CULTURAL CONVERSATIONS: THE POLITICS OF MYTH AND HISTORY IN GUY GAVRIEL KAY'S *UNDER HEAVEN* AND NNEDI OKORAFOR'S *WHO FEARS DEATH*

by

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Abstract

Although Western fantasy is a genre of literature that depends upon the creation of new cultures and new worlds, it remains very Euro-centric, and the cultural influences upon which the genre draws are typically Western in origin. This Euro-centric focus is one of the paradoxes of fantasy literature: while fantasy takes place in altered or entirely invented worlds, there is no expectation that these invented culture(s) will be significantly different than the cultures with which Western readers are already familiar. The characters of fantasy texts tend to be equally familiar, as they are disproportionately white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, and middle-class. Fantasy thus encodes a set of values that is not only Euro-centric, but patriarchal and traditional as well. This trend has begun to shift in recent years, however, as more texts begin to portray non-Western settings and otherwise challenge the traditional values that the genre has typically upheld. Recent examples of this shift include texts such as Guy Gavriel Kay's *Under Heaven* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, both of which draw upon the myths and histories of non-Western cultures in order to establish their settings. Kay's *Under Heaven* draws upon Tang Chinese and Uighur myths in order to create a fictional analogue of Tang Dynasty China during the events leading up to the An Lushan Rebellion, while Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* draws on myths from various African ethnic groups, including the Igbo and Yoruba peoples, and African countries in order to create a fictionalized, futuristic version of Sudan. I argue that both novels use myth to provide a sophisticated critique of the colonial and patriarchal values encoded in many fantasy texts. Ultimately, however, both texts also reinscribe those ideologies in a number of

ways, naturalizing the social constructions of gender that disempower women and

exoticizing or homogenizing the cultures that the novels depict.

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A Note on Spelling

Throughout the thesis, readers will note that there are multiple spellings of some of the terms that are used. This is particularly true of many Chinese and Turkic names and titles, due to a recent shift in the way these names are spelled. For consistency's sake, where applicable I have chosen to adopt the spelling that Okorafor and Kay use in their respective novels, though I have of course preserved the original spelling, capitalization, and other details of formatting of such terms in direct quotations. However, some terms with alternate spellings are not used directly in the novels themselves; for example, Kay creates fictional equivalents for the names of historical Chinese and Turkic figures rather than using the names of the historical figures themselves. In those instances, when referring to historical names and figures I have simply chosen to adopt the spelling used in recent scholarship.

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Chapter One: Speaking Myth: An Introduction

Western fantasy is a genre of literature that depends upon the creation of new cultures and new worlds, other or altered realities in which the impossible is commonplace. Although it is supposedly an imaginative genre, known for its invented myths, histories, geographies, and cultures, modern Western fantasy remains very Euro-centric: its central characters are overwhelmingly male, straight, and white, and the cultural influences upon which the genre draws are typically Western in origin. Even magic, the very thing that distinguishes a fantasy setting, tends to be based on Western systems of thought, such as the now-cliché magical elements of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water derived from the writings of Greek philosophers such as Aristotle. Likewise, fantasy texts whose settings are based upon historical or current societies have traditionally focused on Western histories, geographies, and cultures. This Euro-centric focus is one of the paradoxes of fantasy literature: while fantasy takes place in altered or entirely invented worlds, there is no expectation that the altered or invented culture(s) will be significantly different than the cultures with which Western readers are already familiar. The principal characters of fantasy texts tend to be equally familiar, as they are disproportionately white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, and middle-class. Fantasy thus encodes a set of values that is not only Euro-centric, but patriarchal and traditional as well. However, some recently published fantasy texts attempt to move beyond this traditional model, foregrounding the histories and myths of non-Western cultures and challenging the values encoded in many Western fantasy texts.

1.1 Magic, Structure, and Setting in *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death*

What defines a fantasy text is not the inventiveness of the fictional setting, but the presence of magic within that setting. In *The Magic Code*, Maria Nikolajeva defines fantasy as "the presence of magic, that is, magical beings or events, in an otherwise recognizable world" (12). Drawing on Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories," Nikolajeva articulates a two-world structure that is essential to her concept of fantasy:

> In fantasy two worlds, a real one (*primary*) and a magic one (*secondary*), are involved. The ways they are connected may be different and constitute a variety of fantasy types. Within the magic world supernatural creatures or events may occur and are accepted, but against the background of the primary world they are apprehended as being out-of-place and always cause a sense of wonder. (13, original emphasis)

The clearest examples of distinct primary and secondary worlds typically occur in what Farah Mendlesohn calls the portal-quest fantasy, in which "a fantastic [or secondary] world [is] entered through a portal. . . . Crucially, the fantastic is *on the other side* and does not 'leak'" (xix, original emphasis). C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) is, as Mendlesohn notes, a "classic" example of this kind of fantasy (xix). The story begins in the primary world, in this case in a home in the English countryside, and the wardrobe is the portal through which the Pevensie children enter the secondary world of Narnia. Although the primary and secondary worlds do not actually interact, the characters of the portal-quest fantasy are able to interact with both worlds by moving from one world to another. However, not all fantasy texts have discrete primary and secondary worlds. A large subset of fantasy texts take place in what Nikolajeva calls closed secondary worlds (37), worlds invented by

the authors. Unlike *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, in which the characters journey from the primary world to the secondary world and back again, characters in closed secondary worlds generally do not have any contact with the primary world. Instead, the interaction between the primary and secondary worlds is conceptual, and occurs when aspects of the secondary world, such as its history, geography, or culture, correspond with the history, geography, or culture of the primary world (33). The characters of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and the Lord of the Rings trilogy, for example, do not travel from a discrete primary world to a secondary one. Rather, their stories take place entirely within the closed secondary world of Middle Earth, which interacts with the primary world through its allusions to aspects of real cultures, such the references in Middle Earth cosmology to Norse mythology.

This conceptual interaction between the primary and secondary worlds thus establishes the setting of a fantasy text. Often, aspects of the secondary world correspond closely to aspects of Western culture, and many closed secondary worlds are fictional variations of a medieval or Renaissance European society. However, a growing number of fantasy texts portray settings based on non-Western cultures. Guy Gavriel Kay's *Under Heaven* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, the novels upon which my analysis will focus, draw upon the myths and histories of Asian and African cultures respectively in order to create their secondary worlds. While the way in which each novel uses myth, to be discussed in more detail below, is the primary focus of my analysis, the use of history is also important in establishing each novel's secondary world. Kitai, the fictional empire of Kay's *Under Heaven*, is based on the historical empire of Tang Dynasty China (618-907 A.D.) during the events leading up to the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763 A.D.). The novel begins

when the protagonist Shen Tai is given 250 Sardian horses as a reward for the two years he has spent burying the dead. The possession of so many Sardian horses, which are highly sought after in Kitai and in neighbouring empires, makes Tai a figure of great political interest, and he must navigate the complex intrigue of the Kitan courts during a time of increasing unrest. Although the protagonist is fictional, many of the novel's key political players are based on historical figures who exerted political influence before and during the An Lushan Rebellion; likewise, many of the novel's major events correspond closely to the historical events of that rebellion. This overlap between the history and the political figures of Tang China, on the one hand, and the characters and events of *Under Heaven*, on the other, is central to establishing the setting of Kay's secondary world. This overlap allows the novel not only to reflect the historical period of the Tang Dynasty, but also to comment upon the ideologies that existed during that period, a point that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Three.

In Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, the interaction between primary and secondary worlds establishes the novel's setting as a far-future version of Africa. The relationship between the secondary world of the Seven Rivers Kingdom, the fictional nation in which *Who Fears Death* takes place, and the primary world is made explicit late in the novel, when the Seven Rivers Kingdom is described as "this place that used to be the Kingdom of Sudan" (Okorafor 381). However, it is the novel's references to African history, myths, and political institutions that are most important to the setting and the plot of *Who Fears Death*. The Seven Rivers Kingdom is inhabited primarily by two warring groups, the Okeke and the Nuru, and much of the novel's conflict is driven by the Nuru people's attempt to enslave, and ultimately exterminate, the Okeke people. Stopping the physical and sexual violence to

which the Okeke people are subjected is one of the primary motivations of Onyesonwu, the novel's protagonist. Before she can stand against the genocide of the Okeke people, however, Onyesonwu must first learn to control her magical abilities. This in turn requires her to gain acceptance into the highly selective and highly patriarchal institution of sorcery, a struggle which defines the early chapters of the novel. The institution of sorcery that Onyesonwu seeks to join functions in a similar fashion to male secret societies that exist in Igbo and other cultures, while the violence experienced by the Okeke people responds to Western media portrayals of racially-motivated violence during the Darfur crisis. As the third chapter of my thesis will show, these relationships between the primary world and the secondary world of *Who Fears Death* are integral to not only the novel's setting, but also its politics.

While the above discussion has focused on the way in which the setting of each text is established by its interaction with the primary world, the way in which magic is used is equally important in establishing not only the setting, but also the structure and politics of each novel. In what Mendlesohn calls immersive fantasies, which are usually closed world fantasies, readers are asked to share "not merely a world, but a set of assumptions" (xx). Typically, the assumptions that readers of immersive fantasy are asked to share include the existence and operations of magic, which is often integral to the fantasy world. The unquestioned existence of magic in Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* is one example of this. Although Onyesonwu is initially surprised by her ability to manipulate magic, she quickly learns that her abilities are natural and normal, and that those who wield magic are actually an important part of the political landscape of the Seven Rivers Kingdom. Other assumptions that readers of immersive fantasies are invited to share encompass knowledge of the secondary world's geography and its political and cultural institutions. Many fantasy texts

that portray closed secondary worlds, including both *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death*, assume the existence of a patriarchal political structure in which women are limited to appropriately "female" roles; powerful women in *Under Heaven* are typically either courtesans or noblewomen, while women with magical abilities in *Who Fears Death* are expected to become healers, and are traditionally excluded from the more powerful (male) role of sorcerer. It is important to note, however, that while closed secondary worlds often assume the existence of patriarchal (or other oppressive) institutions, they do not necessarily assume that these institutions are worth upholding. Indeed, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, Onyesonwu's attempt to challenge the patriarchal assumptions of the institution of sorcery is essential to the plot of *Who Fears Death*.

In *Under Heaven*, encounters with magic are comparatively rare. The first appearance of magic occurs in the opening chapter, during which Tai is in the deserted valley of Kuala Nor, burying the bones of fallen soldiers in order to quiet their ghosts. However, Tai soon leaves Kuala Nor behind, and does not encounter the ghosts again. Instead, Tai meets a *daiji*, a fox-spirit capable of transforming into a beautiful woman, while his sister Li-Mei encounters the shamanistic magic of the nomadic Bogü tribe (Tai's own encounter with the Bogü is described through a series of flashbacks, the events of which take place well before the events of the novel's opening chapter). Unlike *Who Fears Death*, in which magic is assumed to be a natural part of the secondary world, the portrayal of magic in *Under Heaven* is not consistent with Mendlesohn's category of immersive fantasy. Rather, *Under Heaven* is what Mendlesohn calls an intrusion fantasy, in which magic intrudes upon the secondary world: it is unwanted and unexpected, its appearance wreaks havoc, and the characters' lives can return to normal only once the intrusion leaves or is defeated (xxii). The appearance of

the *daiji* and the magical abilities of Bogü shamans in *Under Heaven* are both treated as intrusions, although they are intrusions of a very different kind. While Xu Liang, the supposed *daiji*, certainly poses a threat to Tai's political position (and perhaps his physical well-being), as an individual she is no more dangerous than any of the other characters who attempt to manipulate Tai for political gain. It is specifically her magical abilities, and indeed the notion that such abilities might exist in the first place, that make the *daiji* an intrusive, threatening figure. The type of intrusion that the *daiji* represents can be best described by what Tzvetan Todorov calls a "hesitation," the feeling of confusion "experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (25). It is this feeling of confusion, more than any concrete danger that the *daiji* might pose, that characterizes her appearance in the novel. Fox-spirits are so far outside of everyday experience in Kitai that Tai frequently questions whether they even exist, and while the narrative hints that such spirits are indeed real, their existence is never confirmed. The shamanistic magic of the Bogü is equally intrusive. Although Bogü magic is unambiguously real, it is always experienced from the point of view of outsiders to the Bogü culture, in particular Tai and Li-Mei, and is presented as utterly beyond either character's understanding. In fact, witnessing Bogü magic is deeply unsettling for Li-Mei and utterly horrifying for Tai, both of whom must leave the Bogü and their magic behind in order to return to "normal" life in Kitai. I will discuss the significance of these two types of intrusion in greater detail in Chapter Three, in which I argue that the novel's portrayal of magic attempts to deconstruct the typical relationship between colonized and colonizing peoples, but ultimately reinscribes racial difference.

1.2 The Sacred Narratives of Multidisciplinary Myth

As the above discussion demonstrates, considerable critical attention has been paid to the way in which magic functions in fantasy literature. There is also an emerging body of scholarship that examines the ways in which fantasy authors use myth, due to the frequency with which fantasy authors draw upon existing myths in order to create fantastic settings. Common creatures in fantasy such as dragons, gryphons, and unicorns, for example, are derived from the myths and legends of historical cultures. In some fantasy texts, references to such creatures, or to other mythical figures or narratives, exist simply as a backdrop against which the story takes place. In other texts, however, elements borrowed from the myths of historical or current cultures are an integral part of the secondary world. This is particularly true in both Kay's *Under Heaven* and Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, in which myths borrowed from real cultures are central to the politics and culture of each text's secondary world. Indeed, it is primarily these myths that establish both novels as fantasies, since the magical occurrences in each book are based almost entirely upon the myths of real cultures: the myths of the historical Tang Chinese and nomadic Uighur peoples in *Under Heaven*, and the myths of current African cultures, particularly those of the Igbo and Yoruba peoples, in *Who Fears Death*.

However, there is currently no scholarship on either *Under Heaven* or *Who Fears Death*, and most of the existing scholarship on myth in fantasy literature focuses on adaptations of Western myths, often Biblical or classical, in the works of major authors such as Lewis, Tolkien, and, more recently, Philip Pullman. For example, William Gray's *Myth, Fantasy, and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald and Hoffman* discusses Biblical influences in the works of multiple fantasy authors, noting as

well Lewis and Tolkien's shared fascination with Norse myth. Similarly, Elisabeth Rose Gruner's "Wrestling with Religion: Pullman, Pratchett, and the Uses of Story" examines how the works of Pullman and Terry Pratchett engage with issues of religion (meaning Christianity) and storytelling. This focus on Biblical myths is also present in academic scholarship on the works of influential African-American science fiction writer Octavia Butler. In "Subversion Through Inclusion: Octavia Butler's Interrogation of Religion in *Xenogensis* and *Wild Seed*," Sarah Wood argues that Butler revises Biblical narratives in order to "incorporate the specificity of the African-American experience" (87), while Michele Osherow, whose "The Dawn of a New Lilith: Revisionary Myth-Making in Women's Science Fiction" will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, examines the adaptation of the Biblical figure of Lilith in the works of Butler and C. L. Moore.

Osherow's discussion of the appearance of a specific Biblical character in the works of multiple authors is indicative of another trend in scholarship on myth and fantasy, which is to examine a specific mythical trope as it appears in multiple works. Holly Virginia Blackford's *The Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature*, for example, traces allusions to the story of Persephone and Demeter in a number of fantasy texts. Many other studies that adopt this approach do so from a specifically Jungian perspective, analyzing the appearance of particular Jungian archetypes in fantasy stories; Jacqueline Furby and Claire Hines's *Fantasy* and William Indick's *Ancient Symbology in Fantasy Literature: A Psychological Study* discuss the appearance of various Jungian archetypes in fantasy films and fantasy literature respectively, while Edgar C. Bailey's "Shadows in Earthsea: LeGuin's Use of a Jungian Archetype" examines the specific Jungian archetype of the shadow in

Ursula LeGuin's Earthsea novels. Such studies are demonstrative of the general tendency in scholarship on myth and fantasy to examine recognizable Western tropes and archetypes.

There is also a growing body of scholarship that examines the work of writers using non-Western myths. However, this scholarship tends to place little focus on the specific cultural contexts from which those myths arise. For example, Jerrilyn McGregory contends in "Nalo Hopkinson's Approach to Speculative Fiction" that Hopkinson uses West African myths in order to challenge the conventions of the fantasy genre. Similarly, Gina Wisker, in "'Your Buried Ghosts Have a Way of Tripping You Up': Revisioning and Mothering in African-American and Afro-Caribbean Women's Speculative Horror," examines the way in which Hopkinson's portrayal of Afro-Caribbean and African-American myths interacts with the conventions of Gothic literature. Although both McGregory and Wisker profess interest in the way that Hopkinson uses myths to explore experiences of race and gender, neither McGregory nor Wisker place much emphasis on the myths themselves. McGregory's discussion of specific West African myths is limited mainly to a list of which of Hopkinson's fictionalized deities correspond to actual West African deities, while Wisker identifies Hopkinson's Afro-Caribbean "influences" on what she asserts are common Gothic tropes, identifying, for example, the soucouyant as a Caribbean equivalent to the Western vampire without providing any discussion of how the soucouyant actually appears in Caribbean myths or folklore (77). Equating a figure of Caribbean myth and folklore so casually with a Western one robs the soucouyant of any culturally specific context that may be important to analyzing the soucouyant's appearance in works of fiction. Even academic works that specifically analyze myth in relation to experiences of colonization in fantasy fiction tend to ignore culturally specific contexts by focusing on the fictionalized myths of the secondary world,

rather than the real cultures from which those myths are drawn. For example, in "Paradigms of Colonization: Exploring Themes of Imperialism in Guy Gavriel Kay's *Tigana*," Diana Pharaoh Francis argues that the existence of mythical creatures in *Tigana* allows the novel to challenge the idea that the religious beliefs of colonized cultures are simple superstition (Francis 125). Francis's analysis, which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three, is compelling; however, its discussion of myth focuses entirely on the secondary world of *Tigana*, and does not acknowledge that the myths portrayed in the novel are drawn from actual cultures with their own histories of colonization. McGregory's, Wisker's, and Francis's arguments about understanding myth as a method of subverting Euro-centrism and colonialism respectively offer valuable insight into a genre of literature that has traditionally focused on white characters, Western traditions and myths, and often imperialistic narratives. However, examining myth only in the context of a fantasy text's secondary world ignores the way in which such fictionalized myths may reflect on the real cultures from which the fictional ones are drawn. Indeed, as I will show, the fictionalized myths of *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death* are not only inspired by Asian and African myths, but also provide commentary on those myths. Furthermore, examining such myths only in the context of the secondary world divorces them from important, even critical contexts, since myths are not merely narratives that happen to be about gods, but narratives that inculcate a particular set of values and beliefs.

  The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (*OED*) states that a myth is a "traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon" ("Myth," def n. 1a). In the introduction to

Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth, Alan Dundes asserts that myths are not merely traditional, but sacred, stating that "[t]he critical adjective *sacred* distinguishes myth from other forms of narratives such as folktales, which are ordinarily secular and fictional" (1). According to Dundes, mythic narratives are religious in nature, and all religions, including Christianity, "incorporate myths of some kind;" furthermore, mythic narratives are not fictional, but "may constitute the highest form of truth" (1). While Dundes himself argues that the truth to be found in myths is metaphorical, he also states that there are multiple ways of understanding myth, writing that the study of these sacred narratives is "an international and an interdisciplinary venture. . . . [S]cholars [of myth] include students of anthropology, classics, comparative religion, folklore, psychology, and theology" (1). My thesis focuses primarily on the way in which myths are portrayed in literature, rather than the study of sacred narratives themselves. However, examining myth scholarship in other disciplines, particularly anthropology, provides a useful basis for understanding myths within their cultural contexts, which, as my analysis will show, is crucial to interpreting the myths portrayed in literary works. It is also important to examine the way in which historical trends within the broader field of myth scholarship, such as the tendency of universalist scholars to downplay or ignore the differences between cultures in favour of a univocal truth, have influenced the way in which literary critics understand myth.

While Dundes observes that myth scholarship is a broad field with many diverging opinions, he also contends that there are general trends within the field that have changed considerably over time, writing that "[t]here has been a dramatic shift in theoretical orientation from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. In the nineteenth century, myth theorists were primarily interested in questions of origins" (2-3). Some scholars, using what

Dundes calls the comparative method, collected variations of the same myth in order to

reconstruct that myth in its "original" form (3). Other scholars assumed that myths originated

from the attempts of primitive cultures to understand natural phenomena, and that myths

were understood by such cultures to be literal truth (3). In his introduction to James George

Frazer's essay "The Fall of Man," Dundes provides an example of such a theoretical

approach. Describing what he calls "unilinear evolutionary theory," Dundes writes that

according to this theory,

> all peoples were believed to have passed through the identical successive stages
>
> of savagery, barbarism, and civilization. . . . It was argued that sacred myth
>
> became secular folktale in the barbarism period . . . finally dying out completely
>
> among civilized societies. (72)

This theory assumed that "civilized" societies such as England and France were the natural

endpoint of the evolutionary process, and that the beliefs of so-called primitive or "modern

savage" peoples were not indicative of different cultural contexts, but rather an earlier stage

of evolution. Indeed, knowledge gleaned from such primitive societies was assumed to be

directly applicable to so-called civilized societies; according to Dundes, scholars used

ethnographic data from other societies not to understand those other societies but rather "to

elucidate many perplexing puzzles of modern civilization" (72). Dundes points to Frazer's

"The Fall of Man" as one example of this type of scholarship, in which Frazer compares the

Biblical story of the fall of man to death myths from "modern savage" societies in order to

explain "features of the Genesis story hitherto not fully understood" (73). While Frazer's

work has been influential, particularly *The Golden Bough*, his collection of ethnographic data

from various societies originally published in 1890, Dundes notes that Frazer has since been

criticized for his tendency to remove "ethnographic facts [from] their cultural contexts" (73). This concern with cultural contexts signals one of the major shifts in theoretical understandings of myth between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

According to Dundes, in the twentieth century scholars of myth "turned to considerations of the structure and function of . . . myths in their actual cultural contexts" (3). Gregory Schrempp, however, argues in the introduction to the 2002 volume *Myth: A New Symposium* that the influence of nineteenth-century scholars lingered in the twentieth century despite this theoretical shift. Schrempp writes that while there was considerable scepticism among twentieth-century scholars towards the "world-synthesizing perspectives" of the nineteenth century, such as the evolutionism practiced by Frazer and other scholars who focused on ethnographic data gathered from "modern savage" societies, many twentieth-century scholars were nevertheless influenced by the tendency of nineteenth-century scholars to treat the study of myth as a science with universal rules (7). According to Schrempp, twentieth-century scholars sought the "underlying building blocks . . . classifying species . . . and natural laws" of myth (Schrempp 8), which were assumed to be the same for all cultures. One example of this type of scholarship is the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Certainly, Lévi-Strauss was in some ways attentive to cultural contexts, as Dundes argues was typical of twentieth-century scholars; Lévi-Strauss's 1958 "The Story of Asdiwal," for example, argues that the story of Asdiwal, a Tsimshian (Canadian aboriginal) myth, can be understood on "geographic, economic, sociological, and cosmological" levels, and insists that certain facts about the Tsimshian are necessary to understand the myth of Asdiwal on the first three levels (Lévi-Strauss 296). However, Schrempp argues that Lévi-Strauss's methodology disregards other culturally significant traits, such as a myth's original language, style, and form, in order

to ascertain the "gross constituent units" of myth that supposedly apply to all cultures (Lévi-Strauss qtd. in Schrempp 10).[1] In other words, while Levi-Strauss's work acknowledges the importance of cultural contexts to a certain degree, it positions those contexts as mere layers, under which there lies a universal or cosmological logic.

Using the essays collected in *Myth: A New Symposium* as an example, Schrempp contends that the trends in myth scholarship continue to shift away from universal truths and towards the study of myths in culturally specific contexts, noting in *New Symposium* a lack of "world-synthesizing" perspectives (7), a cautious treatment of supposedly universal ideas (8), and an increasing interest in "detailed sociohistorical contexts and original-language texts" (9). These detailed sociohistorical contexts often show that a culture's myths are more than just a collection of religious narratives; they are also narratives that contain important knowledge and reflect or even shape that culture's realities. Examples of such scholarship include Barre Toelken's "Native American Reassessment and Reinterpretation of Myths," which argues that the Navajo people revise their mythic narratives in a way that reflects their cultural and political realities, and Sabine Jell-Bahlsen's *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology: Ogbuide of Oguta Lake*, which argues that ritual and myth among the Oru-Igbo encode and reflect values about (among other things) gendered relationships. This understanding of myth as not just religious, but politically and culturally important, is central to my thesis. While the myths that I examine in *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death* are only loosely connected to religion within the context of each novel's secondary world, they are borrowed from the sacred narratives of historical Asian and current African cultures.

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[1] For a more detailed discussion of the universalizing methodologies of Lévi-Strauss, see John H. McDowell's "From Expressive Language to Mythemes: Meaning in Mythic Narratives," also in *New Symposium*.

Furthermore, as I will show, the myths in *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death* are politically and culturally important both within the context of each novel's secondary world and within the real cultures on which the myths are based.

1.3 The Universalism of Myth in Literary Criticism

However, it is difficult to examine the political and cultural importance of mythic narratives purely through the lens of literary criticism. As mentioned above, existing scholarship on myth and fantasy tends to focus entirely on the presentation of myths within a fantasy text's secondary world, disregarding important sociocultural and political contexts that exist in the cultures from which those myths are drawn. Furthermore, while the study of myth in anthropology and folklore has tended to move away from the universalizing or world-synthesizing perspectives discussed above, those universalizing perspectives have exerted significant influence on myth scholarship in the area of literary criticism. In the work of some scholars, this influence appears in the guise of supposedly-universal literary structures, such as the monomyth proposed in Joseph Campbell's 1949 *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. While Campbell is a comparative mythologist, rather than a literary critic, I have chosen to place this discussion of Campbell's work within a discussion of literary criticism because Campbell's influence is greater in the humanities than it is in social sciences like anthropology (Dundes 256). Indeed, Dundes notes that the ethnographic data collected by anthropologists do not support Campbell's conclusions; however, Dundes argues that Campbell's works are nonetheless worth considering, due to Campbell's popularity outside of the academy (257). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* claims that all myths adhere to the same basic structure, called the monomyth (Campbell 3), and that

examples of this structure can be found in myths worldwide. Dundes refutes Campbell's claim by examining the element of the monomyth known as "The Belly of the Whale," which Campbell claims is a "worldwide womb image" (Campbell 90). However, Dundes observes that while Campbell cites several examples of heroes being swallowed, in only two of those examples are protagonists swallowed by actual whales (256). Dundes argues that it is impossible to call the "belly of the whale" image a worldwide image on the basis of two examples, adding that in fact there are several cultures in which this image does not exist (257). Dundes writes that "[i]t is undoubtedly comforting to think that all mankind shares common myths and metaphors, but the empirical facts don't support such an illusion," dismissing not only Campbell's particular assertions, but also universalist claims in general (257).

While Dundes dismisses claims of universalism as not grounded in empirical reality, postcolonial scholar Arun Mukherjee argues in "The Vocabulary of the 'Universal': Cultural Imperialism and Western Literary Criticism" that claims of universalism are not simply erroneous, but damaging. Mukherjee criticizes the supposedly-universal criteria of literature that some Western literary critics use to examine works by non-Western writers. Such criteria, Mukherjee argues, disconnect literature from the concrete cultural reality in which it is grounded, de-politicize works grounded in resistance to and opposition of oppression, emphasize vague themes that are generalized almost to the point of meaninglessness, and otherwise distort stories that do not fit neatly into a Western framework (344, 346, 351). While Mukherjee's article focuses on the universalist claims made in literary criticism rather than in myth scholarship, the universalist criteria with which Mukherjee engages are certainly influenced, at least in part, by scholars like Campbell. Mukherjee demonstrates this

by engaging briefly with a supposedly-universal motif that is also the central trope of Campbell's monomyth, that of the quest. Campbell uses a series of carefully-selected examples to construct the monomyth, a "marvellously constant story" (Campbell 3), as an individual journey, during which the hero undergoes a series of trials in order to attain his destiny. Mukherjee, however, argues that "[i]t is not possible to accept that the quest, the Jungian journey to the underworld, the individual's growth from ignorance to knowledge, etc. are 'universal' archetypes. . . . For example, instead of the quest, the main motif of Indian epics is exile" (349-50). Campbell argues that all myths derive from a single structure, and that "the problems and solutions" shown within this single structure, such as individual obstacles and growth, "are directly valid for all mankind" (19). However, this supposedly-universal monomyth does not account for narratives structured by different tropes, such as the Indian epics that Mukherjee argues are shaped by different motifs and concerns.

While Campbell relies on specific examples to prove his assertions about the structure of the monomyth, Northrop Frye, in his 1957 book *Anatomy of Criticism*, proposes a generalized system of literature characterized by the existence of archetypes, "a group of universal symbols . . . [or] images of things common to all men" (118). Because literature is steeped in archetypes, a given literary work can only be understood in relation to the body of literature as a whole (99). Philosopher Paul Ricoeur, in the second volume of *Time and Narrative* (1985), describes archetypal criticism as an example of "traditionality," a way of structuring (in this case, literary) tradition that is "neither historical nor ahistorical but transhistorical" (15). Ricoeur contends that the proper function of criticism is to "discern a style of [literary] development" rather than to simply produce a history of literary works, but also argues that "[c]riticism cannot eliminate [literary history] because it is familiarity with

literary works, as they have appeared in the succession of cultures to which we are the heirs, that instructs narrative understanding" (14). In other words, Frye's archetypal criticism works *only* in relation to the history of a specific literary tradition. That specific tradition, however, is not universal, but Western. Although Frye notes that *Anatomy of Criticism* focuses primarily on Western literature, this is not because Frye acknowledges that the literatures of other cultures might have different structures or thematic concerns. Rather, Frye proposes that literature is comprised of different modes that incorporate the supernatural to varying degrees: myth, which is about characters who are actually divine or godlike; mimetic fiction, of which there are several types and which is more or less realistic; and romance, the mode that exists between those two extremes (*Anatomy* 33-34). "[T]he establishing of the high mimetic mode," Frye writes, "is one of the great feats of Greek civilization. Oriental fiction does not, so far as I know, get very far away from mythical and romantic formulas" (35). This comment indicates that these modes are apparently applicable not only to Western literature but also to the literature of other cultures, since "Oriental" literature also uses romantic and mythic modes. At the same time, this comment implies a theory of literature reminiscent of Frazer's evolutionism—that the literatures of all cultures evolve in basically the same way—since mimetic fiction is characterized as a "feat" of Greek civilization while Oriental literature has yet to reach that rung of the literary ladder.

This refusal to acknowledge the differences between Western and Oriental literature as anything other than different stages of cultural evolution is indicative of a more general tendency in *Anatomy of Criticism* to disregard particular cultural contexts. Frye argues that archetypal criticism is autonomous, "existing in its own universe, no longer a commentary on life or reality, but containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships" (122). This

concept of autonomy allows the archetypal critic to focus entirely on the study of literary

conventions, that is, archetypes, without relying on information from outside disciplines such

as history and anthropology. Practically speaking, however, this supposed autonomy

subordinates "life and reality" to the study of archetypes. While Frye observes that "[s]ocial

and cultural history . . . will always be a part of the context of criticism" (110), critics such as

John Fekete have argued that archetypal criticism "occludes the real historical subjectivity of

human praxis" (111); that is, references to "life and reality" are understood in relation to

literature rather than any specific historical period, and are thus divorced from any cultural or

historical context. Mukherjee shows the de-contextualizing effect of so-called universalizing

themes quite clearly by examining the reaction of Western literary critics to Kamala

Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire*, which Mukherjee argues is "a concrete exploration of the

realities of lower-middle-class Indian life at the bureaurocratic, matrimonial and economic

levels" (351). However, Mukherjee observes that Western critics tend to discuss the novel in

terms of clichés such as Western rationality and Eastern spirituality. Applying these themes

to *A Silence of Desire*, Mukherjee argues, distorts the novel in all of the ways cited above; it

disconnects the novel from the concrete economic reality that the novel is trying to explore, it

de-politicizes the novel's exploration of economic oppression, and it reduces a complex

literary work to "a simple theorem of East meets West" (351). Mukherjee demonstrates that

models of Western criticism that divorce literary works from their cultural contexts, such as

Frye's archetypal criticism, are ill-equipped to understand non-Western literatures, and

indeed their myths. Furthermore, although Frye's archetypal criticism attempts to incorporate

both myth and literature, the way in which it decouples myth and literature from historical

and cultural contexts means that archetypal criticism is incapable of understanding myths,

whether Western or not, in the sense of the sacred, culturally important narratives discussed above.

Frye returns to the idea of myth in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), which in some ways is a significant revision of *Anatomy of Criticism*. While Frye revisits the concept of autonomy, he does not argue in *The Great Code* that literature is autonomous from history or culture, but rather that myth is autonomous from nature, an assertion that is a clear reaction against the assumption of Frazer and other evolutionary anthropologists that all myths arise from a naive attempt to understand natural phenomena. "In *Folklore and the Old Testament*," Frye complains, Frazer "collects flood stories from all over the world, in typically Frazerian fashion, and then suggests that in every case a local flood was the reason for the myth" (53). Frye contends that this suggestion is wholly inadequate to explain why cultures create myths, arguing that myth-making is not a direct response to the surrounding environment, but rather depends upon the imaginations of the people who create the myths (55). He explicitly condemns the colonial thinking underlying the evolutionary methodology, writing that dismissing myth as a naive understanding of nature "was obviously part of an ideology designed to rationalize the European treatment of 'natives' on darker continents, and the less attention given it now the better" (56). Interestingly, Frye's comments about the Frazerian method also contain an implied critique of universalism, since his insistence that myth depends upon cultural imagination suggests an implicit acknowledgement of the subject-positions of the people of that culture. Indeed, *The Great Code* asserts that specific cultural values are essential to the process of myth-making, and references scholars such as Lévi-Strauss in order to come to a general understanding of myth that is similar to the one that I propose above: that is, a sacred and culturally important narrative. However, just as

Anatomy of Criticism makes general statements that supposedly apply to the literatures of all cultures, *The Great Code* makes general statements that supposedly apply to the myth-making processes of cultures, as indicated by Frye's (albeit infrequent) references to the myths of non-Western cultures. General statements such "myths are the stories that tell a society what is important for it to know" (50), while certainly difficult to disprove, relieve Frye of the need to actually examine the specific cultural contexts that he insists are central to the process of myth-making. Frye's argument, essentially a series of assertions about the importance of the cultural specificity of myth substantiated almost entirely by references to the Bible, offers little real insight into the myths of non-Western cultures or the cultural contexts that are central to understanding those myths. Much as Lévi-Strauss argues in favour of the importance of the local and specific while focusing on universal or cosmological logic, Frye insists upon the importance of specific cultural contexts to myth-making processes without providing any examination into contexts beyond his own.

While Frye's archetypal criticism has largely fallen out of fashion due to its universalizing methodology, and even Frye himself takes an important step away from that universalism in *The Great Code*, universalizing methodologies are evident even in relatively recent literary discussions of myth. In *From Homer to Harry Potter: A Handbook on Myth and Fantasy* (2006), Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara, responding to the vernacular meaning of myth as untruth, propose that myth, rather than expressing historical or scientific fact, expresses what they call "profound truths." Their attempt to articulate these profound truths, however, turns to overly general themes such as "human nature, divine nature, [or] love" (35). Quoting Walter Wangerin Junior's *The Orphean Passages*, Dickerson and O'Hara conclude that "truth is neither temporally, spatially, nor socially relativistic. It

therefore makes sense to *present* truth in a context that transcends specific cultures and reaches instead 'through *countless* generations' and 'many *disparate* cultures' (emphasis ours)" (36). In other words, they argue that myth communicates *universal* truths, truths that transcend all differences and create some sort of essential humanity. However, as Mukherjee demonstrates, applying universal themes to texts outside of Western literature tends to place false emphasis on individual journeys, ignore the place a particular text occupies in the conversations (literary, academic, cultural) that surround it, and ignore the concrete realities of the people that produced the text in the first place. To understand Onyesonwu's quest to learn magic in Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* as a journey of self-improvement, for example, ignores the specific African myths that are essential to both the plot and the politics of the novel. Onyesonwu's magical abilities are drawn directly from African myths, while her struggle to become accepted as a sorcerer is a conflict that directly reflects, and comments upon, the gendered relationships of Igbo secret societies. Similarly, the myths portrayed in Kay's *Under Heaven* are borrowed from the historical period of Tang Dynasty China and the neighbouring Uighur Qağanate (empire). These myths do more than establish the novel's setting, however; they also comment upon the ideologies of the cultures that created those myths in the first place. Understanding myths not as universal but as culturally specific, and also as important to the particular cultures from which they arise, is central to understanding the ideas with which both *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death* engage.

1.4 Multivalent Myth in *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death*

Myth, and to a lesser extent history, are important in both *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death* in a number of ways. Because myth plays such a substantial role in establishing the setting of each novel, Chapter Two will discuss at length the real myths upon which the myths of *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death* are based. In *Under Heaven*, Kay re-presents the myths of the Tang Chinese and Uighur peoples, focusing particularly on the fox myths of the Tang Chinese and the shamanism of the Uighur, while Okorafor, in *Who Fears Death*, draws on the myths of a number of African ethnic groups, particularly the Igbo and the Yoruba peoples, and to a lesser extent on myths from the country of Sudan. In Chapter Two, I will compare the myths of each novel's secondary world to the real-world myths from which the fictionalized versions are drawn. I argue that while Kay focuses on the myths that existed during the historical period about which he is writing, his portrayal of these myths is misleadingly narrow. Kay disregards many aspects of the broad and complex tradition of fox narratives in order to present, in *Under Heaven*, a fox-woman whose only characteristic is her exaggerated sexuality. Likewise, while shamans were historically only one part of Uighur religion, the Bogü of *Under Heaven* are defined entirely by their relationship to shamanism. Ultimately, the myths of *Under Heaven*'s secondary world are grounded as much in Western traditions of exoticism as they are in the cultural traditions of the historical Uighur and Tang Chinese.

While Kay uses myth to ground his secondary world in the past, Okorafor uses myth to situate her secondary world in the future. Incorporating Yoruba, Igbo, and Sudanese myths into the cosmology of a single fictional people, the Okeke of Okorafor's secondary world, helps to establish the setting as a future, rather than current, version of Sudan. More than

that, however, I argue that creating a setting in which the myths have changed over time challenges the modern colonial notion that indigenous identity is fixed and unchangeable. The specific myths upon which *Who Fears Death* draws are also important as intertexts, as Okorafor uses the altered myths of her secondary world as a method of critiquing the oppressions that exist in the real-world myths from which the novel's fictional myths are drawn. For example, her portrayal of the female character Ting as exceptionally knowledgeable about the Nsibidi script challenges the current belief in Igbo (and some other) societies that knowledge of Nsibidi should be an exclusively male privilege, while her decision to portray twins according to Yoruba beliefs revises a far more oppressive view of twins in Igbo society. Throughout *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor uses the myths of the secondary world to examine and criticize oppressions enabled by current Igbo beliefs.

My third chapter will focus on the way in which the myths of each novel's secondary world interrogate the ideologies of the historical and current cultures on which the secondary worlds are based. Myth is central to Okorafor's exploration of gendered exclusions in *Who Fears Death*. Just as the mechanics of sorcery are drawn from Igbo beliefs, the gendered exclusions that Onyesonwu experiences as a sorcerer are based on the gendered exclusions perpetuated by male secret societies in Igbo and other cultures. I argue, however, that Okorafor's critique of patriarchal institutions is somewhat limited. While the characters of *Who Fears Death* manage to overcome these gendered exclusions to a certain degree, female sorcerers are still portrayed as both exceptional and dangerous; furthermore, the novel largely ignores the female societies that exist in Igbo cultures, presenting the male role of sorcerer as the only role that is powerful or desirable. Okorafor's examination of gendered and racial violence, which I discuss in the same chapter, is more compelling. I argue that

Onyesonwu's magical abilities allow Okorafor to foreground the novel's concern with the use of rape as a weapon of ethnic conflict. As I will show in this chapter, the novel's portrayal of rape responds directly to Western portrayals of the Darfur conflict. Drawing this connection to the Darfur crisis allows Okorafor to acknowledge the importance of the novel's geographical setting, and to examine the violence that occurred there.

Similarly, I argue that the many historical parallels between the secondary world of Kitai and the historical period of Tang Dynasty China allow Kay to comment on the ideologies of not only the fictional Kitan people, but also the historical Tang Chinese. I argue that Kay's portrayal of Bogü shamanism deconstructs Frazerian notions of myth in which the religious beliefs of a colonized culture are constructed as naive or primitive. The novel does this by using myth to demonstrate the constructedness of colonial ideology, on the one hand, and by reversing the usual dynamic between the colonizer and the colonized, on the other: In *Under Heaven*, the religious beliefs of the primitive Bogü are legitimized as unequivocally real, while the beliefs of the supposedly-superior Kitan are questioned at every turn. However, I contend that the effectiveness of this critique of colonial ideology is undermined by the way in which Kay portrays the Bogü as a subject people of the Kitan. Although there exists a real history of oppression between the Uighur and the Tang Chinese, in *Under Heaven* this history is displaced: at the time of the An Lushan Rebellion, the Uighur Qağanate was equal in power to the Tang Chinese empire. In *Under Heaven*, however, the Bogü are portrayed as powerless subjects of the Kitan people. Furthermore, while the novel effectively demonstrates the constructedness of colonial ideology, the Bogü are not merely constructed as exotic and primitive; they *are* exotic and primitive, as demonstrated by the

ahistorical portrayal of the Bogü engaging in ritual cannibalism. The novel's portrayal of the Bogü thus participates in the very tradition of marginalization that it attempts to examine.

Ultimately, I argue that while the imaginative visions of Kay's *Under Heaven* and Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* are very different, each novel uses myth and history for a similar purpose. *Under Heaven* uses myth and history to invoke and then interrogate the colonial and patriarchal attitudes of historical Tang China, while *Who Fears Death* uses myth and history to invent a fictional, futuristic version of Sudan through which to examine the colonial and patriarchal attitudes of the present. While neither *Under Heaven* nor *Who Fears Death* is completely successful in challenging the colonial and patriarchal ideologies with which both novels attempt to engage, Okorafor's examination of these concepts is somewhat more compelling. The overt changes that Okorafor makes to the Igbo, Yoruba, and Sudanese myths upon which she draws allow her to more effectively challenge the values encoded in those myths and the cultures from which the myths come. The more subtle changes that Kay makes to Uighur and Tang Chinese myths in *Under Heaven*, on the other hand, ultimately reinscribe the values that the novel attempts to deconstruct.

Chapter Two: Rewriting and Revising Myth

This chapter will examine the fictionalized myths of *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death* in relation to the Asian and African myths upon which the fictionalized myths are based. Although the fictionalized myths of each novel retain obvious similarities to the actual myths by which they were inspired, there are also significant differences between the fictionalized myths of *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death* and their historical and current equivalents. While both Kay and Okorafor use a similar strategy, altering the myths of actual cultures to better fit their imaginative visions, this strategy has a very different effect in each novel. In *Under Heaven*, the effect is a reductive one. *Under Heaven* focuses on the figure of the Bogü shaman and the sexual Kitan fox-woman to the exclusion of other aspects of Uighur religion and Tang Chinese fox narratives, and the novel's portrayal of these figures responds as much to Western traditions of exoticism as it does to the Uighur and Tang traditions on which these figures are supposedly based. *Who Fears Death*, on the other hand, actually challenges the colonial tradition of viewing indigenous identity as static by portraying a futuristic society in which aspects of culture such as myths and religious beliefs have altered over time. The novel then uses these altered myths to interrogate and even revise the oppressions enabled by the traditional myths upon which *Who Fears Death* draws.

2.1 Rewritten, Reinscribed: Selection and Emphasis in *Under Heaven*

Although *Under Heaven* is set in the fictional empire of Kitai, this setting is clearly based on the historical empire of Tang China and its neighbouring peoples. In an interview with Sarah Johnson, author of the historical fiction blog *Reading the Past*, Kay states that

while he uses fantastic settings in part to signal that he is not trying to create completely accurate versions of the cultures upon which he draws, he also wants readers "to be aware of the inspiration and origins of each of these historical fantasies, to 'feel' which periods [he is] taking as [his] basis." Indeed, Kay's work is well-known for, and explicitly marketed on the basis of, its accurate historical research. Johnson introduces her interview by commenting on the way in which Kay's novels are "deeply grounded in the history of a real culture" and complimenting "[t]he carefully researched background of *Under Heaven*." Similarly, a quote from *The Washington Post Book World* on the cover of *Under Heaven* proclaims that "[h]istory and fantasy rarely come together as gracefully or readably as they do in the novels of Guy Gavriel Kay," while a quote from *The Vancouver Sun* on the back cover of Kay's 2013 book *River of Stars* professes that "*Under Heaven . . .* demonstrates Kay's ability to convert historical research into impeccable detail and verisimilitude." Thus, while Kay insists in his interview with Johnson that he wants to "leave the reader conscious of 'difference,'" his works are often positioned with respect to their historical accuracy, which invites readers to view Kay's secondary worlds as not merely fictional cultures, but also as windows into particular historical times and places.

Certainly, the Bogü and Kitan peoples of *Under Heaven* have some basis in historical cultures, a basis which the novel signals partially through its portrayal of the myths of those cultures. The myths of the Uighur, the Turko-Mongolic people upon whom Kay's Bogü are based, are particularly prominent in *Under Heaven*.[2] For example, the Bogü people's

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[2] Although my thesis focuses on the portrayal of the Uighur, the nomadic people that ruled the steppe during the period in which *Under Heaven* is set, many scholars write about the Turko-Mongolic peoples as a whole rather than discussing the beliefs of the Uighur specifically, asserting that the Turko-Mongolic peoples share not only a common ancestry but also common religious beliefs (Findley 37-38). Thus, I will sometimes refer to the

worship of the "Lord of the Sky" echoes the Turko-Mongolic peoples' worship of the sky god Tengri (Kay 104; *Silk Road* 115). Likewise, the Bogü belief that swans carry the souls of the dead reflects the beliefs of central Eurasian tribes (Dunnigan 8894). The references to these myths, however, serve no purpose other than to reinforce the connections between Kay's fictional Bogü and the historical Uighur people. Of more importance to the narrative are the pack of wolves that follows the Bogü character Meshag, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, and the role of shamanism, which is particularly prominent in *Under Heaven*. Those Bogü who possess magical abilities occupy a position similar to that occupied by historical Uighur shamans: that of religious specialists valued for their supernatural abilities (Mackerras, *Uighur Empire* 47-51). Indeed, while James Thrower argues that the term "shaman" is commonly used to refer to religious specialists in a variety of traditional and contemporary societies (59), the capabilities of Kay's Bogü seem to be drawn from Turko-Mongolic beliefs specifically; the ability of Bogü shamans to communicate with animals and even bind Meshag's soul to that of a wolf's suggests the Bogü can not only communicate with the spirit world, but also control it, a feature which Thrower asserts is unique to Turko-Mongolic and Siberian shamanism (Kay 405; Thrower 59). Similarities such as these allow the novel to draw a clear parallel between the beliefs of the fictional Bogü and those of the historical Uighur and signal to readers, as Kay states in the interview cited above, that though the novel's setting is fictional, it is grounded, at least in part, in historical fact.

While Kay argues that he does not intend for his fictional works to be exact representations of the periods about which he writes, the way in which his work is explicitly

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beliefs of the Turko-Mongolic peoples in general, although I will discuss the beliefs of the Uighur specifically wherever possible.

marketed as historical and Kay's own attention to historical detail, such as the examples

mentioned above, invite readers to expect a level of historical accuracy that is not maintained

throughout the novel's portrayal of all aspects of Uighur or indeed of Tang Chinese myths.

Readers who are not already familiar with Central Asian history may not realize that

shamanism, for example, is much more prominent among the fictional Bogü than it was

among the historical Uighur. The novel ignores personal and communal rituals such as

sacrificial offerings made to ancestral spirits in order to protect a family or tribe, which

Thrower argues were an important aspect of religious life on the steppes (56), and instead

focuses almost exclusively on the shaman. Despite the fact that Turko-Mongolic shamans

were "specialists . . . [called on] only for exceptional religious or medical needs, [rather than]

routine religious practice" (Findley 47), the figure of the shaman is extremely prevalent in

Under Heaven. There is no aspect of Bogü magic or mythology that is not somehow

connected to shamanism; swans, for example, are believed to carry the souls of the dead to

the underworld, but they also obey the will of the shaman who pursues Meshag and Li-Mei

through the steppes (Kay 326). Even Meshag's wolf pack, the single most prominent

example of the supernatural within the novel, is the result of a shaman's failed spell.

Positioning shamans as central to Bogü religious life in *Under Heaven* suggests that they

played an equally important role in the day-to-day religious life of the Uighur, when in fact

Turko-Mongolic shamans existed "beyond the known [and] . . . beyond the threshold of daily

routine" (Stepanov 110). As exceptional figures, shamans were hardly representative of the

Uighur community at large. Furthermore, Stepanov asserts they were also regarded with

some ambivalence, since their powers could be used to help or harm the community (112).

In *Under Heaven*, however, the Bogü are largely defined by their relationship to shamanism, despite the position of historical Turko-Mongolic shamans as somewhat marginal figures, and the novel uses this relationship to exoticize the Bogü. The Kitan view of Bogü shamanism as "too strange, too barbaric for words" (Kay 101) invites readers unfamiliar with Turko-Mongolic shamanism to assume that Turko-Mongolic beliefs are likewise strange and barbaric. This association is reinforced by the way in which the novel's portrayal of Bogü barbarism responds to an existing tradition of exoticism among Western writers. Specifically, it responds to what Rodney Lucas and Robert Barrett call "barbaric primitivism," in which a particular ethnic group is classified as primal, chaotic, and disordered in order to construct that group as exotic (290). The novel uses the Bogü's religious beliefs to portray the Bogü as primitive in precisely the fashion that Lucas and Barrett describe, first by framing Bogü beliefs as mere superstition that can be easily dismissed (Kay 106; Lucas and Barrett 296) and later, after the shaman's attack on Meshag has proven that Bogü beliefs are real, by portraying the Bogü as a savage, cannibalistic mob (Kay 124; Lucas and Barrett 296). Furthermore, Lucas and Barrett argue that the shaman itself is a common symbol of this type of primitivism; they assert that there is a long history in Western writing of regarding shamans as not merely abnormal or mentally ill, but as symptoms of a superstitious and irrational society (309-310). Similarly, the discourse of primitivism in *Under Heaven* uses the Bogü's relationship to shamanism to frame that entire culture as irrational, barbaric, and primitive, a portrayal that is strengthened by the prevalence of shamans in the novel. Ultimately, the novel reinscribes a particularly Western trend of exoticism onto the fictional Bogü, a portrayal which also reflects upon the historical Uighur on whom the Bogü are based.

The portrayal of Tang Chinese beliefs in *Under Heaven* serves a similar purpose, and is similarly problematic. Much like the novel's portrayal of Bogü religion is clearly drawn from historical Uighur beliefs, its presentation of Kitan religion is clearly based on the religious beliefs of Tang China; indeed, many of the details about Kitan religious beliefs serve no narrative purpose other than to reinforce the connection between Kay's fictional Kitan empire and the historical Tang Chinese empire. For example, Daoism, the official religion during the Tang Dynasty and instrumental to Tang politics (Lewis 214-15), exists only as part of the backdrop against which the story of *Under Heaven* takes place, and influences the characters and the political institutions portrayed in the novel only to a limited extent. Tai's comments about the need for balance, for example, invoke the Daoist principle of harmony (Cheng 124), while the way in which the novel connects myth and politics is suggestive of the way in which the Tang Chinese mobilized myth in order to support their political ideologies, particularly the notion that the Tang Dynasty ruled both China and its conquered provinces by divine right (Lewis 208; Beckwith, *Silk Road* 137). In *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, Mark Lewis asserts that Xuanzong (portrayed by the character Taizu in *Under Heaven*), who reigned from 712-756 and was the Tang emperor in the years leading up to the An Lushan Rebellion, "fully mobilized the [Daoist] religion in support of the dynasty," creating statues that honoured the ancestry shared by Tang emperors and the Daoist masters, dedicating the temples in Tang China's capital cities to Daoism, and having Daoist priests perform important rituals on the empire's behalf (209). Tang emperors who claimed heavenly titles or the "mandate of Heaven" (Lewis 94) were thus mobilizing a political ideology, but one explicitly underwritten and supported by the empire's religious beliefs and practices. Likewise, the Kitan emperors of *Under Heaven* are said to be ruling

with the mandate of Heaven, and certain details, such as the way in which the physical layout of the imperial palace is meant to ward off supernatural foes (Kay 474), suggest that the Kitan people also mobilize religious beliefs in explicit support of the notion of divine right to rule. Such parallels draw a clear connection between the fictional Kitan people and the historical Tang Chinese people upon whom the Kitan are based. However, these parallels also suggest a level of historical accuracy that is not maintained in the novel's portrayal of more narratively significant myths.

While the fox-woman in *Under Heaven* is clearly based on Tang myths about fox-spirits, the novel excludes a number of important features of historical fox narratives, creating a very narrow vision of what was actually a broad and varied tradition. The fox-spirit, and specifically the fox-woman, is portrayed in *Under Heaven* as a seductress with supernatural powers. There is certainly an historical basis for this portrayal, as Rania Huntington argues in her article "Foxes and Sex in Late Imperial Chinese Narrative." Fox spirits were believed to be skilled at seduction and deception, and one could either be possessed by a disembodied fox spirit or be seduced by a fox that had taken on a human shape (Huntington 81). Huntington observes that the two different fox-spirit narratives, possession and seduction, became more clearly gendered as they evolved, with possession becoming a narrative with primarily female protagonists (and victims) while seduction became a narrative with primarily male protagonists. Interestingly, however, Huntington asserts that this gendered division evolved *after* the Tang, and that during the Tang Dynasty itself, it was believed that both fox-spirits and their victims could be either male or female (Huntington 81).

The portrayal of the fox-spirit in *Under Heaven*, however, is highly gendered, and serves to reaffirm the centrality of the male subject. First of all, the only fox-spirit to appear in the novel is female, and the novel's brief discussion of the legends surrounding shape-shifting foxes likewise focuses *only* on women (Kay 211). While Huntington notes that female narratives of possession were comparatively rare (82), there is no indication in *Under Heaven* that legends about male fox-spirits actually exist. Such a portrayal implies that all or most of those who are seduced by fox-spirits are male,[3] and suggests that the hypersexuality of the "remarkably seductive" Xu Liang (Kay 211), who seems to be a victim of possession by a fox-spirit in *Under Heaven*, is a solely female trait.[4] Furthermore, while the fox-woman subplot in *Under Heaven* involves both possession *and* seduction, it takes its structure from the narrative of seduction. While narratives of possessed women are structured around the elements of "onset of illness, diagnosis, and exorcism," early narratives of seduction, according to Huntington, follow "the basic structure of first encounter, consummation, and exposure, quickly followed by expulsion of the beast" (82). When Liang attempts to seduce Tai in *Under Heaven*, the characters quickly decide that Liang is not a fox-spirit herself, but has rather been possessed by one, if of course there is a fox-spirit at all (Kay 211). However, the fox-woman encounter in *Under Heaven* focuses on the subjective experience of the male character, and the structure of this encounter closely resembles the male seduction narrative

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[3] Huntington observes that although some fox narratives do depict homosexuality, they are almost always about male homosexuality. Huntington cites "Feng Sanniang" as the single example of a fox narrative in which both of the primary characters are women (122).

[4] While the narrative makes clear that Liang is not herself a fox-spirit, it is ambiguous about whether or not Liang has been possessed by one, and indeed whether or not such spirits actually exist. That a fox-spirit is interested in Tai is never conclusively proven, and Tai himself states that he does not believe in fox-spirits (Kay 211), although his certainty is easily shaken. The significance of this ambiguity will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three. It is important to note, however, that the *structure* of the fox-spirit myth remains important despite this equivocation. That Liang's seduction of Tai is an attempt to entrap him is not in question; the only question is whether it is done for political gain or at the behest of a supernatural creature.

that Huntington describes. Liang's appearance in Tai's bedroom constitutes the first

encounter, and while there is no consummation in this case, there is exposure: Tai asks Liang

if there is a *daiji* within her (210). This effectively ends Liang's attempted seduction, and the

poet Sima Zian suggests that any spirit that may have been present fled after Liang's attempt

at seduction was interrupted, implying, as Huntington observes, the expulsion of the beast

(Kay 212). Given that Tai is a male protagonist, it makes sense for the novel to adopt the

structure of a seduction narrative, in which the male experience is typically central, for the

fox-woman subplot. However, the novel also appropriates the trope of possession without

acknowledging the narrative tradition from which that trope comes, a tradition comprised of

stories with typically female protagonists. This erases the importance of the female

experience in fox narratives, while at the same time creating an erroneously narrow depiction

of what is actually a broad and varied narrative tradition.

Indeed, there was much more variation among Tang fox narratives than Kay's

portrayal suggests. As discussed above, even narratives that feature seductive foxes may

adopt one of multiple story structures, which during the Tang were not related to the

characters' genders as they are in *Under Heaven*. Furthermore, while Huntington's analysis

indicates that sex was an important part of the tradition of fox narratives, it is also evident

that sex was far from the *only* aspect of these narratives. Huntington notes that even

seductive female foxes would sometimes assume "the nonsexual responsibilities of

concubines or even wives," and that "foxes also play important roles as popular deities,

aspiring immortals, household poltergeists, romantic heroines, and scholarly friends, to name

a few" (82, 79). Female foxes therefore played much more varied roles, even in popular

narratives, than Kay's portrayal would indicate, and popular narratives were themselves part

of a much larger tradition.[5] Xiaofei Kang comments in *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China* that "fox spirits as a religious phenomenon [have] lasted for more than a thousand years" (3). Lewis likewise argues that fox-spirits formed the basis for religious cults among the commoners, who would make offerings to fox-spirits in order to gain their favour (229-30).

In *Under Heaven*, on the other hand, there is no indication that fox myths have a religious component, and the varied roles of the fox-woman in traditional narratives are eschewed in favour of a fox-woman who is an entirely sexual being. While there is certainly an historical basis for the portrayal of fox-women in *Under Heaven* as supernatural seductresses, historically the seductive fox-spirit, and in particular the seductive fox-woman, has been part of a much larger narrative and religious phenomenon. However, the way in which *Under Heaven* is (positioned as) grounded in historical Tang myths allows readers unfamiliar with the broader history of fox narratives to assume that Tang fox myths were just as singularly sexual as the fox myths portrayed in *Under Heaven*, especially since this portrayal echoes the exoticism and Orientalism with which Western writers have traditionally engaged so-called Oriental cultures. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that Orientalist narratives tend to draw a clear association between the "Orient" and "freedom of licentious sex" (190), and it is precisely this license that fox-women in *Under Heaven* represent. Indeed, fox women are representatives of the type of female character that Said describes as "creatures of a male power fantasy," common to Orientalist narratives: "[t]hey express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing"

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[5] In a post for John Scalzi's "The Big Idea" blog series, Kay cites Tang poetry as being an important influence on the novel. This may partially explain the over-emphasis on seduced men and seductive fox-women, as Huntington indicates that the tradition of the fox-woman as dangerous seductress is particularly common in poetry (82-83).

(207). While *Under Heaven* does not indicate that fox-women are particularly stupid, the novel is so focused on their "unlimited sensuality" that their intelligence hardly matters. The defining traits of fox-women in *Under Heaven* are their beauty and their appetites (Kay 211). By basing Kitan fox-woman legends on historical Tang Chinese fox narratives, the novel draws a clear parallel between its fictional tradition and the historical one; however, the novel's erasure of all fox-spirit narratives in which the foxes are not seductive, sexual, and female creates a version of fox-spirit narratives that responds not to the historical tradition of Tang Chinese fox myths, but to a Western tradition of exoticism and Orientalism.

Fox-women in *Under Heaven* are further exoticized by the way their sexuality is presented as not only excessive, but dangerous. Said observes that "[i]n most cases, the Orient seemed to have offended sexual propriety; everything about the Orient . . . exuded dangerous sex, [and] threatened hygiene and domestic seemliness with an excess of 'freedom of intercourse'" (167). Said describes a number of examples of Orientalist scholarship in which descriptions of excessive sex and licentiousness are used as a method of portraying the "Orient" as dangerous as well as exotic. In many of the examples that Said discusses, excessive sexual license represents some existential threat to Western rationality; in *Under Heaven*, the sexual availability of fox-women creates concrete threats to personal and political well-being, with potentially devastating consequences. Fox-women are so sexually voracious that they pose a physical threat to any man who succumbs to their charms, since "men could be destroyed" by their appetites (Kay 211), but they can also be politically dangerous in the correct circumstances. It would certainly be politically dangerous, for example, for Tai to have sex with Liang, the unmarried daughter of a prominent military general; in fact, *Under Heaven* suggests that this would be dangerous not only to Tai

personally, but to the empire at large. While it is possible that Liang attempts to seduce Tai

in order to marry him and claim his connection to royalty (Tai's sister Li-Mei has recently

been elevated to royalty in an imperial ceremony and given in marriage to the Bogü ruler's

heir), Tai suspects that Liang's attempted seduction is an effort to place him in a

compromising position and thus force him to surrender the Sardian horses (Kay 208), which

become crucial to the defense of the empire during the rebellion. In other words, *Under*

Heaven literalizes Said's notion of dangerous sex, suggesting that the already-dangerous

political intrigue that Tai must navigate is made even more dangerous by the presence and

sexual availability of fox-women.

For readers already familiar with Chinese history, the exoticization inherent in Kay's

portrayal of the fox-woman myth is further emphasized by Kay's choice to name his fox-

spirits *daiji*. This term invokes the historical and literary figure Daji, a favoured imperial

concubine whose influence is believed to have caused the downfall of the last Shang emperor

as well as the Shang Dynasty (1600-1027 B.C.) itself (Huntington 102). According to

Huntington, Daji is one of "a series of specific fatal imperial concubines [who] are identified

as actually being vixens" (101). Daji is the focus of a number of popular narratives in which,

possessed (and ultimately completely consumed by) a fox-spirit, she plays a central role in

the fall of the Shang dynasty (102). Unlike what Huntington describes as "even the most

voracious vixens," Daji is portrayed as bloodthirsty as well as sexually aggressive (103).

Huntington asserts that "[t]he combination of fox and fatal concubine becomes a clearer

embodiment of evil than a fox ever could be on her own" (103). Daji, a "fatal" imperial

concubine whose influence is said to have caused the downfall of the emperor whom she

served, is associated with physical, psychological, and political danger that epitomizes Said's

notion of dangerous sex. This is an association that *Under Heaven* wholeheartedly embraces.

That *daiji* is the name given not to a particular fox-woman character, but to fox-women in

general, suggests that all fox-women within the secondary world of *Under Heaven* are as

dangerous as Daji, a figure whose capability for violence, according to Huntington, was

almost cartoonishly exaggerated in popular Tang sources. Indeed, the novel emphasizes the

danger that fox-women pose not just to a single man's body or consciousness, but to the

empire itself. Liang's attempt to seduce Tai, discussed above, is a threat to the empire as well

as to Tai's personal wellbeing. Similarly, Wen Jian, the favoured concubine of emperor

Taizu and a figure who, like her historical counterpart Yang Guifei, ultimately shouldered

some of the blame for the An Lushan Rebellion and the subsequent collapse of the Tang

Dynasty (Lewis 40), is described as "more dangerous than a fox-woman" (Kay 308). Given

the way that the novel emphasizes not just dangerous sex, but sex that has the power to

topple entire empires, the use of the term *daiji* for fox-spirits can hardly be coincidental.

Associating fox women so clearly with Daji herself suggests that all fox-women are not only

sexual, but destructive, a suggestion that the novel reinforces by portraying *all* fox-women as

both of these things (and *only* these things). Ultimately, Kay's portrayal of fox-woman myths

in *Under Heaven* reduces a complex tradition to a single story of violence and dangerous

sexuality, one that is nevertheless associated with the historical tradition upon which it is

based.

Much as Kay's portrayal of Bogü religion exoticizes the Uighur by focusing on

primitivist discourse and the figure of the shaman, his portrayal of fox myths exoticizes the

existing Tang tradition by placing an ahistorical emphasis on danger and sexuality. The

parallels that the novel draws between the fictional Bogü and Kitan peoples and the historical

Uighur and Tang peoples allows readers who are unfamiliar with these histories to assume that Kay's portrayals are based in fact. However, these portrayals contain historical inaccuracies that reflect negatively on the cultures in question; the novel's portrayal of the Bogü as primitive and savage suggests that the Uighur were likewise primitive and savage, while its portrayal of Kitan fox-women as dangerously and excessively sexual reduces a complex Tang tradition to an exotic sexual preoccupation. Ultimately, the novel's portrayal of each culture's myths is drawn as much from Western traditions of writing about those cultures as from the cultures themselves.

2.2 Revising Oppression: Dynamic Myth in *Who Fears Death*

While the changes that Kay makes to the Uighur and Tang myths portrayed in *Under Heaven* ground the novel's portrayal of those myths in Western exoticism, the changes that Okorafor makes, in *Who Fears Death*, to myths drawn from various African countries and ethnic groups have an opposing effect: they allow the novel to challenge Western colonialist notions. Unlike the way in which the altered myths in *Under Heaven* re-create, at least to an extent, an historical social and cultural milieu, the altered myths in *Who Fears Death* create a new and changed culture for the inhabitants of the Seven Rivers Kingdom, a far-future version of Sudan (Okorafor 381). Adapting current myths to reflect this fictional setting does more than simply reinforce the novel's imaginative vision, however; it also challenges the notion that indigenous identity must remain fixed in order to be considered indigenous. As discussed in the first chapter, my thesis defines myth in part as the *traditional* narratives of a culture. However, the concept of tradition becomes problematic within the context of colonial discourse, which constructs tradition as a key part of indigenous identity and uses a

lack of "authenticity," or adherence to tradition, as a means of excluding a person or group from indigenous identity once that person or group becomes too threatening. Linda Tuhiwai Smith states in *Decolonizing Methodologies* that "[a]t the heart of such a [Western] view about authenticity is a belief that indigenous cultures cannot change, cannot recreate themselves and still claim to be indigenous. Nor can they be complicated, internally diverse, or contradictory. Only the West has that privilege" (74). By adapting current myths to suit the fictional setting, rather than simply transcribing current myths into a novel that supposedly takes place many years in the future, Okorafor asserts that the indigenous cultures from which those myths come do indeed transform over time.

Okorafor adapts elements of African myths in order to create a cosmology that is, on the surface, typical of that of many fantasy novels: a systematic explanation of magic that is at least loosely related to the religion of the secondary world. For example, the Great Mystic Points, which are central to the mechanics of magic in *Who Fears Death*, are clearly adapted from Igbo myths. Sorcerers in *Who Fears Death* use magic by manipulating the four Points, which consist of Uwa, representing the body and the physical world; Mmuo, representing the spirit world; Alusi, representing "forces, deities, spirits, [and] non-Uwa beings;" and Okike, representing the Creator (Okorafor 144-45). Although these points do not correspond exactly with Igbo mythology, there are some striking similarities. Chinwe Achebe explains that Igbo cosmology consists of "Elu-Igwe (Sky or Heavens) ruled by Chiukwu (Great God); Ala mmadu (the human or physical world); and Ala mmuo (world of spirits or the dead)" (Achebe cited in Ilechukwu 240). Okorafor's Uwa (physical) and Okike (Creator/deity) points are conceptually similar to the notions of Ala mmadu and Chiukwu that Achebe

describes,[6] although their names have been altered; Uwa, for example, echoes the term *uwa mmadu*, an alternate term for *ala mmadu* (Cole and Aniakor 14). While the novel does not explain that these concepts are similar to current concepts in Igbo mythology, it does explain how they function within the context of the secondary world, so even readers who are not familiar with Igbo myths are able to understand how magic functions in the novel.

For readers who are familiar with the sources upon which Okorafor draws, however, the portrayal of myth creates an additional layer of meaning by presenting fictional myths that, while they are clearly adapted from Igbo mythology, do not correspond exactly to current Igbo beliefs. For example, while the Great Mystic Points of Alusi and Mmuo have Igbo names, they are not conceptually identical to traditional Igbo beliefs of the same name. In *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, Herbert Cole and Chike Aniakor assert that "alusi" is the collective term for various "tutelary deities" while mmuo are "ghost[s] or spirit[s]," including ancestors (16), and the term "ala-" or "animmuo" refers to the land that these spirits inhabit (Cole and Aniakor 16; Ilechukwu 240). In *Who Fears Death*, however, the Alusi Point encompasses deities *and* spirits, while the Mmuo Point represents the land that these deities and spirits occupy. While this is a seemingly small change, it suggests a larger cultural shift; specifically, it indicates the absence, or at least the relative unimportance, of ancestors in *Who Fears Death*. In Igbo culture, ancestors and Alusi are treated as separate forces and worshipped accordingly (Cole and Aniakor 16), while in *Who Fears Death*, deities, ghosts, and other such forces are all subsumed under the category of magical or Alusi beings. The novel's portrayal of myths that are clearly related to, but at the same time

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[6] Although it is not obvious from Ilechukwu's description of Igbo cosmology, Chiukwu (also spelled Chi-ukwu or Chukwu) is the supreme god of the Igbo pantheon, the "god of creation and destiny" (Jell-Bahlsen, *Water Goddess* 69). This strengthens the link between Okorafor's fictional Okike point and Chi-ukwu of the Igbo, since both are regarded as supreme deities and creative forces.

different from, current Igbo beliefs serves two distinct, but related, purposes. First, this portrayal reinforces the novel's futuristic setting; readers who are aware of the differences between Okorafor's fictionalized myths and current Igbo beliefs are reminded that *Who Fears Death* does not portray Igbo culture as it is now, but in an imagined future. Secondly, by portraying a future in which mythical beliefs *have* changed, the novel challenges the stereotype that aspects of indigenous culture, such as religious beliefs, cannot or do not change with time.

The novel's project to incorporate and adapt indigenous African myths extends beyond just Igbo culture. Indeed, although the novel draws more on Igbo myths than on other African myths, the myths of the fictional Seven Rivers Kingdom are borrowed from a number of different (primarily West African) countries and ethnic groups. For example, the novel refers to a number of existing African scripts and alphabets. Ting, the apprentice sorcerer of the Red People, comments that Onyesonwu would be able to read Vai, Bassa, Menda, and Nsibidi if she had finished her apprenticeship (Okorafor 261). All four of these names refer to actual African scripts and alphabets. Nsibidi, discussed in more detail below, is the only one of these scripts that is associated with the Igbo; the Vai syllabary is the name of an actual script developed in Liberia, while the names "Menda" and "Bassa" invite comparison to the Mende and Bassa peoples, each of whom also developed prominent scripts or alphabets (Tuchscherer 45-46). Although this is the novel's only mention of the Vai, Mende, and Bassa scripts, Ting's comment indicates that they are important to the fictional inhabitants of the Seven Rivers Kingdom. Other myths from non-Igbo cultures play a more prominent role in the novel, such as the *kponyungo*, a dragon-like creature which assists Onyesonwu near the end of the novel and which shares a name with the *kponyungo* that

appears in the masquerades of the Senufo people, an ethnic group located in the Niger-Congo area (McNaughton 43). More prominent yet are some of the myths drawn from Yoruba culture, including the phenomenon of *abiku* (known as *ogbanje* among the Igbo), and Yoruba beliefs about twins. Each of these myths serves a specific narrative and thematic purpose, which I will discuss in greater detail below. However, it is important to note that mixing different cultural influences is itself a significant gesture. Much like the deliberately altered version of Igbo cosmology described above, the mixture of different cultural influences here suggests that within the context of *Who Fears Death*'s secondary world, these African cultures have changed with time, once again reinforcing both the futuristic setting and the implied assertion that indigenous cultures are capable of change.

The mixture of Yoruba and Igbo cultures makes a particularly important statement given the unhappy history between these two groups. Max Siollun, in *Oil, Politics, and Military Coup Culture (1966-1976)*, describes the conflicts between three major groups, the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo, in the events leading up to and during the Nigerian civil war. Although Siollun argues that most of the violence during the original coups was perpetrated by the Hausa-Fulani against the Igbo, he also notes that anti-Igbo sentiments were present among the Yoruba and that some Yoruba officers participated in the massacres of Igbo people (Siollun 91, 131). Siollun likewise observes that this violence increased Igbo anger towards the Yoruba, as "Igbo survivors of the [massacres] felt that some of their Yoruba neighbors had not done enough to protect them" (138). To include both Yoruba and Igbo influences within a single fictional culture is thus quite remarkable, and in fact caused some controversy upon the book's release. In a blog post entitled "The Lesson from my 1st *Who Fears Death* signing," Okorafor describes a book signing during which she was

criticized by African academics for mixing cultural influences. Although Okorafor does not

discuss her reasoning for doing so in specific terms, she hints at a political purpose, writing,

"[t]he envelope needs to be shoved. The mold needs to be crushed. There are many ways to

write outside the box. . . . I knew the poison I was dabbling in, the spirits and ghosts I was

communing with, the history and cultures I was poking." Indeed, the novel does considerably

more than "dabble" in this history, since the violence associated with ethnic conflict is

central to the plot of *Who Fears Death*. The ethnic conflict at the heart of the novel cannot be

easily aligned with the anti-Igbo violence that occurred during the Nigerian civil war,[7] but

Okorafor, in another blog post entitled "The Writing of *Who Fears Death*," describes a

variety of things that influenced her writing process, including "hear[ing] stories about the

Biafran War and arguments about how what happened during this civil war was indeed the

genocide of the Igbo people." In light of such history, Okorafor's treatment of myth becomes

even more significant. Combining the myths of multiple cultures into a single cosmology

suggests that indigenous cultures are neither static nor isolated, but capable of borrowing and

adopting from one another as well as adapting their own myths over time. In conjunction

with the end of the novel and its ultimate resolution of ethnic conflict in the Seven Rivers

Kingdom, this combined cosmology also suggests the possibility of peace, since disparate

and even historically conflicting cultures are brought together in the fictional future of *Who

Fears Death*.

     In most of the examples cited above, the myths upon which Okorafor draws have

been altered mostly by virtue of their placement within the cosmology of a single culture.

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[7] The ethnic violence portrayed in *Who Fears Death* is also, at least in part, a response to the ethnic violence
that occurred in Sudan during the Darfur conflict, particularly the way in which rape was used as a weapon of
war. This point is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three below.

However, Okorafor also combines different cultural influences to create completely new

myths. The magical "eye" of the antagonist Daib, for example, combines the Sudanese

notion of the evil eye with Igbo colour symbolism. While she undergoes ritual circumcision

during the Eleventh Year Rite, Onyesonwu inadvertently travels to the spirit world (Mmuo)

and spots a malevolent magic, which is "[r]ed and oval-shaped with a white oval in the

center, like the giant eye of a jinni. It sizzled and hissed, the white part expanding, moving

closer. . . . The red was bitter venom. The white was like the sun's worst heat" (Okorafor 41).

Onyesonwu later learns that this eye is a manifestation of Daib's magic, one that allows him

to watch her and even attack her through the spirit world. The similarities between the

Sudanese evil eye and Daib's malevolent eye are very suggestive. The Sudanese evil eye is

closely linked to sorcery, and Daib is a powerful sorcerer; the evil eye is usually attributed to

outsiders or strangers, and Daib is Nuru whereas most of the prominent characters in *Who*

Fears Death are Okeke; and the evil eye is closely associated with "persons expressing

undue interest in the private concerns of another" (Chapin-Metz 109), and Daib regularly

uses the magical eye to monitor Onyesonwu's actions.[8] The red-and-white of Daib's magical

eye, however, is suggestive of Igbo colour symbolism. In *The Water Goddess in Igbo*

Cosmology: Ogbuide of Oguta Lake, Sabine Jell-Bahlsen explains that red and white are

common colours in Igbo rituals. Each individual colour holds ritual significance, but the

particular combination of red and white is also meaningful, as "[t]he color dualism

symbolizes the structured opposition of reciprocal and balanced gender relations, as

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[8] This is one of the few references to Sudanese myths contained in *Who Fears Death*, despite the fact that the
Seven Rivers Kingdom is set in a future version of Sudan. While it is possible that Onyesonwu's role as a
sorcerer is meant to acknowledge the Sudanese belief in sorcery, it is equally possible that Onyesonwu's role is
simply another iteration of the sorcerer as a common fantasy trope. Evidently, beliefs regarding sorcery are not
limited to a particular Sudanese ethnic group or groups (Chapin-Metz 109).

reaffirmed and displayed in ritual" (Jell-Bahlsen 106). This colour symbolism, according to Jell-Bahlsen, represents both the contrast between male and female, and the need to achieve balance between those two roles (222, 223). Invoking this contrast is certainly appropriate in *Who Fears Death*, where the relationship between the male and female genders is primarily oppositional. Much of the novel's conflict, especially in the early chapters, centers on the unequal relationship between men and women, and in particular the way in which women are constantly refused access to sorcery. The relationship between Onyesonwu and Daib is also oppositional. Onyesonwu opposes Daib personally because Daib raped Onyesonwu's mother, and politically because of the violence with which Daib treats Okekes and the sexual violence with which he treats Okeke women in particular. Daib's hatred of Onyesonwu, in turn, is in large part due to Onyesonwu's biological sex: the characters state on numerous occasions that Onyesonwu was "supposed to" be both male and an ally of Daib's (Okorafor 110, 120, 365, 372). The presence of the malevolent red-and-white eye allows Onyesonwu and Daib to come into conflict even before Onyesonwu decides to leave her village in order to face Daib directly. Like the examples cited above, the eye of Daib represents the ability of traditional beliefs to transform over time. Furthermore, drawing on Sudanese beliefs about the evil eye acknowledges the importance of the novel's geographical setting of Sudan, while drawing on the traditional associations of the red and white colour scheme emphasizes one of the novel's major themes.

While it may seem contradictory to assert that the fictionalized myths of *Who Fears Death* are in any way traditional, there is an emerging critical understanding of myth as both traditional and dynamic. In "Myths and Boundaries: Reflections on Thompson's 'Myth and Folktales,'" William Hansen comments that many of the scholars who contributed to *Myth: A*

Symposium, the volume to which the essays in *Myth: A New Symposium* respond, share an interest in the origins of myth. Hansen criticizes this focus on origins, however, saying "[n]ever mind what the narrative might have meant to later generations who knew nothing of its origin, or, for that matter, what it might mean to us" (22). For Hansen, the original meaning of a myth is less interesting than the current meaning of the same narrative. Barre Toelken, in "Native American Reinterpretations of Myth," argues that the ability to incorporate cultural changes is important in order for myth to reflect a culture's current reality. Toelken describes the tendency of some Navajo storytellers to include references to modern elements of Navajo life, such as cattle, sheep, and goats, within traditional narratives, and argues that "the Navajos use myth not to 'explain' where they came from, but, rather, to narratively claim the world into which they moved, and to adjust that claim as the world moved in on them" (Toelken 92). Ultimately, while myths can be understood as traditional narratives, neither myths nor the traditions that shape them are completely fixed. Instead, traditions evolve over time, and the myths associated with those traditions must likewise evolve in order to reflect the worldview of the culture that creates them.

By altering the myths upon which it draws, the novel does more than simply dramatize the phenomena of changing worldviews. Although the fictionalized myths of *Who Fears Death* bear some important resemblances to the actual myths upon which they are based, the way those myths are altered allows Okorafor to comment on, and, within the context of the secondary world, even repudiate the oppressions that the traditional narratives might otherwise enable. In "The Dawn of a New Lilith," Osherow argues that C. L. Moore and Octavia Butler engage in "revisionary myth-making," or the revision of mythical

characters or narratives in order to explore oppression.[9] Osherow's observations about Butler, one of the best known African-American writers of fantasy and science fiction, are particularly pertinent, as they suggest that this sort of "revisionary myth-making" is already an established technique in the area of African-American science fiction and fantasy particularly. Certainly Okorafor, like Butler, revises mythical narratives in order to explore experiences of oppression. However, Osherow's analysis focuses on the fictional versions of Lilith that Moore and Butler create, and suggests that the Biblical myth of Lilith is merely a reference, a backdrop against which Moore and Butler create their new, empowered (and in Butler's case, estranged) Liliths. The revision of mythical narratives that occurs in *Who Fears Death*, on the other hand, is even more complex. Okorafor's particular method of using myth is perhaps best described by what Michael Kightley, in "Heorot or Meduseld? Tolkien's Use of Beowulf in 'The King of the Golden Hall,'" calls "calquing," which is the use of particular narratives as intertexts in order to achieve a specific effect. Calquing affects not only the reader's perception of the new narrative, but also his or her perception of the traditional narrative upon which the new narrative draws; that traditional narrative is not merely referenced, but revised. While the reader's recognition of the traditional narrative enhances the new narrative in subtle ways related to devices such as plot, characterization, and theme, calquing is not merely an allusion to a traditional narrative, but rather an active revision of that narrative.

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[9] Although Osherow's article focuses mostly on science fiction writing, her observations are relevant to fantasy as well as science fiction, as the two genres share many of the same tropes, including a fascination with far-off worlds, fantastic or alien creatures, and themes of colonialism and imperialism. Many authors, including Moore, Butler, and Okorafor, write both fantasy and science fiction, and novels such as *Who Fears Death* could be characterized as belonging to either genre.

Okorafor's portrayal of the Nsibidi script is one example of calquing. Much like the examples cited in previous paragraphs, the novel invokes some of the traditions associated with Nsibidi among the Igbo and other ethnic groups, such as the Ejagham, Ibibo, and Efik peoples, who use the script (Kreamer et al., "Inscribing Meaning" 83). Specifically, Okorafor invokes the sense of secrecy and mystery that surrounds Nsibidi, as well as the particular methods through which that air of secrecy is maintained. Knowledge of Nsibidi falls primarily within the purview of men's secret societies both in current West African cultures and in the secondary world of *Who Fears Death*: Okorafor's community of sorcerers essentially functions as a men's secret society, albeit one in which the male-only aspect is beginning to break down, a point which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three. Importantly, however, the novel's single most knowledgeable character regarding Nsibidi and magical scripts in general is a woman, Ting. When Onyesonwu is magically poisoned by Daib, it is Ting who identifies the Nsibidi symbol used to create the poison.[10] Indeed, the novel indicates that Ting is the *only* character with sufficient knowledge of Nsibidi to do so. Ssaiku, a master sorcerer of the Red People and the man to whom Ting is apprenticed, does not recognize the symbol that Daib uses to poison Onyesonwu. When asked what the symbol is, Ssaiku answers, "Ting may know . . . At two years old the girl could read Okeke, Vah, and Sipo. She'll be able to read this" (Okorafor 297). Although both Ssaiku's gender and his position as a master sorcerer grant him a great deal of authority over Ting, he defers without question to her superior knowledge of the Nsibidi script, and her superior ability to create the

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[10] Amanda Carlson, in "*Nsibidi*: Old and New Scripts," notes that "[a]mong the Bakor-Ejagham . . . *nsibidi* can be used to command a spiritual manhunt, in which no physical action is directed at the target, but he or she is hunted down and killed in the spiritual realm. This leads to the person's eventual death in the physical world" (148). Daib's poisoning of Onyesonwu resembles this kind of spiritual manhunt, since the poisoning occurs when both Onyesonwu and Daib are in the spiritual world, but would have lead to Onyesonwu's death in the physical world.

tattoos that counteract the poison. By invoking the traditional association between Nsibidi and male knowledge, and then creating a female character whose knowledge of Nsibidi exceeds that of the male characters, Okorafor invites readers to re-examine the traditional belief that Nsibidi should be male-only knowledge.

In its portrayal of twins, the novel uses a more overtly revisionist approach to achieve this calquing effect, outright replacing the traditional Igbo belief that has historically enabled the persecution of twins. In a post on Penguin.com entitled "Proprioception," Okorafor writes that among the Igbo, "twins and other multiple births were seen as monstrous; immediately afterwards, the 'extra' babies were thrown into the bush." Indeed, the mothers of twins were often persecuted as well (Jell-Bahlsen, *Water Goddess* 134). In *Who Fears Death*, however, twins are regarded as extraordinary rather than unnatural. According to Onyesonwu, "[t]wins are a strong sign of Ani's love. Twins are often paid to live in a town, too. If anything goes wrong, it is always said that if the twins weren't there things would be worse" (Okorafor 86). Indeed, Onyesonwu and her companions later encounter twins who are being paid to live in the town of Banza, where they are regarded as the town's good-luck charm. Emily McIlroy asserts that this view of twins as exceptional and extraordinary is common to a number of African ethnic groups, including both the Yoruba and the Sudanese Neur, the latter of whom regard the twin bond as "both sacred and indestructible" (3). Okorafor herself discusses Yoruba beliefs about twins in "Proprioception," where she notes that "the Yorubas saw twins as extraordinary people, giving them special names and believing them to have important destinies," which suggests that the portrayal of

"exceptional" twins in *Who Fears Death* is drawn from Yoruba beliefs.[11] While the novel is still somewhat critical of the way the lives of "extraordinary" twins' are circumscribed by tradition (Okorafor 216), the portrayal of twins in *Who Fears Death* replaces a history of violence and persecution with one of veneration. For readers who are not familiar with Yoruba and Igbo beliefs, the historical persecution of twins and the mothers of twins within Igbo culture is effectively erased. For readers who are familiar with Yoruba and Igbo traditions, however, the novel implies a comparison between the two traditions by linking Yoruba beliefs about twins to the favour of an Igbo goddess, Ani. At the same time as the novel normalizes acceptance of rather than persecution of twins, it also invites readers to question the persecution of twins enabled by traditional Igbo beliefs by comparing those beliefs to the less oppressive Yoruba views of same. Through calquing, Okorafor encourages readers to re-examine the oppressions enabled by traditional beliefs surrounding the Nsibidi script and twins, while also creating a secondary world in which those oppressions no longer exist. At the same time, Okorafor's portrayal of Nsibidi and twin beliefs serves the same purpose as the other examples cited above: it reinforces the novel's setting as a fictional, future Africa, and also challenges the colonial notion that indigenous cultures and traditions are static.

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[11] Given that the novel is set in Sudan, it could be argued that the novel's portrayal of twins is meant to reflect Neur beliefs instead of or in addition to Yoruba beliefs. However, a distinguishing feature of Neur beliefs is that twins are also birds (5). Since twins are not associated with birds in *Who Fears Death*, it is also possible that the similarity is merely coincidence.

2.3 Reinscription, Re-imagination, and the Politics of Myth

Although myth is a crucial tool through which both *Who Fears Death* and *Under Heaven* establish their imaginative visions, the use of myth in each novel creates opposing effects. African myths in *Who Fears Death* establish an imagined culture and an imagined future, while Tang Chinese and Uighur myths in *Under Heaven* are used to re-imagine the social and cultural milieu of a specific time and place in the past. While the myths in both novels are clearly based upon the myths of past or present cultures, both novels also alter the myths upon which they draw to a certain extent, and these changes are indicative of each novel's politics. The Bogü and Kitan myths of *Under Heaven* are based directly on the myths of the historical Uighur and Tang Chinese peoples, but are presented in a reductive way that exoticizes both Uighur and Tang cultures. The African myths of *Who Fears Death*, on the other hand, are removed from the context of the (primarily) Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups to which they belong and placed within the context of a fictional and futuristic culture. This allows the novel to take a revisionist approach, re-imagining the future in order to challenge colonial notions of difference and indigeneity, and to engage with issues of oppression enabled by the traditional myths upon which the novel draws. However, Okorafor's approach of blending multiple cultures also runs the risk of homogenizing those cultures by eliding the differences, as well as the very real history of oppression, that exist between those cultures. Furthermore, the novel's revisionist approach to traditional Igbo and Yoruba myths relies on the reader's knowledge of those myths. While Okorafor's altered myths indicate a thoughtful engagement with both the myths themselves and the politics thereof, for readers who are unfamiliar with traditional Igbo and Yoruba myths, the altered myths function as simply another variation on a standard fantasy cosmology.

Chapter Three: Myth and History as a Method of Political Engagement

The previous chapter compared the fictional myths of *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death* with the real myths on which the fictional ones are based in order to argue that the fictionalized myths of each novel are indicative of that novel's politics: Orientalist in *Under Heaven* and revisionist in *Who Fears Death*. Although the Uighur and Tang Chinese myths in *Under Heaven* are presented in a reductive and exoticist manner, both *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death* use myth as a tool through which to explore racial and gendered oppressions created by political institutions and ideologies. The current chapter will explore the ways in which both novels use myth to criticize oppressive ideologies created not only by the fictional institutions in each novel, but also by the real institutions on which the fictional ones are based. For example, *Who Fears Death* portrays sorcery as a form of highly secretive knowledge in order to comment upon the exclusions perpetuated by men's secret societies such as masquerading societies. The novel also uses its portrayal of sorcery to acknowledge the political climate of Sudan, the geographical location in which the novel is set, while the racialized and gendered violence of the novel responds not only to the anti-Igbo violence discussed in Chapter Two above, but also to the violence that occurred in Sudan during the Darfur crisis. Similarly, although its presentation of Uighur and Tang Chinese myths leaves much to be desired, *Under Heaven* nevertheless uses these myths to provide a pointed criticism of colonial and patriarchal ideologies. The explicit descriptions of Kitan colonial ideology comment on the artificiality and constructedness of this ideology, while the novel's presentation of the way in which Kitan women's lives are circumscribed by patriarchal power structures provides a commentary on the very real oppressions experienced by Tang

Chinese women. The effectiveness of the novel's critiques is limited, however, by the way in which the novel presents these things as regrettable but natural and unavoidable, a presentation that ultimately reinscribes the very marginalization that it attempts to criticize.

3.1 Exploring Exclusions: The Gendered Knowledge of Myth in *Who Fears Death*

Sorcery, the primary manifestation of myth in *Who Fears Death*, also functions therein as a political institution. While this institution is clearly invented, it is nevertheless based on real political institutions that exist in the cultures upon which the novel draws, in particular the men's secret societies common to Igbo (and other) cultures. Although the sorcerers in the novel are never explicitly described as belonging to a secret society, the way in which knowledge of sorcery is disseminated in the novel is highly suggestive of such a society. Carlson describes the relationship between the Nsibidi writing system and men's secret societies, observing that only initiated members of particular secret societies have access to the meaning of Nsibidi symbols and that "[k]nowledge of *nsibidi* is highly restricted and learned through a progression of ritual tests" (146-47). The Nsibidi writing system is only one of many aspects of sorcery portrayed in *Who Fears Death*, and indeed only one of many kinds of knowledge guarded by historical and current secret societies; masquerades, for example, often (though not always) fall under the purview of secret societies (Cole and Aniakor 111). Like those hoping to gain the knowledge of secret societies, Onyesonwu must undergo the ritual test of initiation before she is permitted to learn anything beyond the most basic knowledge of sorcery. Other parallels exist as well. For example, Aro, the sorcerer who eventually becomes Onyesonwu's teacher, insists that Onyesonwu is not permitted to write down what she learns, which echoes Okorafor's own

observation, in a blog post entitled "Never Unmask a Masquerade," that the masking

organization in her father's village does not write down its secrets. Onyesonwu's father

describes Aro as the man who structures the government of Jwahir, Onyesonwu's village, a

political role that suggests the importance that men's secret societies have historically played

in the government of Igbo and other ethnic groups (Cole and Aniakor 116; Carlson 146). The

most important parallel, however, is the fact that access to such knowledge is highly

gendered. Knowledge of sorcery is an (almost) exclusively male privilege in *Who Fears*

Death, just as knowledge of Nsibidi and masquerades are almost exclusively male privileges

in Igbo and many other cultures.[12] Drawing these parallels allows *Who Fears Death* to

discuss the exclusions perpetrated by such societies within the context of the secondary

world.

This discussion informs one of the novel's central conflicts: Onyesonwu's inability to

access information about her magical abilities. While Onyesonwu is able to learn minor juju

(magic) from Mwita, Onyesonwu's close friend and eventually her lover, knowledge of the

Great Mystic Points, which are central to the mechanics of true sorcery, is jealously guarded.

Aro initially refuses to teach Onyesonwu because she is female (Okorafor 66), and this

rejection becomes the single most important obstacle for Onyesonwu to overcome in the

early parts of the novel. In fact, Onyesonwu is excluded from the institution of sorcery before

she even learns that such an institution exists. When Onyesonwu's body becomes transparent

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[12] While I focus on the way in which Nsibidi is used among the Igbo people, it is worth noting that Nsibidi is
important to many African ethnic groups, and that while knowledge of Nsibidi is typically a male privilege,
there are important exceptions to this rule (Carlson 148-49; Cole and Aniakor 111). Carlson comments that "the
relationship between women and *nsibidi* is very complex," and varies from context to context (148). Likewise,
while Cole and Aniakor assert that Igbo masking organizations are "overwhelmingly male in membership and
concept" (111), they also note a number of exceptions to this rule, such as maiden- and mother-spirit masks
(128). The authors also note that some exceptions are specific to particular Igbo villages (157).

during her ritual circumcision, the Ada, the priestess who oversees the ritual (and, as readers learn later, Aro's wife), says that Onyesonwu should speak with Aro; however, when Onyesonwu asks who Aro is, the Ada refuses to elaborate (Okorafor 42). Even Mwita does not tell Onyesonwu that he is Aro's student; although he is aware of Onyesonwu's considerable talent for sorcery, he does not even tell Onyesonwu that there is a sorcerer in the village. Instead, Onyesonwu discovers Aro's position completely by chance, overhearing a conversation between two boys who had recently failed their initiation (Okorafor 62). When Onyesonwu confronts Mwita and demands to know why he withheld this information, Mwita responds that "[Aro] *won't* teach you . . . because you're a girl, a *woman!*" (Okorafor 63). While neither Mwita, who failed his initiation and is thus not permitted to learn the Great Mystic Points (Okorafor 119), nor the Ada are part of the institution of sorcery, and thus not in a position to address the exclusionary nature of its knowledge, they perpetuate that exclusion by concealing Aro's position from Onyesonwu. Effectively, Onyesonwu's gender becomes the basis for excluding her not just from the institution of sorcery but from the knowledge that such an institution exists in the first place. The novel's deployment of myth, therefore, does much more than simply inform the supernatural elements of sorcery; by portraying sorcery not just as a set of magical abilities, but as an institution from which Onyesonwu and other women are excluded, the narrative offers a critique of institutions such as men's secret societies that perpetuate gendered exclusions.

In "Never Unmask a Masquerade," Okorafor writes somewhat dismissively of the perceived need for such gendered knowledge. She describes her own (failed) attempts to learn the secrets of the masquerades and her intent to keep trying, saying sarcastically that "as soon as the information falls on my female ears . . . the sky will turn black, plants will

grow underground, and babies will speak like old men." Onyesonwu's struggle to gain

access to the knowledge of sorcery, which Okorafor notes in the same blog post is at least

partly inspired by the author's own experiences, becomes a focal point of the novel, and this

conflict allows the novel to emphasize the apparently arbitrary nature of gendered

exclusions. Aro himself, though he rejects Onyesonwu numerous times, does not deign to

explain his reasoning.[13] When Onyesonwu first confronts him, Aro comments that because

Onyesonwu is female, she cannot "measure up," as if Onyesonwu's gender gives Aro

sufficient reason to assume her incompetence (Okorafor 66). In later confrontations, he

simply tells Onyesonwu to leave or ignores her altogether (83, 105). Even Mwita does not

explain *why* such knowledge is traditionally kept from women; he informs Onyesonwu that

her ability to bear children makes her sorcery "dangerous and unstable," but refuses to say

why (Okorafor 63). Onyesonwu's frustration at being repeatedly rejected is heightened by

the threat posed by her biological father, Daib; during this time, Onyesonwu has suffered a

number of Daib's magical attacks, and has realized that her only adequate defense against

such attacks requires learning to control her magical abilities. Even after Onyesonwu tells

Aro that she is being hunted, however, Aro refuses to teach her. His persistent refusal to

accept Onyesonwu as his student, especially in the face of Onyesonwu's genuine talent and

urgent need, seems in the novel's early chapters to be the result of baseless prejudice,

although this is later clarified, as I will discuss in more detail below. By drawing parallels

between the male-only institution of sorcery in *Who Fears Death* and existing male-only

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[13] Later in the novel, Aro does offer an explanation for his rejections. It is important to note, however, that he provides this explanation only *after* he has agreed to take Onyesonwu on as his student and she has passed her initiation. In the early parts of the novel, Aro treats even his justification for refusing Onyesonwu as a piece of secret knowledge.

secret societies, the novel suggests that such prejudice is shared by historical and current institutions; by making Onyesonwu's quest to learn sorcery not only a desire, but a necessity, the novel also suggests that such prejudice has the ability to do real and significant harm.

While the novel portrays sorcery as an overwhelmingly male institution, the competence and ability of the novel's female sorcerers suggests that overcoming such gendered exclusions is possible, at least to a degree. Onyesonwu's talents as a sorcerer allow her to occupy what, in the secondary world of *Who Fears Death*, is a traditionally male role, while Mwita, the novel's most prominent male character, occupies the traditionally female role of healer. Likewise, persuading Aro to teach her the Great Mystic Points is a significant victory after so many rejections, especially since Onyesonwu is far from the only woman whom Aro has rejected; even the Ada has despaired of ever convincing Aro to teach her the Great Mystic Points (87). Onyesonwu's triumph here is made even more significant by the suggestion that her example may have provided other women with the opportunity to learn the Great Mystic Points. After leaving her village, Onyesonwu learns that Aro may accept Najeeba, Onyesonwu's mother, as a student, which suggests that Aro, at least, is moving beyond his traditional prejudices by teaching women a traditionally male art (Okorafor 311). Nor is Aro the only one who has overcome such prejudices, as Ting, the apprentice sorcerer of the Red People discussed in the previous chapter, observes. She informs Onyesonwu that both Sola, the sorcerer who oversees the initiation rite, and Ssaiku, the Red People's master sorcerer, were initially sceptical of Ting's abilities, and assures Onyesonwu that this attitude is changing (319). Ultimately, although the novel criticizes the exclusionary nature of men's secret societies, it uses the magical abilities of Onyesonwu, Najeeba, and Ting to envision a future in which those exclusions begin to break down.

The effectiveness of this critique of gendered exclusions is limited, however, by the way in which the novel presents the female ability to do sorcery as dangerous. Onyesonwu's initiation into a typically male role continues to be a point of conflict throughout the novel, especially between Onyesonwu and Mwita, and the narrative ultimately makes clear that while the prejudice against female sorcerers may be unfair, it is far from baseless. In particular, their ability to bear children makes female sorcerers problematic. One of the first things that Aro teaches Onyesonwu, before he even begins to teach her the Great Mystic Points, is that a woman who attempts to practice sorcery while pregnant risks far more than just her own life and her child's:

> This happened to a woman long ago who was learning the Points. She was too early in her pregnancy for her Master [to] be aware of it. When she attempted a simple exercise, the entire town was wiped out. Disappeared as if it never existed. . . . You are now on the road to something very powerful but unstable. (Okorafor 137)

This tale reflects the notion that female fertility makes a woman's power unstable and therefore dangerous, a point raised explicitly by both Aro and Mwita (Okorafor 137, 63) and referenced obliquely at many points throughout the novel. Even Sola cautions Onyesonwu against her own lack of control over her sorcerous abilities (319). By dramatizing the fear of female power that exists in Onyesonwu's society, this story ultimately provides a justification for excluding women of child-bearing age from the institution of sorcery. Indeed, this story is used to exclude *all* women from practicing sorcery, since the novel makes no explicit distinction between women who can bear children and women who cannot. There is no indication that women who are unable to bear children are any less dangerous

than those who are able, nor is there any indication that it is viewed as socially acceptable for women who cannot bear children to practice sorcery.

The tale that Aro tells to Onyesonwu echoes tales that exist among ethnic groups in which the Nsibidi script plays a prominent role. For example, Carlson writes that "[a]ccording to many myths about the origins of *nsibidi*¸ women had access to it before men. In these stories, women's perceived inability to keep secrets results in their having to give *nsibidi* to men and relinquish their knowledge of it" (148). This story about the origins of Nsibidi, much like the story of the pregnant woman that Aro describes to Onyesonwu, asserts that women cannot or should not be trusted with certain kinds of knowledge. However, while the novel is critical of the gendered exclusions perpetuated by the institution of sorcery in *Who Fears Death*, and by extension of the gendered exclusions perpetuated by men's secret societies in current Igbo culture, it does not challenge the sexism inherent in stories that assume that women are incapable of handling certain types of knowledge and power. Instead, the novel treats Aro's tale of the pregnant woman with complete seriousness. Aro is a figure of considerable knowledge and authority, and Onyesonwu has no cause to question him. Even the Red People, who are remarkably relaxed regarding norms of gender and sexuality and who possess extensive knowledge of sorcery, are cautious when they realize that Onyesonwu is sexually active. Like Aro, they treat the cautionary tale of the woman whose womb wiped out an entire village as if it were absolutely true, and Ting, the female apprentice sorcerer, is prohibited from sexual intercourse (Okorafor 286). In fact, the novel suggests that the characters are completely correct to treat this story seriously, since the story is not just confirmed, but repeated when Onyesonwu, consumed by rage and sorrow after Mwita's death, uses sorcery to make herself conceive. She is successful, but the

consequences of her success are severe: every fertile woman within range of Onyesonwu's sorcery is impregnated, while every fertile man simply drops dead. Onyesonwu's actions, however inadvertent, legitimize the notion that a woman's ability to bear children makes female sorcery dangerous and difficult to control. This in turn suggests that the systemic exclusion of women from the institution of sorcery is not an arbitrary social limitation, but rather a reasonable response to women's abilities to use dangerous and uncontrollable magic. The novel's critique of gendered exclusions is thus mitigated by its portrayal of Onyesonwu, Najeeba, and Ting as not only exceptions, but dangerous ones, to the male-only rule.

The novel's portrayal of these women as exceptional is heightened by the lack of an equivalent female society in *Who Fears Death*. In "Traditional Women's Institutions in Igbo Society: Implications for the Igbo Female Writer," Theodora Ezeigbo argues that historical (typically colonial) portrayals of African women as downtrodden and powerless are inaccurate and stem from a lack of understanding of, or discussion about, powerful Igbo institutions such as the Association of Daughters and the Association of Wives (150). Ezeigbo writes that "[e]ven though, in some situations, women were excluded from participating in political decisions affecting the community at large, they had complete control of affairs concerning themselves . . . [women] could voice out their grievances and even take action when necessary to safeguard their rights when infringement occurred on the part of men" (151). Similarly, Jell-Bahlsen notes that there are two complementary religious-political institutions among the Oru-Igbo, one male and one female, and argues that the female institution possesses a significant amount of ritual and religious power (*Water Goddess* 15). These comments indicate that Igbo women were and are able to exert significant influence over their own lives as well as areas of religious and social significance,

despite stereotypical portrayals of African women as not only oppressed, but powerless, and Ezeigbo argues that female Igbo authors have a responsibility to portray "traditional" women who are able to exercise this kind of self-determination (164).

Although *Who Fears Death* does not portray "traditional" societies in the historical sense that Ezeigbo discusses, it certainly engages with aspects of Igbo traditions, including men's secret societies and the exclusions perpetuated by those societies. However, while the novel does not portray individual women as powerless, it pays little attention to the social influence exerted by even powerful female characters. Similarly, while the novel hints that female societies do exist, gaining access to such a society is certainly not presented as a viable alternative to Onyesonwu's goal of gaining access to the institution of sorcery. In fact, the novel's acknowledgement of female societies is so subtle that some readers, particularly readers who are not already aware of the presence of such societies in existing cultures, may not realize that such societies exist within the secondary world of *Who Fears Death* at all. For example, the Ada and other women overseeing Onyesonwu's circumcision wield a certain amount of social power; they are able to intervene in the ongoing sexual abuse of Binta, one of the girls who undergoes the ritual along with Onyesonwu, punishing the perpetrator and ordering counseling for the victim (Okorafor 47). This echoes Ezeigbo's assertion that women "had control of affairs concerning themselves . . . they could voice out their grievances and even take action when necessary to safeguard their rights when infringement occurred on the part of men" (151). However, while the (male) sorcerers of *Who Fears Death* are clearly established as belonging to a discrete society, one with its own distinct hierarchy and rules, the women are never explicitly described as belonging to a similar group. Indeed, the way in which the Ada and other women intervene in Binta's

sexual abuse is one of the only events in the novel that acknowledges the social power that women wield as a group. Onyesonwu's association with powerful female figures such as the Ada and Nana the Wise is limited to her circumcision, and later, requests that the women speak to Aro on her behalf. Furthermore, while (male) sorcerers enjoy obvious magical and social power, there is no obviously equivalent role exclusive to women; the novel implies that the role of "healer" is meant to be the female complement to the sorcerer, but there is no description of what (if any) powers, either magical or political, or responsibilities that such a role might encompass. Indeed, Onyesonwu never even considers the possibility that women such as the Ada or Nana the Wise may possess information or abilities that Onyesonwu may find useful. Instead, it is Onyesonwu's desire for knowledge of and acceptance into a male institution that shapes the story of *Who Fears Death*. Ultimately, myth in this novel creates an institution (sorcery) that allows Okorafor to explore the unfair exclusions perpetrated by men's secret societies, and the damage that such exclusions can cause, while also imagining a future in which the exclusive nature of these societies begins to break down. At the same time, however, the novel's critique of such societies is limited by the way in which it presents female sorcerers, or at least female sorcerers such as Onyesonwu and Ting who are able to bear children, as not just exceptional, but dangerous, and the way in which it presents the male title of sorcerer as a more desirable title to attain than any possible female equivalent.

3.2 Rape as a Weapon: *Who Fears Death*'s Response to the Darfur Crisis

 As discussed in the previous chapter, *Who Fears Death* contains few references to myths drawn from Sudanese ethnic groups, even though the novel is set in a far-future

version of Sudan (Okorafor 381). However, the novel does not merely appropriate the

geographical location while ignoring all of the country's cultural and political concerns.

While the ethnic conflict at the heart of *Who Fears Death* echoes to an extent the history of

anti-Igbo violence in Nigeria, as discussed in Chapter Two above, the novel's portrayal of

the Nuru-Okeke conflict also attempts to respond to some of the political conflicts of (now

the Republic of) Sudan, particularly the Darfur crisis. In a blog post entitled "The Writing of

Who Fears Death," Okorafor comments that while writing the novel, she encountered Emily

Wax's *Washington Post* article, entitled "We Want to Make a Light Baby," which contends

that rape was used as a weapon of ethnic cleansing in Darfur. Okorafor remarks, "I realized

that this article was showing me why the people in my story's town disliked Onyesonwu so

much, and why she was so troubled," referring to Onyesonwu's identity as an *Ewu* or mixed-

race woman, and the prejudice that Onyesonwu encounters as a result of cultural beliefs that

Ewu people are always products of violence who will ultimately become violent themselves

(Okorafor 20). Although the novel provides no cultural signifiers indicating that the Nuru

people are supposed to represent an Arab or Muslim people, the Okeke-Nuru violence in

Who Fears Death certainly reflects, at least in part, the conflict that Wax describes as taking

place between the "Arab" and "African" groups in Darfur.[14] The description of Daib's rape

of Najeeba, Onyesonwu's mother, makes this particularly clear. In "We Want to Make a

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[14] Wax describes the conflict as taking place between those viewed as "Arabs" (that is, the Sudanese and Janjaweed soldiers) and those viewed as "Africans," primarily those from the "Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa ethnic groups." However, in *Saviours and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, Mahmood Mamdani provides a scathing critique of the Western representation of the conflict in Darfur as primarily racial, arguing that in fact "the violence in Darfur was driven by two issues . . . The local grievance focused on *land* . . . [and t]he National context was a *rebellion* that brought the state into an ongoing civil (tribal) war" (4). Okorafor's portrayal of ethnic conflict and rape in *Who Fears Death* can therefore be said to be responding more directly to Wax's portrayal of the Darfur conflict than the Darfur conflict itself.

Light Baby," Wax argues that the rapes occurring in Darfur are part of a program of ethnic

cleansing. She quotes a Human Rights Report that states, "[t]he rapes are often accompanied

by dehumanizing epithets, stressing the ethnic nature of the joint government-Janjaweed

campaign. The rapists use the terms 'slaves' and 'black slaves' to refer to the women." Wax

observes that the rapists themselves are often explicit about the purpose of the rapes, telling

victims that they want to make "light babies" or "Arab babies," since children in Sudanese

culture are regarded as children of the father. The novel foregrounds these parallels, not only

by making racial conflict central to *Who Fears Death*, but also by incorporating that conflict

into the novel's presentation of myth.

While Daib's rape of Onyesonwu's mother Najeeba is the only act of sexual violence

that is described in detail, the novel makes clear that the rapes and other violence committed

against the Okeke by the Nuru continue throughout the events of *Who Fears Death*. The use

of rape as a weapon remains a particularly important theme throughout the novel, since

Onyesonwu's magical abilities are the result of such a use of rape. In the world of *Who Fears

Death*, an individual can only become a sorcerer if one or both of the child's parents have

wished for the child to do so. When Daib rapes Onyesonwu's mother, he does so with the

intent of creating not just a sorcerer, but an ally; he gloats to Najeeba that "[y]ou'll bear my

son . . . he will be the greatest thing this land will ever see" (Okorafor 372). Daib intends for

Onyesonwu and her sorcerous powers to become another weapon against the Okeke people.

Although this plan fails when Najeeba gives birth to Onyesonwu instead of Daib's hoped-for

son, the novel repeatedly reminds readers that Onyesonwu was "supposed" to be both male

and Daib's ally (Okorafor 110, 120, 365). Daib's rape of Najeeba becomes an important part

of Onyesonwu's character, both because it is how Onyesonwu comes by her magical abilities

and because Daib's violence against Onyesonwu's mother and against the Okeke people in general becomes one of Onyesonwu's central motivations for rewriting the Great Book and healing the racial tensions that define the Seven Rivers Kingdom. Tying Onyesonwu's motivations and abilities so closely to the use of rape as a weapon makes her crusade against Daib not just a personal quest, but a clear condemnation of the racial and gendered violence that Daib both commits and encourages, while the end of the novel invokes the possibility of a future where such violence no longer exists. At the same time, while the fictional Okeke-Nuru conflict of *Who Fears Death* more closely parallels the Western portrayal of the Darfur conflict than the Darfur conflict itself, the depiction of rape and ethnic violence allows the novel to invoke the recent history of violence in Sudan, the novel's geographical location, for readers familiar with Western media depictions of that violence.

3.3 Fiction as a Comment on History in *Under Heaven*

Much as *Who Fears Death* uses myth to comment on the political ideologies of the present and very recent past, *Under Heaven* uses myth to comment on the political ideologies of Tang Dynasty China (618-907), just prior to the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763), the political and social milieu that the novel partially reconstructs within its secondary world. Many of the important political figures of *Under Heaven* are recognizable analogues of historical Tang figures, and the novel's plot closely follows the events of the An Lushan Rebellion. The fictional empire of Kitai is governed, at least in name, by the aging Emperor Taizu, whose early reign was glorious but whose advancing age and infatuation with his young consort have led him to become much removed from affairs of state (Kay 187). Likewise, the early reign of Taizu's historical counterpart, Xuanzong, is regarded as a high

point of the Tang dynasty, while Xuanzong's negligence in the latter part of his reign

ultimately led to the An Lushan Rebellion (Lewis 40). Lewis expresses some scepticism of

the conventionally cited view that Xuanzong's infatuation with his courtesan led directly to

his withdrawal from matters of state and thus to the An Lushan Rebellion (40). Certainly, the

facts that Xuanzong *did* grow infatuated with a young courtesan and *did* eventually

relinquish the task of governing China to his ministers are not in dispute (Lewis 42); nor is

the fact denied that Yang Guifei, like her fictional counterpart Wen Jian, exerted

considerable political influence (Pulleyblank 25). However, although *Under Heaven* suggests

that Emperor Taizu's disinterest in government comes in no small part from his infatuation

with Jian, it does not suggest that the An Lushan Rebellion, known as the An Li Rebellion in

the novel, is directly caused by this relationship; indeed, Jian is actively working against

Roshan by the end of the novel. Ultimately, although Kay's portrayal of the An Li Rebellion

adheres fairly closely to the events of the historical An Lushan Rebellion, it does not

reinforce the conventionally cited view that the rebellion was solely due to the emperor's

negligence, or to the influence of his favoured courtesan. Instead, Kay portrays the An Li

Rebellion as the result of a number of factors, such as an increasingly unwieldy empire and

in-fighting among the empire's many officials. Indeed, many of the policies that Lewis cites

as contributing to the An Lushan Rebellion are present in *Under Heaven* as well: for

example, the consolidation of power into the hands of a few (and eventually a single) chief

minister; the appointment of military governors to high-ranking official positions, and

especially the policy of employing non-Chinese, including An Lushan himself (known in

Under Heaven as An Li and as Roshan), as military governors; and the elevation to lofty

positions of relatives of Yang Guifei, including her cousin Yang Zhao, portrayed in *Under*

Heaven as Wen Jian and Wen Zhou respectively (Lewis 40-43). *Under Heaven*'s protagonist

Shen Tai enters the Kitan court at a time of great political turmoil; Zhou has ascended to the

position of First Minister and ultimately decides to eliminate the "barbarian" military

governor Roshan, just as the historical chief minister Yang Zhao attempted to eliminate An

Lushan (Lewis 43).

Similarly, the events of the An Li Rebellion portrayed in *Under Heaven* mirror

almost exactly the events of the historical An Lushan Rebellion, in that Zhou's actions drive

Roshan into open rebellion, and a major strategic error on Zhou's part allows Roshan's

forces to occupy the capital of Xinan. Emperor Taizu flees the capital along with his court,

but his escort mutinies and executes both Zhou and Jian. In the novel, the Emperor is allowed

to continue towards Shuquain, but soon surrenders the throne to his heir, Shinzu, who

ultimately re-captures Xinan from the rebels (Lewis 43-44). By creating a setting that so

closely matches the historical period, the novel is able to comment on the events and political

ideologies of not just the fictional Kitan empire, but the historical Tang Chinese Dynasty as

well. In some cases, the novel provides this commentary by creating subtle revisions of

historical events. For example, according to Lewis, Xuanzong executed both Yang Zhao and

Yang Guifei, though his hand was certainly forced by the mutineers (44). In *Under Heaven*,

however, the emperor plays no role in the mutiny, and the soldiers execute both Wen Zhou

and Wen Jian themselves. Zhou confronts the mutinying force, and when he arrogantly

refuses to listen to their concerns, he is slain by an arrow to the back (Kay 486). When the

soldiers demand that Jian also come out to them, however, Jian acquiesces, accepting her

death as a consequence of failing to control Zhou (Kay 498). Jian's death in *Under Heaven*

presents a striking contrast to the death of Yang Guifei, who, according to Beckwith, was

simply strangled without ceremony (*Tibetan Empire* 144). The highly performative nature of

Jian's death allows the author to invest that death with considerable narrative importance,

while Jian's decision to accept it lends to her death a sense of grace and dignity that Guifei

was not permitted to achieve. By granting Jian the ability to accept, and to a certain extent

control, the manner of her death, Kay allows one of the novel's most important female

characters to preserve her agency up until the moment of her death. This gesture is indicative

of the novel's larger concern with the way in which women's lives were circumscribed by

patriarchal structures during the Tang Dynasty, a point that I will discuss in more detail

below.

Like history, myth is an important tool through which the novel comments on Kitan

patriarchy and Kitan colonialism, the latter of which was an attitude based on a real and

long-lasting history of oppression between the Turko-Mongolic peoples and the Tang

Chinese. The Uighur, along with other peoples that constituted the Turk empire of the time,

were at one point subjects of the Tang dynasty; the Tang emperor Taizong, who reigned from

626 to 655, conquered the eastern Turks and claimed that the Tang empire encompassed both

the Chinese and the Turkic peoples (Lewis 149-50). While the relationship between the

fictional Bogü and Kitan peoples does not accurately reflect the relationship of the Uighur

and Tang peoples by the time of Xuanzong's reign and the An Lushan Rebellion, a point that

shall be discussed in more detail below, that relationship is nonetheless based on an actual

history of oppression. Furthermore, the Tang Chinese continued to perform their superiority

over the Uighur, at least according to official sources, even after the Uighur became an

empire that equalled the Tang Dynasty in power. For example, Lewis observes that foreign

emissaries who visited the Tang court were not viewed as envoys from empires of equal

status, but rather were officially designated as bearers of tribute, and typically appeared in

native "costumes," a political performance meant to suggest that the Tang empire held

world-encompassing power (164). In this way the Tang Chinese maintained the illusion of

superiority, at least in official sources, over nations that, like the Uighur Qağanate, were

actually equal to the Tang Dynasty in power. Of the Uighur specifically, Mackerras writes

that "the Tang court gave each new kagan [Uighur leader] an officially appointed (*feng*) title.

. . . The Chinese term suggests that it was the Emperor himself who bestowed power on the

kagan" ("Uyğur-Tang Relations" 226). Mackerras contends, however, that while the Uighur

kagans likely valued this formal recognition from the Tang court, it is "highly unlikely" that

the kagans agreed that their offices were bestowed by the Tang emperor, "since their

ideology was specific that it was Heaven from whom they received their power" (226). Thus,

although the Uighur were no longer a subject people of the Tang Chinese by the time of the

An Lushan Rebellion, the superior attitude that the Tang apparently maintained is reflected in

Kay's portrayal of the Bogü as a subject people of the Kitan. Although the Bogü's status as

colonized subjects does not reflect the status of the historical Uighur just prior to or during

the An Lushan Rebellion, the Kitan attitude of superiority towards the Bogü is nevertheless

based upon a real history of oppression with which the novel attempts to engage.

In fact, this portrayal of Kitan superiority is crucial to the novel's attempt to engage

with that history. The superior attitude of the Kitan people is linked explicitly to Kitan

colonial ideology, which the novel's presentation of myth attempts to deconstruct. In

"Paradigms of Colonization," Francis argues that "identity is the point of contention in

colonization," and asserts that the religious beliefs of a colonized culture, as an important

point of cultural identity, often come under attack (125). This is precisely what happens in

Under Heaven, where the Kitan attitude of superiority is established at the expense of Bogü religious beliefs:

> [T]he Kitan were famously dismissive, never allowing themselves to be more than languidly amused by the primitive beliefs of the barbarians on their borders. Beliefs that confirmed their barely human nature, the appropriateness, in a world rightly ordered, of Kitan pre-eminence. Really: a people that left their dead to be devoured by wolves? (Kay 106)

Myth here is mobilized in an explicitly Frazerian fashion: Bogü beliefs are dismissed as the superstitious, inaccurate beliefs of a primitive people, and actually constitute a justification for Kitai's subjugation of the Bogü. However, the narrative challenges this attitude of superiority. The novel soon demonstrates that the religious beliefs of the Bogü are not so easily dismissed, while the narrator's characterization of Kitai's dismissive attitude *as* dismissive implies that the narrator does not share that attitude. The explicit, almost exaggerated description of colonial ideology invokes Homi Bhabha's notions of fixity and stereotype:

> Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical racial difference in the discourse of colonialism [. . .] connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy, and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always "in place," already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated. . . . (37)

It is precisely this repetition that is apparent in the passage from *Under Heaven* cited above. When he defines the Bogü as primitive and barbaric, Tai turns not to prior experience with or

personal beliefs about the Bogü, but to Kitan stereotypes thereof. As Bhabha suggests, Kitan "knowledge" of the Bogü is already in place, and that so-called knowledge must be anxiously repeated; finding himself unduly affected by the description of Bogü beliefs about swans, for example, Tai rehearses these stereotypes as a way of reassuring himself that such beliefs cannot possibly be true, thus demonstrating the constructedness of the Frazerian characterization of myth as the province of primitive, superstitious peoples.

The constructed nature of Kitan superiority is further emphasized by the way in which the narrative validates Bogü (and Uighur) beliefs. The superior attitude of the Kitan relies on the notion that the truthfulness of "primitive" Bogü beliefs can be easily dismissed. However, the power of the shamans in *Under Heaven* is presented as unquestionably real, since it is a shaman's spell that grants Meshag the ability to communicate with wolves. This portrayal of Bogü myths "subvert[s] the notion that the religions of colonized subjects are mere myth and superstition, lacking any grounds in fact" (Francis 125), and legitimizes the Bogü's beliefs while further de-naturalizing the attitude of Kitan superiority discussed above. Indeed, the narrative does more than legitimize the myths of the fictional Bogü; it also legitimizes myths of the Turkic peoples from which the Bogü's myths are drawn. Meshag's retine of wolves, the single most prominent example of myth in *Under Heaven*, references the historical bodyguards known as "böri," the Turkic word for "wolves" (Stepanov, *The Bulgars* 56). Historically, the böri were bodyguards who owed their loyalty to the Turkic kaghan and were believed to be descended from the she-wolf of Turkic origin myths (Golden 147; Stepanov, *The Bulgars* 55). In *Under Heaven*, the idea of the böri is literalized, and Meshag, who becomes the Bogü kaghan by the end of the novel, is guarded by actual wolves. By legitimizing the beliefs of the fictional Bogü, the novel suggests that the Kitan

sense of superiority discussed above is not only constructed, but false. The notion that the

Bogü are "barbarians" who must be controlled, which the Kitan use as a justification for their

colonization of the Bogü, is first explicitly de-naturalized and then unequivocally de-

legitimized once this justification is revealed to be both artificial and untrue.

The novel's treatment of Kitan myths strengthens this deconstruction of colonial

ideology. Unlike the scenes that focus on the Bogü, where the Bogü's myths are crucial

throughout, the only significant discussion of Kitan myths is confined to a single event fairly

early in the novel: the appearance of a supposed fox-woman. When Wei Song, Tai's Kanlin

guard and a character whose judgement both Tai and the readers have come to trust, spots a

fox on the road to the city of Chenyao, she insists that the fox is actually a *daiji* or fox-spirit.

Tai, in contrast, is quick to dismiss the notion. In part, their mixed reactions reflect actual

beliefs about fox-spirits during the Tang; according to Kang, fox-spirits were widely

worshipped by the common people, even though Chinese officials characterized such

worship as "'illicit,' 'excessive,' 'licentious,' 'lewd,' 'profligate,' or 'improper'" (3).

However, the characters' mixed reactions also highlight the ambivalence with which the

novel treats fox-spirits: as something that may or may not be real. This ambivalence is

heightened when Xu Liang, the daughter of Chenyao's military governor, appears uninvited

in Tai's bedchamber. It is certainly possible that Liang is acting on her father's orders, but

her committed and skilled attempt to seduce Tai seems more suggestive of a creature with

legendary sexual appetites than a dutiful daughter attempting to further her father's political

agenda (Kay 209). At the same time, Liang insists that she is not a *daiji*, although Song and

even Tai suspect that she is either a *daiji* or possessed by one (Kay 210). The discovery of

Liang's guards, inexplicably asleep outside Tai's inn, likewise suggests that some sort of

supernatural event has occurred, if only by the absence of a logical explanation. As explained in Chapter One, the sense of confusion created by the uncertainty surrounding the fox-spirit's existence invokes Todorov's notion of the hesitation; that is, the novel presents both a logical explanation and a supernatural one, and neither the readers nor the characters know which explanation to accept. Furthermore, this hesitation is never resolved; while the narrative ultimately seems to accept that some sort of supernatural intrusion has occurred, it does so not because such an intrusion can be conclusively proved, but rather because the characters have "no better explanation" (Kay 214). This deep ambivalence about whether Kitan myths are anything more than simple stories provides a striking contrast to the treatment of Bogü myths described above. While Kitan myths are constantly questioned, Bogü myths are unambiguously real, a portrayal that actually reverses the typical dynamic in which the religious beliefs of the colonizers are viewed as legitimate while the religious beliefs of the colonized are viewed as mere superstition. Since the Bogü's supposedly primitive beliefs are presented as the sole justification for the Kitan people's imperialistic attitude, this reversal suggests that Kitan colonization of the Bogü is indeed not justified at all.

In a similar fashion, *Under Heaven* uses the appearance of the supposed fox-woman to criticize the way in which women's lives are circumscribed by patriarchal ideologies, in particular the increased commodification of women that occurred during the Tang Dynasty. According to Lewis, "[t]he Tang dynasty is often depicted as a golden age for Chinese women . . . [but] the Tang was also the period when the commercial market in women became a prominent part of city life" (179). Lewis observes that "[w]hile the Tang was a time of relative freedom and power for elite women, others became economic commodities" (186); concubines "were literally bought and sold in the urban marketplace" (186), and

daughters of well-off families commanded high bride prices in politically advantageous marriages (183). This reality is reflected in the secondary world of *Under Heaven*, where the prominent female characters, with the exception of the Kanlin warrior Song, are either concubines or women whose bodies are used as currency in political marriages (or politically motivated seductions). The novel introduces the concept of such political marriages early on with a description of the White Jade Princess Cheng-wan, a Kitan princess married to the ruler of the neighbouring Taguran empire and the woman who gives Tai the 250 Sardian horses. The narrator describes Cheng-wan as "part of the treaty that followed the last campaign here at Kuala Nor. . . . A slender, graceful token of peace enduring between two empires. . . . [A]s if one girl's body and life could ensure such a thing," later adding, "[p]rincesses were coinage in the world, what else could they be?" (Kay 26). Just as the novel's explicit description of Kitan dismissiveness towards the Bogü implies a criticism of that dismissive attitude, the explicit characterization of Cheng-wan as a political tool, as coinage or a token of peace, suggests that the novel is critical of this characterization.

Although Cheng-wan never appears as an actual character, and is important only insofar as her gift of the horses shapes the story, the novel returns to the characterization of women as political tools at other points of the narrative. For example, Tai and his sister Li-Mei are both infuriated to learn that their older brother Liu has arranged to have Li-Mei elevated to royalty and sent to marry the Bogü kaghan's heir, despite the political power that Li-Mei's royal status brings to their family. Tai's and Li-Mei's positions as two of the novel's focal characters invite readers to share their anger on Li-Mei's behalf. This anger, however, is entirely personal, since Tai regards Liu's proposal to marry Li-Mei to the Bogü kaghan as a decision that "shame[s their] father's memory" (Kay 351), while Li-Mei sees the

marriage as something that Liu has orchestrated "purely for his own purposes" (172). Introducing Liang and the supposed fox-spirit allows the novel to frame the commodification of women as a broader social issue. Liang's attempt to seduce Tai demonstrates the frequency with which women's bodies are used as currency in *Under Heaven*, and also provides one of the most explicit descriptions of the patriarchal ideology undergirding such commodification. Liang implies that she is acting on her father's orders when she attempts to seduce Tai, a claim that Tai reasons is "just possible" (208), since Liang's attempt to seduce him, if successful, could potentially allow Liang, and by extension her father, to claim Tai's Sardian horses. Such a claim illustrates that marriages like Cheng-wan's marriage to the Taguran leader, and Li-Mei's proposed marriage to the Bogü kaghan, are not exceptional circumstances borne of political expediency or ambition, but rather a natural consequence of political manoeuvring in a patriarchal world. Indeed, Liang's attempt to seduce Tai allows the novel to make the patriarchal ideology that underlies such political manoeuvring explicit. Liang's claim that she is acting on her father's orders prompts Tai to evaluate her not as a person, but as a political tool, "a lissome daughter sent to bind him" (208), since "daughters—*like sisters*—could be used as instruments" (209, original emphasis). Raising the injustice of Li-Mei's proposed marriage allows the novel to frame Liang's apparent orders to seduce Tai as equally unjust, while the explicit descriptions of Liang as an instrument meant to "bind" Tai to Liang's father (208, 210) demonstrate the dehumanizing effects of such ideologies.

While the novel's presentation of colonial and patriarchal ideologies creates a pointed critique of these ideologies, the effectiveness of the novel's critiques is limited by the way in which the novel ultimately reinscribes the ideologies that it attempts to criticize. For

example, the novel naturalizes women's lack of power even as it condemns that lack. Unlike its depiction of Kitan colonialism, which the novel deconstructs by demonstrating the artificiality of colonial ideology, *Under Heaven* criticizes the role that patriarchal ideology plays in Kitan politics without challenging the social constructions of gender that underlie the treatment of women as political tools as well as commodities. While the novel questions the inferior status that the Kitan assign to the Bogü by portraying Bogü myths as unambiguously real, and thus repudiating Kitan constructions of Bogü beliefs as mere superstition, it does not examine the social assumptions that allow women to be used as currency for the benefit of primarily male characters. The fact that women *are* used in such a way is presented as unfortunate and even unfair, but also as natural and normal. Even Jian and Spring Rain attain their (in Jian's case, considerable) political influence by becoming the concubines of powerful men.

The appearance of Liang and the supposed *daiji*, although it provides the novel's most explicit critique of patriarchal ideology, is particularly problematic due to the way that it portrays Liang as lacking not only power, but agency. While characters like Jian, Spring Rain and even Li-Mei are able, at least to an extent, to navigate the patriarchal system that commodifies them in order to further their own ambitions and desires, Liang is not only portrayed as lacking the power to further her own ambitions, but also as lacking any such ambitions in the first place. Although Liang is the daughter of a powerful military governor, the novel does not suggest that Liang exerts any meaningful influence on the world around her other than through her sexuality. Nor does the novel indicate that Liang uses her sexuality on her own behalf, instead framing Liang's attempt to seduce Tai as the result of either an order from Liang's father or the manipulations of a fox-spirit. While it would

certainly be plausible for Liang to seduce Tai in order to gain Tai's Sardian horses, or his

connection to Kitan royalty, for herself, the novel does not discuss the possibility that

Liang's attempted seduction may be Liang's method of furthering her own ambitions.

Liang's own desires and ambitions are completely erased by the assumption that she is acting

either as a daughter or a *daiji*. Despite the novel's criticism of the way in which women are

used as tools, Liang is presented as just that; she is either an instrument used on her father's

behalf, or the unwitting tool of a malicious spirit. The appearance of the apparent fox-

woman, which the novel uses to examine patriarchal gender relations in the novel, thus has

the ironic effect of entirely erasing the agency of Liang, the supposed fox-woman's victim,

an erasure which further reinforces the naturalization of women's lack of power in *Under*

Heaven.

Furthermore, the hesitation that the novel invokes during Liang's attempted seduction

naturalizes the sexuality that the novel claims is a woman's only method of achieving power

in Kitai. The novel places a heavy emphasis on Liang's sexuality, including detailed

descriptions of her perfume, her clothes, and her flawless physical features. Liang is fully

committed to her attempt at seduction, making suggestive gestures and remarks that prompt

Tai to think that "[i]f . . . she was doing this on the instructions of her father, she was a very

dutiful daughter" (209). Liang's remarkable sexuality makes perfect sense if she is indeed

possessed by a *daiji*, since in the secondary world of *Under Heaven*, "[s]hape-shifting fox-

women were the subject of erotic legends going back to the earliest dynasties" (211).

However, the novel's ambivalence on the subject of fox-women means that Liang's sexuality

cannot be attributed to the existence of a supernatural creature. Instead, Liang's confident,

practiced seductiveness is a trait that she and other female characters must use to navigate the

world around them. Ultimately, the appearance of the fox-woman reinscribes the patriarchal values that the novel attempts to criticize, first by naturalizing women's lack of power and then by naturalizing their sexuality.

The novel's critique of colonialism is similarly limited. While the deconstruction of colonial ideologies described above works well within the context of the novel's secondary world, the criticism of colonial ideologies as it applies to the actual Uighur and Tang cultures from which it draws is not nearly so compelling. While the close historical and religious parallels between the fictional Bogü and Kitan peoples and the historical Uighur and Tang Chinese peoples suggest that the novel is criticizing the ideologies of the historical period as well as the fictional one, the success of this criticism is mitigated by some incongruencies that emerge between Kay's fictional setting and the actual historical period. For example, while there exists a real history of oppression between the Turko-Mongolic peoples and the Tang Chinese, the Turks ultimately revolted against Chinese rule (Beckwith, *Silk Road* 131), and many scholars contend that the Uighur Qağanate, which succeeded the Turk empire, was an empire equal in power to the Tang empire by the time of the An Lushan Rebellion (*Silk Road* 138; Findley 49). The unequal power relationship between the Kitan and the Bogü portrayed in *Under Heaven* is not representative of the actual relationship between the Uighur and the Tang Chinese. In the novel, the Bogü are portrayed as a subject people of the Kitan, who describe the Bogü nation as a "tribute-bearing [state]" (Kay 103), and the Kitan feel entitled to intervene in the Bogü succession (Kay 99). The proposed marriages of two Kitan princesses (one of whom is a daughter of Emperor Taizu and the other of whom is Tai's recently-elevated sister Li-Mei) to the Bogü ruler and his heir is the only event in the novel that suggests that the Bogü exert any sort of influence over the Kitan in return.

Historically, the marriage of Tang princesses, particularly daughters of the emperor himself, to another nation indicated that the other nation was equal in power to the Tang Dynasty (Findley 49; Stepanov, "Political Ideology" 155), but in *Under Heaven* this significance is downplayed. The narrative briefly acknowledges that these marriages are needed to secure an alliance that will shore up Kitai's "momentarily over-extended military" (Kay 170), but no further reference is made to the military assistance that the Bogü provide to the Kitan, despite the fact that historically, the Uighur played a significant role in re-taking the Chinese capitals after the An Lushan Rebellion (Beckwith, *Silk Road* 146; Mackerras, "The Uighurs" 317). Thus, although the novel criticizes the colonial ideology of the Kitan people, it portrays the Bogü as considerably more subdued and oppressed than were the Uighur on whom the Bogü are based. Given the tendency of Kay's work to be explicitly positioned as historical fantasy, as well as the historical parallels between the Bogü and Kitan people of *Under Heaven* and the historical Uighur and Tang Chinese, it is not unreasonable for readers unfamiliar with Central Asian history to assume that the portrayal of the Bogü in *Under Heaven* is historically accurate. Thus, although the novel's sophisticated deconstruction of colonial ideology is certainly effective within the context of the secondary world, this depiction also reduces the historical Uighur, who exerted a significant military, economic, and cultural influence over Tang China and the Central Asian steppes during the time when *Under Heaven* is set, to a people largely defined by its position as a colonized culture.

The novel further downplays the power and influence of the Uighur by eliding key ideological similarities that existed between the Uighur and the Tang Chinese. The position of the Bogü kaghan or leader, for example, is portrayed as an entirely political one, despite the fact that historically, Turko-Mongolic kaghans have occupied places of religious

significance (Golden 147; Findley 44; Beckwith, *Silk Road* 137-38). Findley characterizes

the Turko-Mongolic kaghan as a sort of high priest, asserting that the "[k]aghan and khatun

[the kaghan's wife] were seen not only as a royal couple but also as earthly counterparts of

Tengri, the supreme divinity of the Türk pantheon, and Umay, the goddess of fertility" (48,

44). The kaghan therefore occupied a position similar to that of the Tang emperors who

claimed that they ruled with the mandate of Heaven. Indeed, Golden notes that upon being

raised to the position, the kaghan "underwent an elaborate ceremony with strong shamanic

undertones" (147), suggesting that Turko-Mongolic beliefs and ceremonies played an active

part in matters of statehood, not unlike the way in which the Tang emperor Xuanzong

incorporated Daoist ceremonies into his political rule. Furthermore, both the Turko-Mongolic

kaghans and the Tang emperors viewed the scope of their empires in similar terms. Beckwith

writes that "[e]ach nation believed its own emperor to be the sole rightful ruler of 'all under

Heaven,' and everyone else should be his subjects, whether submitted and dutiful ones or

not-yet-subjugated, rebellious 'slaves.' . . . Each emperor thus proclaimed and attempted to

actually establish his rule over the four directions" (*Silk Road* 137). In other words, the belief

of each people that its leader ruled by divine right led to an imperial ideology shared by both

the Turko-Mongolic peoples and the Tang Chinese. These commonalities, however, are

nowhere evident in *Under Heaven*, which portrays the Kitan emperor as "Lord of the Five

Directions" and ruling with the "mandate of Heaven" (Kay 181, 26) but mentions the Bogü

ruler only in the context of Kitai's attempts to manipulate the Bogü succession, suggesting

that the Bogü have little, if any, political or military influence of their own. Again, this

portrayal ignores the fact that historically, the Uighur Qağanate was an empire equal in

power to that of the Tang Chinese empire (*Silk Road* 138; Findley 49). Instead, the novel

presents the Bogü as significantly less powerful and influential than either their fictional colonizers the Kitan or their historical "equivalents" the Uighur. The novel's critique of colonial ideology is remarkably effective when considered in the context of the secondary world. However, its attempt to comment on the colonial relationship between the Tang Chinese and the Uighur is predicated on a historical relationship that did not actually exist in the period about which Kay is writing. Ultimately, while the novel succeeds in critiquing the colonial ideology of the fictional Kitan people, its ahistorical portrayal of the Uighur ironically reduces the historically powerful Uighur people to a downtrodden subject people of the Tang Chinese.

3.4 Ahistorical Anthropophagy: The Anomaly of Man-Eating Barbarians in *Under Heaven*

By portraying the Bogü as a subject people of the Kitan, the novel suggests that the Bogü are much less powerful than their historical counterparts the Uighur, and its focus on the religious beliefs of the Bogü naturalizes that lack of power. Just as the novel's portrayal of the Bogü-Kitan political relationship portrays the Bogü as subject and powerless, its portrayal of Bogü religious beliefs suggests that the Kitan construction of the Bogü as primitive and barbaric is actually entirely correct. Indeed, the novel suggests that the Bogü are this way *because* of their beliefs, and the fact that these beliefs are unambiguously real does not make the Bogü any less barbaric. The flashback to Tai's first (and only) encounter with the Bogü makes this absolutely clear. Upon discovering the murder of a revered shaman, the Bogü capture the men responsible for the murder and consume the flesh of their still-living prisoners in what appears, to Tai and the horrified soldiers under his command, to be a religious frenzy (Kay 124). This scene, which is presented as so horrifying and so

savage that it can only be responded to with violence (Tai's soldiers slaughter the Bogü who participate in the ritual), merely confirms the idea that the Bogü are barbarians who are utterly beyond the understanding of civilized folk.

Indeed, accusations of cannibalism meant to marginalize a particular people or group are part of a long literary tradition, and it is this tradition, rather than any historical situation, to which the scene of ritual cannibalism in *Under Heaven* seems to respond. In *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy*, William Arens argues that although written accounts of "other" cultures engaging in cannibalism begin with Herodotus in the fifth century B.C., there is little adequate documentation of actual instances of cannibalism, or what Arens calls "anthropophagy" (10). Arens contends that this lack of documentation is prevalent even in publications by professional anthropologists, and ultimately concludes that "although the theoretical possibility of customary cannibalism cannot be dismissed, the available evidence does not permit the facile assumption that the act was or has ever been a prevalent cultural feature" (182), and that notions of cannibalism serve to maintain a "crude cultural opposition between 'we' and 'they'" (183). Certainly, the scene of ritual cannibalism in *Under Heaven* is meant to draw a sharp distinction between the civilized Kitan and the savage Bogü, and does so whether or not it is based on historical data.

In fact, this scene appears to be one of the few scenes in the novel which is *not* drawn, at least in part, from historical descriptions of actual cultural practices. There is a lack of available evidence in current scholarship to support assertions of cannibalism among the either Uighur specifically or the Turko-Mongolic peoples in general.[15] While it is possible

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[15] The sources consulted on this issue include William Arens' *The Man-Eating Myth*; Christopher Beckwith's *Empires of the Silk Road* and *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*; Florin Curta's *East Central and Eastern Europe in the Early Middle Ages*; Carter Vaughn Findley's *The Turks in World History*; Rene Grousset's

that this scene is drawn from acts of cannibalism supposedly engaged in by other cultures

such as the Mongols, who inherited the Central Asian steppes from the Uighur and were

commonly accused of cannibalism, Gregory Guzman argues that accusations of Mongol

cannibalism are not only spurious, but part of a specifically Western literary tradition.

Guzman notes that it is *only* Western texts that accuse the Mongols of cannibalism, and,

furthermore, that Western accounts of Mongol ritual cannibalism are not based on historical

evidence or even supposed eyewitness accounts. Rather, he argues that Western descriptions

of Mongol cannibalism "fuse classical legends, Alexander Romances, biblical exegesis,

and/or allegations of Asian ritual cannibalism—in other words . . . they continue centuries of

Western and Middle Eastern literary tradition" (32). Guzman contends that "[f]or

Westerners, one principal way to denigrate and dehumanize people is to call them barbarians

in general and cannibals in particular" (33); ultimately, Guzman writes, Western texts that

accused the Mongols of cannibalism "merely did what secular and sacred literary tradition

encouraged them to do: they called the Mongols—the contemporary barbarian threat—

cannibals because earlier writers had treated barbarians the same way" (39-40). The ritual

cannibalism scene in *Under Heaven*, then, does not reflect a historical tradition but rather

participates in a literary one, and that tradition reinforces the notion that the Bogü's beliefs

make them barbarians indeed, whether or not those beliefs are real. However, readers

unfamiliar with the customs of Central Asian nomads may not recognize that this scene of

ritual cannibalism is entirely fictional in nature, and the historical parallels present in *Under*

Empire of the Steppes; Gregory Guzman's "Reports on Mongol Cannibalism;" Walther Heissig's *The Religions of Mongolia*; Erik Hildinger's *Warriors of the Steppe*; Colin Mackerras's *The Uighur Empire (744-840) According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories*, as well as his articles "The Uighurs" and "Uyğur-Tang Relations;" Tsvetelin Stepanov's *The Bulgars and the Steppe Empire in the Early Middle Ages: The Problem of the Others*; and James Thrower's *The Religious History of Central Asia: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day*.

Heaven invite readers to associate the cannibalism of the fictional Bogü with the customs of the historical Uighur. By portraying the Bogü as cannibals, the novel reinforces an already-existing Western stereotype of foreigners in general, and Central Asian nomads in particular, as primitive and barbaric, and undermines its project to deconstruct colonial ideology by creating a portrayal of cannibalism that responds to Western colonial tropes rather than to historical realities.

In fact, even the novel's repeated use of the word "barbarians" to describe the Bogü invokes a particularly Western tradition of marginalization. Beckwith argues that the word "barbarian" embodies "a complex *European* cultural construct," rather than reflecting the opinions that the Tang Chinese held about the Uighur or about foreigners in general (*Silk Road* 360, original emphasis). The notion that the peoples of Central Asia were "barbarians" comes, Beckwith asserts, from the erroneous European belief that Central Asians were innately violent, innately skilled at warfare, and inclined to invade the territories of their more "advanced" neighbours in order to steal goods such as textiles and agricultural products (322, 324). However, Beckwith contends that the peoples of Central Asia produced their own goods, were an essential part of trade in the region, and did not need to attack neighbouring nations in order to procure goods (341, 328). Furthermore, Beckwith argues that recorded instances of Central Asian peoples invading China for any reason are rare, and never for the simple purpose of obtaining goods (335). For example, he notes that even the Uighurs' sack of the eastern Chinese capital was authorized by the financially strapped Tang emperor as a reward for the Uighurs' help during the An Lushan Rebellion, while "[a]ll other incidents of Uighur destruction within China appear to be in repayment for treaty breaking, deception, diplomatic affronts, and insults by the T'ang" (335-36). Beckwith asserts that not only is the

European belief that the peoples of Central Asia were barbarians based on a set of

historically inaccurate assumptions, but it is not a belief that the classical Chinese seemed to

share; classical Chinese words for "foreigner" referred to both nomadic and urban peoples,

and the Tang word for "foreigner" had no negative connotations (359). Ultimately, Beckwith

concludes that translating the Tang word for "foreigner" as "barbarian" is both a

mistranslation and an imposition of a specifically Western cultural construct onto a non-

Western people, one that "gives the false impression that the Chinese had the same ideas

about Central Eurasians as the Europeans did" (361). Just as the portrayal of ritual

cannibalism responds to a Western literary tradition rather than a Chinese one, the repeated

use of the word "barbarian" in *Under Heaven* imposes a specifically Western tradition of

marginalization onto Kay's attempt to engage with the oppression of the Uighur by the Tang

Chinese.

3.5 Insider/Outsider Perspectives and Embodied Myth in *Who Fears Death* and *Under*

Heaven

My thesis understands myth primarily as aetiological narratives that arise from

specific cultural contexts. Indeed, as I have argued, understanding myth as culturally specific

is crucial to understanding the presentation of myth in both *Who Fears Death* and *Under*

Heaven. However, while the myths portrayed in both novels are certainly inspired by sacred

narratives, they do not always appear in the novels as sacred, or in narrative form. Instead,

aspects of these sacred narratives are embodied by each novel's characters. Onyesonwu of

Who Fears Death is literally able to change her body by shape-shifting into other animals

both mundane and mythical, while Meshag of *Under Heaven* gains the ability to

communicate with wolves from a spell that physically alters his body. While both novels contain characters who experience myth as an embodied phenomenon, there are striking differences in the way each novel approaches that phenomenon.

In *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor uses embodied myth not only to explore but also to represent certain experiences of race and gender. For example, Okorafor's article "Organic Fantasy" suggests that Onyesonwu's shape-shifting abilities are based in part on a conversation that Okorafor had with a (Christian) Nigerian uncle while driving down a Nigerian road. Okorafor's description of the event is full of conflicting cultural images: she is with family members born and raised in Nigeria, but these family members are "telling [her] stories that sound like *interpretations* (not favourable ones) of Africa from outsiders" (278, original emphasis); she is "surrounded by Nigerian land," but she is thinking about Stephen King novels and listening to Guns'n'Roses, and "suddenly Axl [the lead singer] refers to black people as 'niggers'" (278, 277). Okorafor describes her reaction as intensely physical. She states that she felt as though she were "flickering back and forth" between Nigerian and American cultures, and asks, "why wouldn't it be logical to illustrate myself literally changing shape when I write about this bus ride? My reaction certainly was just as physical as it was mental. And everything about that bus ride was fantastic and surreal" (277, 278). Onyesonwu's shapeshifting abilities, then, are not only embodied insofar as they allow the character to alter her physical body; they also emerge from the author's own experience as a sort of cultural shapeshifter. Myth becomes not just a method of creating or challenging cultural norms, but also of understanding the experiences shaped by those norms. Okorafor's strategy of using myth to represent her own experiences allows her to write about Onyesonwu's exclusion from the institution of sorcery, and the larger issue of the systemic

exclusion of women from Igbo secret societies, in a way that is intimate and immediate. The novel's portrayal of Onyesonwu as a sympathetic protagonist invites readers to share the subjective experience of Onyesonwu's frustration at these exclusions, and to examine the damage that such exclusions can cause. However, *Who Fears Death*'s focus on the experiences of exclusion also means that the novel misses an opportunity to explore the potency of female-only institutions in Igbo societies. *Who Fears Death* focuses not on empowered female characters, but rather on a female character who must struggle to become empowered, a portrayal that, as Ezeigbo contends, reinforces the colonial stereotype of the downtrodden African woman.

In *Under Heaven*, on the other hand, the gendered exclusions upon which Kay's portrayal of myth comments exist outside of the experience of the novel's protagonist. *Under Heaven*'s critique of patriarchal power structures functions mostly through emphasizing the unfairness of such structures to other characters such as Li-Mei and Liang. The introduction of Liang and the supposed fox-woman, in particular, gives the novel an opportunity to criticize the damaging role of these patriarchal power structures and the dehumanizing effects that they have on the women who must navigate them. At the same time, however, describing Liang's apparent possession by a *daiji* through Tai's perspective, rather than Liang's, has the ironic effect of erasing both Liang's experiences (despite the fact that the trope of possession by a fox-woman borrows from a narrative tradition in which the female experience was central, as discussed in Chapter Two) and her agency. Tai is incapable of viewing Liang as anything other than an instrument, whether of her father's political ambition or a fox-spirit's capricious desires. Ultimately, while the portrayal of myth in

Under Heaven allows the novel to comment on the experiences of women in a patriarchal society, it also alienates readers from those experiences.

The novel's portrayal of the Kitan *daiji* as a disembodied fox-spirit whose existence cannot be conclusively proved provides a stark contrast to its portrayal of Bogü myths, the effects of which are quite concrete. While Meshag is not able to shapeshift as Onyesonwu does, his physical presence is profoundly altered by the spell that binds him to the wolf pack. His shambling gait and lifeless eyes effectively embody the results of the shaman's spell, creating a depiction of Bogü shamanism that is much more tangible than the novel's ambivalent presentation of the supposed fox-spirit. The presentation of Bogü myths as embodied allows the novel to actually reverse the typical dynamic between colonizer and colonized, portraying the shamanism of the colonized Bogü people as unambiguously real and the fox-spirit of the colonizing Kitan people as a folk tale whose supposed existence may be no more than simple superstition. This reversal reinforces the novel's pointed critique of colonial ideology, which functions by demonstrating the artificiality of that ideology.

At the same time, however, the novel's portrayal of myth works to reinscribe that ideology by depicting embodied myth in *Under Heaven* as a marker of cultural otherness. Encounters with Bogü myths are always narrated from the point-of-view of Kitan characters, for whom embodied myth is something that can be observed, but never understood. Meshag, for example, is initially presented as unnatural and monstrous. While he eventually becomes less threatening, he never becomes less strange; the novel explains his background and his motivations, but his experiences remain a mystery. This strangeness is generalized to the Bogü at large, whom the Kitan view as primitive and barbaric. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the Kitan are correct to view the Bogü in this way, since despite the fact that the Bogü's

religious beliefs are unambiguously real, the scene of ritual cannibalism proves that the Bogü are barbarians indeed. The depiction of ritual cannibalism responds not to any historical incident, but rather to a long tradition through which Western writers have marginalized peoples of non-Western societies by portraying those societies as savage and cannibalistic, and is one of a number of ahistorical elements that undermine *Under Heaven*'s otherwise sophisticated engagement with issues of colonialism and imperialism.

Okorafor's engagement with the recent history of the Darfur crisis in *Who Fears Death* is similarly problematic. The novel's portrayal of rape as a weapon responds to media portrayals of the violence that occurred during the Darfur conflict and provides a clear condemnation of that violence. However, the violence at the heart of *Who Fears Death* is portrayed as being quite clearly racial, with the light-skinned Nurus enslaving, raping, and eventually attempting to commit genocide against the dark-skinned Okekes. While the focus on racial violence in *Who Fears Death* echoes to an extent the historical violence committed against the Igbo people in Nigeria, as discussed in Chapter Two, it also reinforces erroneous and reductive portrayals by the Western media of the Darfur crisis as a primarily racial conflict, suggesting that while the novel is set in the geographical location of Sudan, the racial violence of *Who Fears Death* responds more directly to Western media portrayals of the Darfur crisis than to the political and cultural concerns of the Darfur crisis itself.

Conclusion

  Western fantasy literature is well-known for its tendency to create new or secondary worlds, settings that not only contain magic but also for which entire geographies, cultures and species have been invented. Aspects of these secondary worlds, particularly their supernatural elements, are often inspired to a greater or lesser degree by the cultures and myths of historical societies, and there is a long-standing tendency in the genre to take that inspiration from Western civilizations in particular. However, as exemplified by the two novels I examine in this thesis, there has been a recent shift in fantasy literature away from the stereotypical setting of medieval fantasy England and towards settings grounded in non-Western cultures and myths. This shift is more than a simple desire to explore "new" or different settings; it also reflects a developing interest within the larger speculative fiction community (that is, writers and readers of science fiction, fantasy, and horror) in creating stories that challenge the traditional values that these genres have typically upheld. Indeed, some fantasy texts, such as the upcoming anthology *Long Hidden: Speculative Fiction from the Margins of History* tentatively scheduled for release in early 2014, explicitly seek to reclaim a genre that, as the anthology's website states, "[has its] roots in real-world history of invasion and oppression." The *Long Hidden* anthology seeks to reclaim speculative fiction by providing stories grounded in the real-world histories of marginalized peoples and groups, in order to counteract the erasure that these groups have historically suffered, both within the genres of speculative fiction and without.

  Projects like the *Long Hidden* anthology seek to subvert the traditional values encoded in the fantasy genre by including stories about those groups that have typically been

excluded. However, it is also important to examine the ways in which fantasy texts that depict non-Western myths go beyond simply including those myths. In Kay's *Under Heaven* and Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, the Asian and African myths do more than simply inform the setting of each story. These myths are also in conversation with historical events, cultural ideologies, and generic conventions, and while these conversations can be quite productive, they can also be quite damaging. It is therefore important not to understand myth as universal, according to literary theories like Frye's archetypal criticism, or as existing only within the context of the secondary world, as do some recently published studies on the subject of fantasy and myth. Rather, it is crucial to examine the myths portrayed in fantasy texts in relation to the specific cultural contexts from which those myths arise, in order to understand the conversations in which such myths engage, the oppressions that they interrogate, and the harms they enable. In Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, for example, examining the mechanics of sorcery within the fictional Seven Rivers Kingdom in relation to the real African myths by which those mechanics were inspired provides insight into the way in which Okorafor uses the African myths as intertexts, exploring the oppressions inherent in the African myths while at the same time using those narratives to emphasize the themes of *Who Fears Death*. Similarly, examining Bogü shamanism and the Kitan *daiji* in *Under Heaven* in relation to Turko-Mongolic shamanism and Tang Chinese fox-spirit narratives allows for a greater understanding of not only the myths themselves, but also the colonial and patriarchal ideologies that the portrayal of those myths attempts to deconstruct.

Both novels use myth to provide a thoughtful deconstruction of different colonial ideologies. *Under Heaven*'s explicit description of the Kitan people's superior attitude towards the Bogü demonstrates the constructedness and artificiality of the ideology used to

justify colonial policies. This deconstruction is most effective when understood in the context of Kay's secondary world, but can also be analyzed in relation to the historical cultures of the Uighur and Tang Chinese; although the Uighur were no longer the subjects of the Tang Chinese by the time of the An Lushan Rebellion during which the novel is set, the relationship between the Bogü and the Kitan peoples in *Under Heaven* is nevertheless based on a real history of oppression and subjugation of the Uighur by the Tang Chinese. The way in which the myths of the Bogü are portrayed as unambiguously real reinforces this deconstruction by legitimizing the beliefs of the colonized Bogü rather than the colonizing Kitan, challenging the colonial stereotype that the myths of colonized peoples are mere superstition. Furthermore, the parallels between the fictional Bogü and the historical Uighur allow the novel to suggest that the Uighur people's religious traditions were likewise more than unsubstantiated beliefs in folktales and legends. That the beliefs legitimized in this way include the Bogü's shamanistic powers is particularly significant, since it repudiates the traditional Western understanding of shaman figures as primitive, irrational, or mentally unwell.

Despite the notable absence of Western colonialism in *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor's novel likewise interrogates colonial ideologies. In particular, Okorafor's tactic of adapting Igbo myths and blending them with myths from other African countries and ethnic groups disputes the colonial stereotype that indigenous identity is static and does not change over time. Rejecting the colonial notion of authenticity also allows Okorafor to examine the oppressive ideologies inherent in the African myths themselves, such as the Igbo view of twins and other multiple births as monstrous and unnatural. Okorafor's decision to replace the Igbo view of twins as monstrous with the Yoruba view of twins as exceptional effectively

erases this oppression for readers who are not already aware of this particular Igbo belief, while inviting readers who are familiar with this belief to re-examine it in contrast to the less oppressive Yoruba view. Okorafor's examination of gender functions in a similar way. The portrayal of female characters in *Who Fears Death* as more capable than the men at traditionally male tasks like reading and writing Nsibidi scripts leads readers to question the legitimacy of the need for male-only knowledge, while the novel's engagement with male secret societies allows it to at once foreground the unfair exclusions perpetuated by such societies and also envision a future in which that exclusive nature begins to break down. Likewise, readers familiar with Chinese history will recognize a similar strategy in Kay's approach to gender in *Under Heaven*. Kay explores an issue specific to the time and place about which he is writing, particularly the increased commodification of women during Tang Dynasty China, but also re-imagines the history of characters like Jian, emperor Taizu's concubine, who in *Under Heaven* is portrayed in a more sympathetic light than her counterpart Guifei has conventionally been represented in historical texts, and whose death in *Under Heaven* affords Jian more grace and dignity than the fate suffered by the historical Guifei.

Examining the specific cultural and historical contexts from which the myths of *Who Fears Death* and *Under Heaven* are derived is central to understanding the sophisticated and innovative ways in which these novels criticize and revise the oppressions enabled by the Asian and African myths they portray and the cultures from which those myths were drawn. Those specific cultural and historical contexts are also essential, however, to an understanding of the problems with each novel's approach to myth. The portrayal of myth in *Who Fears Death* becomes problematic when considered in relation to an audience that is not

familiar with the African myths upon which Okorafor draws. Much of the novel's

commentary on colonial and gendered ideologies will be lost on readers not already familiar

with Igbo and Yoruba myths. More importantly, however, Okorafor's cultural blending runs

the risk of homogenizing the cultures that Okorafor invokes, since readers not already

familiar with those cultures will not be aware that any such blending has occurred. By

mixing myths from different cultures in order to question Western notions of authenticity,

especially cultures with a history of violence such as the one that exists between the Igbo and

Yoruba peoples, *Who Fears Death* ultimately risks reinforcing another colonial stereotype:

that African cultures cannot or need not be easily differentiated. The layering of Sudanese

history over Igbo and Yoruba history likewise invites criticism that the novel is

homogenizing different cultures. Furthermore, by setting a story about racial conflict in the

geographical location of Sudan, the novel echoes Western media portrayals of the Darfur

conflict as a primarily racial war, ultimately reducing a complex historical and political

conflict to a simple story of racial tension for the sake of racial tension.

Similarly, while Kay's use of myth in *Under Heaven* convincingly demonstrates the

constructedness of colonial ideology, it also reifies that ideology in a number of ways. The

novel's treatment of the Bogü as colonial subjects of the Kitan suggests that the Bogü's

historical counterparts the Uighur were likewise subjects of the Tang Chinese, which, while

certainly true at earlier points in history, was no longer the case in the period during which

the events of the An Lushan Rebellion took place. For readers unfamiliar with Central Asian

history, the novel's portrayal of the Bogü as colonial subjects essentially reduces the Bogü

from an economically, militarily, and culturally powerful people to the oppressed and

victimized subjects of a much more powerful nation. The novel's portrayal of the Bogü

further suggests that the Bogü, and by extension the Uighur, were primitive and barbaric.

Readers unfamiliar with Central Asian history may not realize that the novel's emphasis on

Bogü shamanism and its depiction of ritual cannibalism are misrepresentations of the

historical Uighur people, especially since portrayals of both shamanism and cannibalism

respond directly to Western traditions of primitivism and exoticism. So too does the novel's

depiction of Tang Chinese fox-myths, which are portrayed in *Under Heaven* as a series of

narratives focusing entirely on a single figure, that of the supernaturally seductive fox-

woman. Readers not already familiar with the tradition of Tang Chinese fox narratives are

unlikely to realize from the narrow portrayal of fox-women in *Under Heaven* that the Tang

tradition was in fact quite broad and varied. Rather than responding to the Tang tradition, the

dangerously sexual fox-women of *Under Heaven* invoke a long-standing tradition of

Western Orientalism that is both exoticizing and highly gendered.

Indeed, both *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death* portray women in a similar light:

as beings whose sexuality makes them both powerful and dangerous. *Under Heaven* presents

fox-women as beings whose sexual appetites are so extreme that they pose a physical danger

to their male victims, and heightens the association of fox-women with dangerous sex by

assigning fox-women the name of *daiji*. This term, which echoes the name of the "fatal"

Shang concubine Daji, suggests that the fox-women of Kitai have the power to destroy not

just individual victims, but entire empires as well, while the hesitation that the novel invokes

regarding the existence of fox-women suggests that their dangerous sexuality is in fact a

natural trait of *all* women. The dangerous sexuality of women is likewise naturalized in *Who

Fears Death* when Onyesonwu, who has constantly been warned about the instability of her

magical powers, inadvertently decimates the male population of an entire village. Although

Onyesonwu is able to counter the social perception of women as incapable of or less suited to sorcery than men, at least insofar as she gains admittance into a highly exclusive male secret society, she is unable to combat the problem of her biology; her ability to bear children ultimately makes her a figure just as dangerous as the empire-toppling (fox-)women of *Under Heaven*.

This biological determinism is indicative of the liberal feminist approach taken by the novel as a whole. *Who Fears Death* is not interested in dismantling existing patriarchal institutions but rather in allowing women to participate in those institutions. Onyesonwu's quest to gain acceptance into such an institution is central to early parts of the plot, and the novel focuses on this quest to the exclusion of exploring other options like equivalent female societies. In fact, *Who Fears Death*'s liberal feminist approach to gender is also suggestive of the novel's relationship with the fantasy genre as a whole. The novel uses a fantasy story and setting to reclaim myths that have been produced as exclusively male, but also uses those myths to reclaim the fantasy genre itself, placing a female character and a magic system based on African myths at the forefront of a story in a genre that has typically been patriarchal, Euro-centric, and colonial.

Under Heaven, on the other hand, uses fantasy and myth to examine a historical period. While *Who Fears Death* uses fantasy and myth to re-imagine current cultural institutions in a more inclusive way, *Under Heaven* uses fantasy to reconstruct, and then comment on, the political ideologies and cultural institutions of the past. Kay's use of the fantasy genre, in particular, allows him to actualize the myths and beliefs of the cultures about which he is writing. In a 2013 reading at Thompson River University, Kay said of the cultures about which he writes that "if they believed the world was a certain way, I will let

the world be that way." Kay's use of mythically-informed fantasy allows him to literalize and legitimize the religious beliefs of the cultures about which he writes, but also runs the risk of legitimizing the potentially damaging political ideologies encoded in those myths. Both *Under Heaven* and *Who Fears Death* have a complex relationship with myth, fantasy, history, and past and present ideologies of colonialism and patriarchy. While neither novel is completely successful in criticizing the ideologies that they seek to condemn, the complexity of both novels demonstrates that the task of reclaiming a genre that has traditionally been Euro-centric, colonial, and patriarchal requires more than just a simple inclusion of characters, locations, histories, and myths whose stories have typically been excluded; it also requires a careful consideration of the cultural conversations surrounding those stories that authors choose to include.

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