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THE PREVALENCE OF RACIAL
PREJUDICE AND SEGREGATION
IN DEBORAH HARKNESS'
ALL SOULS TRILOGY

Abstract

The article explores how the issue of race present in the American society has been reflected in Deborah Harkness' *All Souls Trilogy*. The mimetic theory and the use of fantasy writing to reflect the social mores and emotional attitudes is presented and serves as the basis for the analysis. The problems of violence, segregation, miscegenation and racial purity concerning blacks and whites are briefly introduced through the use of examples from the American history. These examples are juxtaposed with the events from the novels. The analysis focuses on the struggles involved in the evolution of racial thinking and shows that although the idea of race and related problems have changed, they have not disappeared, neither in the fictional nor in the real world.

Key words: race, prejudice, miscegenation, fantasy, Deborah Harkness

In her essay *Home* Toni Morrison writes: "I have never lived, nor has any of us, in a world in which race did not matter. Such a world, one free of racial hierarchy, is usually imagined or described as dreamscape – Edenesque, utopian, so remote are the possibilities of its achievement."¹ This Edenesque world,

¹ T. Morrison, *Home* in: *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema H. Lubiano, New York: Vintage, 1998, p. 3.

to repeat after Morrison, seems unattainable and exists very rarely even in literature, as human imagination is not without limit and even the most fantastic creations, from new races to completely new worlds, reflect to some extent aspects of our reality, either past or present. For instance, racial violence and other problems connected with race have a significant place in the history of the United States. Moreover, as Timothy Brezina and Kenisha Winder assert, despite the “weakening of traditional racist beliefs over the past several decades, negative racial stereotypes still affect the lives of African Americans in the United States.”² The problems concerning race are not only visible in everyday life but also in many aspects of culture, for instance in movies or books, many of which examine them through blending the elements of the fantastic and realism. This article focuses on how the combination of fantastic and realistic elements in fiction can mirror the events and concerns of the real life. The article begins by establishing that fantasy has often been used to reflect current social issues, and the race problem was, and continues to be, one of them. The article also analyzes how Deborah Harkness’ *All Souls* Trilogy reflects the American reality through a juxtaposition of the race issues presented in the novels and the ones pertinent to the history of the United States. In the article certain events from the novels are compared with particular historical events in order to show similarities concerning prejudice, violence, fight for equality and freedom, personal sacrifices and scientific advancements, all pertaining to the question of race.

The juxtaposition presented does not aim to urge towards the racial reading of Harkness’ whole trilogy, but merely to suggest that certain aspects of the story can be interpreted in such a way. One could argue that the author opens the door towards such interpretations through a scene in which one of the characters compares the state of racial problems depicted in the trilogy with the racial issues that are a part of the United States’ history:

“And about this covenant you’ve all agreed to. I take it that witches aren’t supposed to hang out with vampires?”

“Or with daemons. It makes humans uncomfortable,” Matthew said.

“Uncomfortable?” Chris looked dubious. “So did blacks sitting on buses next to white people. Segregation isn’t the answer.”³

² T. Brezina and K. Winder, *Economic Disadvantage, Status Generalization, and Negative Racial Stereotyping by White Americans*, “Social Psychology Quarterly” 2003, Vol. 66, No. 4, p. 402.

³ D. Harkness, *The Book of Life*, London: Headline, 2014, p. 186.

Through the use of mimesis literature has always presented visions of the surrounding world. Ming Dong Gu asserts that “[s]ince its initial appearance in Plato’s Republic ... mimetic theory has been indispensable to Western studies of the nature, function, and techniques of literature and art.”⁴ Mirroring nature and the idyllic life, however, does not equate with the presentation of political ideas or historic events. Wolfgang Iser put forward the idea that “[i]f literature wishes to respond to history, it must not parade its intentions, but must dress them up in such a way that the reader can uncover them for himself.”⁵ It seems that when contentious themes are involved, their image presented in literature has to be shown in a distorting mirror.

Fantasy, together with science fiction, has the unique capability to prompt the reader into looking at certain issues “in new ways, to reconsider attitudes and assumptions,”⁶ and when the subject of race is concerned, fantasy has often used its potential. Employing the new worlds and non-human races to broach the issue of race present in the contemporary reality is very convenient for many writers, since, as Helen Young asserts, “[w]riting about characters and cultures to which one does not belong, particularly for White writers who cannot escape their privileged positions in both wider society and genre-culture, is complex and requires significant levels of mindfulness”⁷ in order not to expose oneself to condemnation. Literature is not created in a vacuum and the surrounding world transmits itself into the works of art at varying degrees, for instance, “[b]oth [George R.R.] Martin and [David] Gaider have remarked on specifics of real-world history which inspired aspects of their respective worlds,”⁸ to cite Young. In its unique way, fantasy literature presents matters which were not only important at one point in history but also those that are of value today. Nikolai Rodriguez states that:

Fantasy literature reflects the anxieties that still, even now, permeate the complicated issues of racial intermixing in the real world through the representation of race and race

⁴ M. D. Gu, *Is Mimetic Theory In Literature and Art. Universal?*, “Poetics Today” 2005, Vol. 26, Iss. 3, p. 460.

⁵ W. Iser, *Spenser’s Arcadia: The Interrelation of Fiction and History in: Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An interdisciplinary approach: Volume 1: The literary and philosophical debate*, ed. M. Spariosu, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984, pp. 122-123.

⁶ H. Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 2.

⁷ H. Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, p. 159.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

relations using the destabilizing effects of fantasy. The traditional representations of racial fantasy tropes as they exist today were established by Tolkien in his landmark Middle-Earth novels, the most influential of which was – and remains still – *The Lord of the Rings*.⁹

Fantasy literature echoes social mores and emotional attitudes present at a specific time in a particular social group, therefore bridging the gap between the fantastic and realism.

The use of monsters to portray the angst brought about by the idea of “the other” was present in literature even in the Classical Era.¹⁰ However, when changes occur within the society and views on certain issues are altered, their literary reflections also transform. Helen Young informs us that:

[s]ince early 1970s, sympathetic representations of conventional monsters have become almost de rigeur in popular culture. ... Vampires, werewolves, and even, recently, zombies, have been habilitated from the realms of horror to those of romance, comedy, and young adult fiction in cultural moves that reflect a diminishing of their monstrous power.¹¹

This can suggest that since in the past monsters were interpreted as the racial other who is feared, the apprehension once exhibited against the people of other races is also transforming. As the ‘monstrous power’ weakens, so do the racial fears and prejudice. However, the fact that fear is still a significant element of the portrayal of the ‘monstrous’ races points to the persistence of racial problems within the contemporary society.

As briefly presented above, fantasy literature has had a long tradition of broaching the racial issues, thus the subsequent analysis of the *All Souls* Trilogy in terms of race seems justified. Deborah Harkness has written a fantasy trilogy in which the problem of race is one of the major threads. The multifaceted story is set in the contemporary world that includes supernatural elements and deals with the relations between witches, vampires and daemons. The author uses her background as a historian to weave together historical facts with the products of her imagination. Quite heavily set in the world of science, the story presents

⁹ N. Rodrigues, *Miscegenation in the Marvelous: Race and Hybridity in the Fantasy Novels of Neil Gaiman and China Miéville*, Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. 811, 2012, p. 25. <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/811> [09.09.2017].

¹⁰ H. Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, p. 88.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89-90.

how answers to the same question change with scientific advancements. In the trilogy in question historians, biologists, geneticists and physicians work together to unravel the origins of witches, vampires and daemons, to find out how much they really differ and if those differences justify the segregation and the anti-miscegenation laws put in place a long time ago. The questions asked by characters in the trilogy seem eerily similar to those which were significant for Americans, for instance during the Jim Crow era, when “racism explained blacks’ social standing as the result of their biological and moral inferiority,”¹² as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva reminds us.

In the *All Souls* Trilogy the friendship between Hamish Osborne (a daemon) and Matthew Clairmont (a vampire) transgressed the socially mandated lines set between the “species”. The friendship was highly unusual as vampires and daemons were not supposed to interact closely with each other. In *A Discovery of Witches* we can read:

Hamish Osborne had met Matthew Clairmont at Oxford nearly twenty years ago. Like most creatures, they’d been taught to fear each other and were uncertain how to behave. The two became inseparable once they’d realized they shared a similar sense of humor and the same passion for ideas.¹³

The characters overcame their preconceptions about who the other person should be, formulated on the basis of the appurtenance to a certain group of creatures. Their friendship, although frowned upon, was not such a serious transgression as to mandate punishment. However, when Matthew and Diana Bishop (a witch) became intimately involved, their violation of a centuries-old covenant was so serious that the Congregation, which was tasked with upholding the rules of the covenant, had to take action against the characters. The terms of the covenant “prohibited close relationships between different orders of creatures.”¹⁴ The mandated segregation was created upon the assumption that witches, vampires and daemons were different species, which meant that they significantly differed from each other. A similar argument had been put forward by some advocates of slavery in the United States. However, both in reality and in Harkness’ story the arguments behind the segregation and anti-miscegenation

¹² E. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, 2nd. ed., 2006, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, p. 2.

¹³ D. Harkness, *A Discovery of Witches*, New York: Penguin Group, 2011, p. 112.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

rules were disproven. In *The Book of Life* we can read: “‘The science makes the covenant completely irrelevant,’ Matthew said. ‘We’re not separate species.’”¹⁵ Harkness goes even further with her unification of witches, vampires and daemons, since she unites them with humans: “You aren’t monsters after all. There are no such thing as daemons, vampires, and witches. Not biologically. You’re just humans with a difference.”¹⁶ Scientific discoveries concerning race presented in the trilogy relate to those made in the real world for “biologized interpretations of racial difference have been discredited”¹⁷ and nowadays, as Bonilla-Silva points out: “[t]here is very little formal disagreement among social scientists in accepting the idea that race is a socially constructed category.”¹⁸ The definition of race is unstable and ever-changing, but it has certainly moved away from the question of biological differences into the realm of cultural ones. Robert Wald Sussman reminds us:

In 1950, UNESCO issued a statement asserting that all humans belong to the same species and that “race” is not a biological reality but a myth. ... Since that time similar statements have been published by the American Anthropological Association and the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, and an enormous amount of modern scientific data has been gathered to justify this conclusion.¹⁹

However, before the biological arguments concerning race were disregarded they had created a host of issues both in Harkness’ story and in the United States, therefore the article will mainly focus on them.

Throughout the history of the United States a multitude of instances can be found where racial differences have led to significant clashes between groups of people. Violence seems to be ingrained in the feud between blacks and whites in the United States. Race riots, as those in Ferguson in 2014 and 2016 or in Baltimore in 2015, are not a new phenomenon. The Red Summer of 1919, the nationwide riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, or the Rodney King riots of 1992, to name a few, were the outbursts of hostility between blacks and whites in a form of collective violence. Terry Davis postulates

¹⁵ D. Harkness, *The Book of Life*, London: Headline, 2014, p. 561.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 561.

¹⁷ L. Tabili, *Race Is a Relationship, and Not a Thing*, “Journal of Social History” 2003, Vol. 37, No. 1., p. 128.

¹⁸ E. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, p. 8.

¹⁹ R. W. Sussman, *The Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017, p. 1.

that collective violence “gives the excluded groups the means of placing their demands on the political agenda.”²⁰ Although rioting is often used as a “mode of political communication”²¹ and some American analysts have voiced their opinion that riots were a “part of black ‘repertoire’ which evolved through the civil rights movement,”²² rioting is not the only form of violence between the two groups. Coupled with many instances of more individualized brutality such as lynchings (for example, murder of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas in 1998), hate crimes, and racial profiling, the picture of the relations between the two races is not very sanguine. Although some will say that much has changed since the Civil Rights Movement and the equalization of the laws for the people of different races, it seems that much is yet to be done to stop racial violence still present in the United States. Because, as Bonilla-Silva’s research shows, “[d]espite the civil rights revolution, whites, young and old, live a fundamentally segregated life that has attitudinal, emotional, and political implications.”²³ Nonetheless, the changes which have already been introduced were not implemented without sacrifice. Many people who wanted to help with the introduction of the new ways were hurt or even killed. For instance, in 1955 Harry and Harriette Moore first lost their jobs and later their lives due to the fact that they were educators involved in the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) who focused in their work on segregation, police brutality and lynching; or in 1966 Vernon Dahmer was shot in his own house after declaring that he would help to pay the poll tax for any African American who was not able to afford it.²⁴ Those people put themselves in the spotlight and their lives in jeopardy in order to bring changes not only for themselves but also for others.

In the *All Souls* Trilogy vampires, witches and daemons have a long history of relations, which were far from perfect. One of the characters, Matthew, points out: “There’s always been animosity between creatures—vampires and witches especially. But Diana and I have brought those tensions into the open.”²⁵ The hostility between the groups, although constantly maintained by imbuing new

²⁰ T. Davis, *The Forms of Collective Racial Violence*, “Political Studies” 1986, Vol. 34, Issue. 1, p. 50.

²¹ Ibid., p. 50.

²² Ibid., p. 52.

²³ E. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, p. 125.

²⁴ K. Joy, *10 Forgotten Martyrs Of The American Civil Rights Movement*, 5 March 2014, <http://listverse.com/2014/03/05/10-forgotten-martyrs-of-the-american-civil-rights-movement/> [09.09.2017].

²⁵ D. Harkness, *A Discovery of Witches*, p. 414.

witches, daemons and vampires to mistrust each other, as one of the previous quotes points out, has been highlighted by the events in the story. Diana and Matthew's relationship is made public because their families are highly regarded in their respective social groups. Instead of following the law, they decide to stand up to those upholding the old ways and strive to change the rules of their society, which in their opinion are outdated.

Both Matthew and Diana come from the old bloodlines, which throughout history have had significant influence in their respective social circles. Although Diana has distanced herself from the witch community and refrained from using her magic, which can be seen as abandoning her racial identity, her family name is able to conjure up a lot of respect amongst witches. Matthew and his family also have a lot of leverage in the vampire world, which is demonstrated through the perpetual presence of a member of the de Clermont family in the Congregation. Their means and influence may have played a role in their decision to confront the Congregation. However, the article will not focus on the possible implications of their class status when it comes to their actions.

At first, Matthew and Diana's reasons to fight the Congregation which upholds the covenant are purely personal: "'The Congregation will try to stop me, but they won't tell me who to love.' When my parents were taken from me, I was a child with no options and did what people told me. I was an adult now, and I was going to fight for Matthew."²⁶ Having suffered a monumental loss as a child, Diana turned her back on magic and other witches because she thought that having powers put one in danger for she believed that her parents were killed by fearful humans. She has rejected a part of her individuality in an attempt to forsake her group identity. Diana tried to make others see her as an individual and not merely as a member of a group, but witches kept defining her by tethering Diana to their group against her wishes. She seemed to think that the inter-group violence is too high of a price to pay for being a part of a coven of witches. However, it is made clear that Diana's decision to abandon her heritage was made based on a lie, when a witch tells her: "Rebecca Bishop and Stephen Proctor were keeping secrets from other witches. We needed to discover them. Their deaths were unfortunate, but necessary."²⁷ The unveiling of the lie illustrates that inner-group violence happens, but it is just better hidden, and the hostility between different orders of creatures is put in the foreground.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 352.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 151.

Although personal reasons behind their resistance never change, at some point the motivation propelling characters' fight shifts from desiring personal freedom for themselves to seeking those rights for everyone:

'If we are at war, we're not fighting for a bewitched alchemical manuscript, or for my safety, or for our right to marry and have children. This is about the future of all of us.' I saw that future for just a moment, its bright potential spooling away in a thousand different directions. 'If our children don't take the next evolutionary steps, it will be someone else's children. And whiskey isn't going to make it possible for me to close my eyes and forget that. No one else will go through this kind of hell because they love someone they're not supposed to love. I won't allow it.'²⁸

Diana and Matthew were not the sole characters who desired to engender change. They found allies not only amongst their friends and family, but surprisingly also amongst the relatives of the members of the Congregation. As the plot progresses, even some of the members of the Congregation collaborate with them. The Conventicle is created and the fight for change truly begins: "They are all gathering there, you know. The witches. The vampires. There are even a few daemons inside. They are calling themselves the Conventicle. Marcus sent a message to the vampires on the Congregation demanding that the covenant be repealed."²⁹ The Conventicle is diplomatic in their pursue of change; they support their demands for the abolition of the covenant with reasonable arguments including those of scientific nature. The Congregation, however, had not shied away from violence in order to maintain the state of things and possibly gain more power even before the dissenters started to work together.

Diana was kidnapped and tortured by Satu, a fellow witch and a member of the Congregation. The latter tried to justify her actions: "Once again you refuse to listen to reason. I don't want to hurt you, Diana, but I will if it's the only way to make you see the seriousness of this situation. You must give up Matthew Clairmont and show us what you did to call the manuscript."³⁰ Violence was the chosen method to change Diana's mind and abandon her convictions. However, when the acts of brutality did not bring the desired effect, the witch branded Diana, which the character discovered only after having been rescued: "But it couldn't be my back. It was someone else's—someone who had been flayed and

²⁸ Ibid., p. 600.

²⁹ D. Harkness, *Shadow of Night*, Penguin Group, 2012, p. 583.

³⁰ D. Harkness, *A Discovery of Witches*, p. 459.

burned until her skin was red, and blue, and black. There were strange marks on it, too—circles and symbols. The memory of fire erupted along the lesions.”³¹ The wounds left by Satu have been inflicted in order to stigmatize Diana as someone who fraternizes with vampires: “When I refused to give you up, Satu marked me—with your seal.”³² Despite the assaults she had to endure and the permanent markings left on her body, Diana does not abandon her views and her feelings do not change.

Diana’s aunt Emily also suffers at the hands of the member of the Congregation and dies as the result of the ongoing conflict: “Emily must have been under enormous stress trying to resist whatever Knox was doing. She was barely conscious. I tried to revive her. So did Sarah. But there was nothing either of us could do.”³³ The methods used to extract information from Emily’s mind led to her death, even though it might not have been the intended outcome. The desire for power made some members of the Congregation regard life of an individual as inconsequential, in their minds what had to prevail was the Congregation and its rules.

The violence employed by the individual members of the Congregation led some of the vampires, daemons and witches to reconsider their devotion to obeying the covenant. One of them was Sarah, Diana’s aunt:

The Congregation wants answers? Well, I want answers, too. You tell Sidonie von Borcke that I have been consorting with vampires since last October, ever since Satu Järvinen kidnapped and tortured my niece while Peter Knox stood by and did nothing. If that means I’ve violated the covenant, that’s too damn bad. Without the de Clermonts, Diana would be dead—or worse.³⁴

For some, personal loyalties were more important than abstract laws introduced centuries ago, even a member of the Congregation sent her loved ones to seek help from Diana and Matthew: “Your mother appreciated the danger your family was facing, or she wouldn’t have sent you here. One day you might discover your wife and child gone. If you do, it’s highly unlikely you’ll ever see them again.”³⁵ The danger the characters were facing was the accusation of breaking the laws against segregation and miscegenation.

³¹ Ibid., p. 496.

³² Ibid., p. 520.

³³ D. Harkness, *The Book of Life*, p. 12.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 188.

³⁵ D. Harkness, *A Discovery of Witches*, p. 678.

In the United States miscegenation was widespread during slavery, as many female slaves were in involuntary sexual relationships with their masters. Regardless of the horrible circumstances of an interracial relationship during slavery, these relationships did not disappear after the abolition of the institution. Emancipation meant merely that from then on the interracial relationships that developed were consensual, although often the consent was the result of the pressure of the trying conditions under which former slaves had to live. The interracial relationships which were entered willingly were not always legal. Only in 1967 the Supreme Court ruled that all laws opposing interracial marriages were in fact baseless.³⁶ That means that for the longest time, the mixed-race couples who wanted to enter the union voluntarily, without coercion, were not as free to do so as the same-race couples.

In the *All Souls* trilogy miscegenation was also present in the world of creatures for the longest time. However, it was a guarded secret. It comes to light that even one of the members of the Congregation is a descendent of the child who was born in a mixed-race relationship. The idea bewildered the other members of the Congregation to the point that at first they refused to believe that it was true:

“You are a famous witch, Janet. Your spell-casting ability is renowned. And you come from a distinguished line of witches. Why you would want to sully your family’s reputation with this story is beyond me.”

“And there it is,” I said, my voice soft.

“There what is?” Sidonie sounded like a testy schoolmarm.

“The disgust. The fear. The dislike of anybody who doesn’t conform to your simple-minded expectations of the world and how it should work.”³⁷

To be in an interracial relationship or a child born out of one equals to be socially stigmatized. Because of that some couples in the story are afraid to reveal their relationship even to their families:

We didn’t tell Agatha my people were witches. I didn’t even tell Nathaniel—not until he came home to meet my dad. We’d been together for almost four years, and my dad was sick and losing control over his magic. I didn’t want Nathaniel spooked. Anyway, when we got married, we thought it was best not to cause a fuss. Agatha was on the

³⁶ R. Staples, *The Black Woman in America*, Chicago: Nelson Hall Publishers, 1978, p. 118.

³⁷ D. Harkness, *The Book of Life*, p. 522.

Congregation by then and was always talking about the segregation rules and what happened when folks broke them.³⁸

However, the emotional reaction of the society is not necessarily why most couples hide their relationships. They do that because to be out in the open means to be punished for breaking the law; and as a result the children of such couples are to be removed from their parents' care and their fate is to be decided by the Congregation.

In the *All Souls* Trilogy the fantastic inhabitants of the world are dying out. Vampires are not able to create new ones and witches have less and less power. One could assume that the dying out of all types of creatures at the same time is a metaphor for the receding arguments behind the idea of race. One of the characters enquires about the diminishing number of the creatures and asks: "[W]hich of these so-called species cares the most about racial purity?"³⁹ It seems that in the fantastic world presented in the story racial purity is something of a taboo, whereas in the United States racial purity seems to be not as significant as it used to be in the past.

As presented in the article, analogies between the racial problems depicted in Deborah Harkness' books and the actual events in the history of the United States can be found. In the *All Souls* Trilogy the biological separation of witches, vampires and daemons came to an end just as biological arguments concerning race were discredited in reality. However, race perceived culturally, both in the books and in real life, is still an evolving concept. The discussion whether to eliminate, conserve or reconstruct racial discourse is still ongoing. Joshua Glasgow presents two possibilities of how identity can be influenced by the transformation of the racial discourse. He speculates that "abandoning race-thinking might be prudentially bad because doing so would disintegrate one's individual identity; or it might be prudentially good because it allows us to pursue relationships that are difficult to pursue in a race-conscious world."⁴⁰ The topic of race is currently a very sensitive issue and attempting to discuss it openly may cause one to become an object of strong criticism. Therefore, it seems that fantasy remains a perfect genre in which authors may comment on current issues, even if they do so in a less straightforward manner than in realistic fiction.

³⁸ D. Harkness, *A Discovery of Witches*, p. 655.

³⁹ D. Harkness, *The Book of Life*, p. 187.

⁴⁰ J. Glasgow, *A Theory of Race*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 3.

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