# THE HOUSE OF BLACK AND WHITE:
# IDENTITIES OF COLOR AND POWER RELATIONS
# IN THE GAME OF THRONES

A CASA DO PRETO E BRANCO:
IDENTIDADES DAS RELAÇÕES DE COR E PODER
EM GAME OF THRONES

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**ABSTRACT:**

This article analyzes the representations of non-white identities in an HBO's fantasy show "Game of Thrones" (GOT). By specifically focusing on hegemonic relations between white characters and characters of color, the research scrutinizes the rhetorical strategies through which non-whiteness is enacted in relation to white "natives" of the "Westeros." Authors show that the GOT employs orientalist discourse in constructing the world of Westeros and contrasts it with the exotic lands of Essos. Westeros is rich, white and located in the western hemisphere, while Essos is a scorched and mysterious land located in the East. By associating the show's major characters with Westeros and the casting of white actors, viewers are encouraged to identify with their complex struggles and to embrace their intricate characterizations. On the other hand, Essos' characters of color typically include marginalized characters such as slaves, servants, and pirates. Their story arcs are glazed over and their characterization serves not to enhance the narrative but to emphasize the uniqueness of a superior cultural entity, i.e. Westeros. The essay discusses the implications in which GOT perpetuates long-established relations in a re-imagined system of power, which its writers and audiences have identified as female progressive and noted for its narrative complexity.

**KEYWORDS**: Whiteness; Popular culture; Game of thrones; Orientalism; Hegemony.

**RESUMO:**

Este artigo analisa as representações de identidades não brancas no programa de fantasia da HBO "Game of Thrones" (GOT). Ao focar especificamente nas relações hegemônicas entre caracteres brancos e caracteres de cor, a pesquisa examina as estratégias retóricas através das quais a não-brancura é promulgada em relação aos "nativos" brancos dos "Westeros". Os autores mostram que o GOT emprega discurso orientalista na construção de o mundo de Westeros e o contrasta com as terras exóticas de Essos. Westeros é rico, branco e está localizado no hemisfério ocidental, enquanto Essos é uma terra arrasada e misteriosa localizada no leste. Ao associar os principais personagens do programa a Westeros e ao elenco de atores brancos, os espectadores são incentivados a se identificar com suas complexas lutas e a abraçar suas intrincadas caracterizações. Por outro lado, os caracteres de cor de Essos normalmente incluem caracteres marginalizados, como escravos, servos e piratas. Seus arcos de história são vitrificados e sua caracterização serve não para aprimorar a narrativa, mas para enfatizar a singularidade de uma entidade cultural superior, ou seja, Westeros.. O ensaio discute as implicações nas quais o GOT perpetua relações estabelecidas há muito tempo em um sistema de poder reinventado, que seus escritores e audiências identificaram como progressista feminina e notaram por sua complexidade narrativa.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**: Brancura; Cultura popular; Game of thrones; Orientalismo; Hegemonia.

**INTRODUCTION**

Despite being one of the most popular shows in television history, Game of Thrones (GOT) has lately garnered criticism for its portrayal of race and ethnic groups. Several articles point out that "Westeros has a race problem" and ask, "Why is fantasy TV so white?" (HAWKES, 2017; JONES, 2019). They have signaled the lack of representation of people of color and their presence only in small supporting roles. Despite the author's claims that Game of Thrones is a show with fantastical elements based on medieval England (CERON, 2017), detractors have observed that imagining a world where people of color are used as plot devices for story advancement of white characters is merely the fictional portrayal of a hegemonic world that celebrates white identities (JONES, 2019). Although diversity problems have been addressed in journalistic commentary and opinion pieces (BAHADUR, 2017), there have not been empirical approaches to how Game of Thrones portrays its characters, and most importantly how the relations among individuals are explored in the narrative. Hence, the present article analyzes the representations of non-white identities in the show from an Orientalist perspective and examines the dynamic of hegemonic reproduction of power that echoes the colonial world division. As such, the current research scrutinizes the rhetorical strategies through which the non-whiteness of 'Essos' is enacted in comparison to the white "natives" of "Westeros."

To advance this objective, we conducted a textual analysis of all scenes that include characters of color. We analyzed their characteristics and associations to white dominant roles in the context of orientalism and hegemony. Drawing from Orientalism and its idea on how the West gazes at the rest of the world (SAID, 1979), the authors of this paper deconstruct how the GOT creators visualize Essos and its habitants, and ponder at the rationale behind it. In doing so, we adopt the view that hegemonic ideology embodies common-sense assumptions of elite interests and involves their acceptance by the audience (GITLIN, 1980). These representations are problematic because the entertainment industry perpetuates stereotypes and misrepresent people of color (Smith et al., 2018; UCLA, 2019). For example, despite constituting nearly 40% of the total U.S. population, minorities are represented in only 21% of the total number

of characters in the entertainment industry, and the majority of film directors (87.4%), writers (92.2%) and show creators (87.6% in average) continue to be primarily white (UCLA, 2019).

Moreover, African Americans and Latinos are, in proportion to the general population, consistently overrepresented in news as criminals and underrepresented as victims (DIXON & LINZ, 2000). Although rates of inequality and bias have somewhat improved over the past few decades, non-white identities remain statistically underrepresented and usually assume positions of less prestige than their white counterparts (MONK-TURNER et al, 2010). These trends tend to proliferate in television shows and films in a form of two extremes: In one, personality traits are idealized and hailed by the dominant (white) group (the "Noble savage" trope for example), or people of color are depicted as model minorities. The second common portrayal involves non-white characters that help transform disheveled, uncultured, or broken white characters into competent people (the "Magical Negro" trope) (HUGHEY 2009). Either way, these tropes put people of color (POC)'s story arcs as subservient to the development of other white characters and inherently highlight POC's inferiority.

Television, however, can be an agent of a change. It is a medium that reaches a wide international audience and has profound effects on its viewers. For example, it can help violence survivors deal with abuse (SCHWARK & BOHNER, 2019), assist in developing empathy towards minorities (JOYCE & HARWOOD, 2012; SCHIAPPA, GREGG & HEWES, 2006) or generate support for public policies (CARLL, 2003). Therefore, a systematic examination of how one of the biggest TV show deals with race and ethnic minorities and their interactions with majority members merits further attention, especially in light of demands for change in representation from marginalized groups in the industry, such as the Oscars so White and the diversity matters movement. The following section examines in broader detail how orientalism and hegemony come across in media messages and how they affect the representation of POC.

**ORIENTALISM AND HEGEMONY: THE MEDIA'S REPRESENTATION OF THE OTHER**

Historically, political elites have highlighted their own superiority and legitimacy by drawing attention to the "problematic" qualities of outsiders. They have defended their positions of power by "conditionally" welcoming cultural others and implementing restrictive boundaries that keep minorities at bay (immigrants, blacks, LGBT members, elders, poor, etc.) (ARTHUR & WOODS, 2013; DORSEY & HARLOW, 2003; SMITH, 2012). Elites' institutional actions and opinions have also found a place in the society's media. By transmitting the elites' values to the community, media outlets and the film industry have acted as implementers and intermediaries that interpret the outsiders' activities to the dominant culture (BYERLY & WILSON II, 2009, SPOONLEY & BUTCHER, 2009). Despite calls for media to remain objective and promote diversity (BYERLY & WILSON II, 2009), their values and routines usually reflect and reinforce the existing institutions that have traditionally been controlled by white males, such as entertainment financing, selection, and the creation process. As a result, the media have overrepresented the upper-middle class, middle-aged, professional, heteronormative, white male sectors of society (SALINS, 1997). In contrast, when covering minorities, the "sensed gap in extrinsic cultural traits" between the two groups is crucial in the development of a biased and sometimes, hostile coverage (GORDON, 1964). As Gans (1979) expressed it: "the media prefer women and blacks who move into the existing social order to separatists who want to alter it (p. 61)".

Edward Said (1979) explored this perceived gap of cultural traits between non-western groups (Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies) and western gazes in Orientalism: the distinction between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident" and to what extent it related to the western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (p.3). In Said's analysis, the Western portrayal of the Middle Eastern and East-Asian cultures frames them as unchanging, focused on the past and undeveloped; thereby, manufacturing a deceivingly simplistic view of an Oriental culture that can be studied, depicted, and controlled. Implicit in this view is also the view that Western society is superior, advanced, rational, modern and flexible. By defining the whole East as its less developed antithesis, the West affirms its

own dominance and authority while at the same 'othering' cultures it vaguely understands.

This is especially true in the case of the Middle-Eastern and East-Asian cultures whose representations in Western films have long been associated with enduring stereotypes and binary tropes. In many of them, the Oriental culture is looked down upon as pre-modern, exotic, unchanging, mystical, feminine and dark-skinned, while the Occident is depicted as white, modern, advanced, developing, masculine and empathetic (BERNSTEIN & STUDLAR, 1997; CHUANG & CHIN ROEMER, 2013). In our present case, we assume – like many other authors – that the portrayal of Westeros is the creators' self-interpretation of the Western heritage, while Essos serves as the representation of the distant Orient.

As previously stated, representation is but one element of the analysis. The study of Orientalism is a dynamic exchange between the creators and the larger political context where the creative process occurred, one that ultimately symbolizes and benefits the dominant white-male status quo. This relationship places the production of knowledge about 'the Orient' in service of the Western hegemony, thus generating fragmented images of the Orient as an "other" that function as an illustration of West's humanity, progress and rightful superiority (SPIGEL, 2004). In this example, it is the dynamic relation of Essos' characters to the dominant white characters of Westeros, as a clear expression of the Western original context.

Media, film, and entertainment industries have justified such misrepresentation or their invisibility. They have claimed historical accuracy, such as George R.R. Martin (Game of Throne's author) did on his blog: "Westeros around 300 AC is nowhere near as diverse as 21st century America, of course (2014)". They have also stated their products intend to reflect and reach the largest demographic group, such as white majorities in the American or European markets. Clearly, many past films were mainly written for a Western audience or written at the peak of Western colonialism (i.e. Lord of the Rings or the Chronicles of Narnia). However, it is telling that Game of Thrones is aimed and promoted for an international public and in a context where diversity is an everyday reality. This relationship between majorities and minorities do not only reflect

hardwired beliefs about how the world is envisioned, but it illustrates the existing dynamics of power. The reproduction and justification of this status quo, where white male characters are leaders, benefactors and saviors to people of color, who more often than not have non-speaking, supportive and minor roles (DIXON & LINZ, 2000; MASTRO & GREENBERG, 2000; UCLA, 2019) is explored in the following section.

## HEGEMONY AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION

Hegemony is "a ruling class's domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology (ideas and assumptions) into their common sense and everyday practice; it is the systematic (but not necessarily deliberate) engineering of mass consent to the established order. Hegemony is a process that is entered into both dominators and dominated (GRAMSCI 1971 cited GITLIN, 1980, p.253). Hegemonic principles include commitment to maintaining the private property, relations that honor the prerogatives of capital; commitment to a national security State; commitment to reform selected violations of the moral code through selective action by State agencies; and commitment to approving individual success within corporate and bureaucratic structures (p. 258). These principles are produced, transmitted and perpetuated by media, film and entertainment industries or the so-called cultural industry. They operate, socialize and connect with each other to create, direct and write the content of the cultural apparatus.

These principles, plus the definition of western identities as opposed to non-western ones, have been translated into how people of color are treated as outsiders or deviant challengers to the social stability of the dominant order. For example, several scholars have found that news, films and television shows have traditionally represented minority members as criminals or outsiders. Dixon and Linz (2000) pointed out that African Americans and Latinos are more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than victims on television news -not representative of their proportion as perpetrators and victims in general crime statistics. Conversely, whites are more likely to be portrayed as victims than perpetrators in the media. In a similar study, Mastro and Greenberg (2000) and Monk-Turner et al. (2010) explore the racial representation of minorities in prime-

time entertainment television. Monk-Turner et al. (2010) note that roles for Latinos and black characters had increased from an initial 3% in 2000 to 5% in 2010. Regarding the quality of the portrayals, Mastro and Greenberg (2000) write that Latinos are equally positioned to whites in terms of income, intelligence, cleanliness, industriousness, and respect. In contrast, blacks are judged as lazier and less respected. In their 2010 replication, Monk-Turner et al. observed no significant differences between laziness and respect between minorities and white roles. However, Latino and African American characters were portrayed as more immoral, viewed as more despicable and portrayed as less intelligent than white characters. In comparison, the majority of white primetime television characters are eloquent, respected, moral and admirable.

Over time, these negative representations of minorities have become recurrent stereotypes. The most conventional ones use minority characters story arcs to support and enhance the white main characters' development. For example, they are submissive and supportive of white characters' growth, such as the Magical Negro, the Noble Savage, the 'black' best friend, the help (i.e. the Mammy prototype), etc. These archetypes have special powers, wisdom, patience or love for the white characters and appear on screen solely to help them get out of trouble or guide them - all in detriment or unconcerned for their own fate (HUGHEY, 2009). A recent film example is that of Mahershala Ali in *Green Book* (2019), where Ali's black character –a virtuoso pianist- exists merely to help the white character overcome his racism, flaws and save his marriage.

On the other end of the spectrum is the minority presented as a menace, a savage or a criminal. Similar to news reports and primetime television, Latino and black characters are used to exemplify the victimhood of white people or to draw attention to their civilization, culture and superior position. In these images, people of color are dangerous and violent, without any background for the political and economic circumstances that drove them to their situation. For example, in the so-called "'ghettocentric', action-crime-adventure" movies (GUERRERO, 1993), black and Latino characters are violent, ruthless and drug-driven gang members, where their depicted lifestyle is set against that of a civilized white one or is set right by a white character,

who saves them from themselves (HUGHEY, 2012). This negative extreme representatión seems to be the most related to Orientalism, where non-western characters are portrayed as Islamic extremist terrorists, assailing or threatening "western paradigms that are traditionally used to assert American conceptual discipline over the Arabs, their cultures, and their landscapes and to ensure the stability of American identity (Semmerling, 2008)".

These problems of invisibility and problematic representations have faced constant criticism from minority groups and scholars. Among the first documented ones was the Kerner Report in 1968, in response to the 1967 race riots in Michigan, which recommended newsrooms to endeavor in a fairer coverage of minority issues and incorporate a higher participation of race, gender, sexual and ethnic minorities (BYERLY & WILSON, 2009). Efforts that are more recent include the #OscarsSoWhite and "Representation Matters" movement, condemning the lack of nominations for actors of color. Although figures indicate the number of female and minority actors, writers, creators and producers has slowly grown (particularly on television) (MOLINA-GUZMAN, 2016; UCLA, 2019), hegemony contends most of the solutions continue to be within the system, allowing it to continue (CLOUD, 1996). As previously stated, even positive representations continue to box characters of color as symbols for an entire community. They are tokens of diversity, standing as outsiders in the lives of white majorities. A few exceptions include the complex and round-up portrayals of Latino people in shows, such as Jane the Virgin or East Los High, or black ones in Atlanta. Therefore, based on this understanding of how media reproduces hegemonic principles and uses Orientalist stereotypes that reify the white culture, we examine how Game of Thrones as a fictional and mythical world represents people of color and mimics images of imperialist Europe? In the following section, we explain the methodology and our findings.

**METHOD**

This section describes the research design for the textual/semiotic analysis. Textual analysis is a traditionally used method to try to understand the likely interpretations of texts made by people who create and consume them (McKee, 2003). That is, how texts (or characters of color and the power dynamics with other characters within an episode) would be interpreted within the larger social structure. Researchers used textual/semiotic analysis in examining the first seven seasons of Game of Thrones and paid particular attention to scenes when people of color had significant screen presence (i.e. talking roles and interaction with white characters). At the same time, we conducted a study of language and signs of the written and spoken word. That is, besides the thematic elements of Orientalism and hegemonic principles, we examined codes such as costumes, editing, mise-en-scène and the hidden cultural or symbolic meaning of a text.

A textual analysis was appropriate as it offers enough flexibility to examine vast concepts like Orientalism and Hegemony, while at the same time the semiotic analysis allowed for additional hidden cultural and symbolic meaning to come to the fore. The analysis focused on what ideas and feelings the non-white characters or interaction between characters invoked in relation to Orientalism and hegemony. Although the audience and coders do not share a cultural background and heritage to this fantastic land, the show's reliance on known minority and outsider tropes makes it possible for a traditional semiotic reading of the series to be done.

We also developed an analysis template in the form of codes or questions to organize the indexing of material (CRABTREE & MILLER, 1999; EZZY, 2003; BOYATZIS, 1998). The codes were organized around broad categories, which asked questions such as: Which orientalist themes are emerging? How are the characters of Essos portrayed in relation to Orientalist and hegemonic themes? What is the relationship of people of color to the white characters and status quo? How is the portrayal of a non-white character representative of all other non-white characters? These questions were broken down further to narrower units, such as, to what extent are Essos characters portrayed as treacherous, conniving or aggressive? How do they behave around white

people? What positions do they serve? What role do they play creating or menacing to the civilized culture of Westéros? Lastly, in relation to the setting and symbolism of the region, we posed the following questions: How does the visualization of Essos correspond to Orientalism? How does the Essos landscape reproduce the idea of Orientalism?

## DEVELOPING AN ALLEGIANCE TO 'OUR' WESTEROS

Most of the GOT action takes place on a continent called Westeros and its Seven Kingdoms which, politically and culturally, have been written and designed as a mixture of late medieval and pre-colonial Europe. This is a place ruled by tradition and nobility whose stern and orderly exterior hides numerous intrigues, treacheries, and political maneuvers. At its most basic GOT is a story about three feuding noble houses - Targaryen, Stark, and Lannister, who fight over the Kingdom's dominance. While the show includes common fantasy features, such as magic and dragons, these three families' histories are described with such meticulous attention to detail and precision that the show feels less like a work of fiction than an 'authentic' account of an alternate universe. In fact, great lengths are taken to explain the historical origins of nobility's firmly held antagonism which involves a description of events that took place a few generations before the start of the show's main action. Through numerous flashbacks and historical records of Maesters[1], we meet the leading characters' ancestors and witness morally questionable choices they made to protect their families and retain their reign. We also learn of the Westeros' myths and antiquity via cave drawings (Dragonstone), children's stories (Old Nan), and visions of a Three-Eyed Raven. Three-Eyed Raven is a magical character who allegedly remembers all the history of this world and informs other characters about it (though curiously, he only dips into the Westeros past). Moreover, the show teaches viewers about the significance of Westeros' artifacts, such as religions (especially The Faith of the Seven), the meaning behind its symbols (such as sigils or even music[2]), history of notable landmarks (i.e. Red Keep, Harrenhal, or

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1 Order of scholars, healers, and learned men in the Seven Kingdoms.
2 Particular songs and music themes are associated with each of the great houses.

the Wall), as well as pragmatic information, such as who produces the food (Highgarden), metals (Casterly Rock) or knowledge (The Citadel).

In short, a well-crafted universe is designed, where viewers are taught about the smallest nuances of Westeros tradition—making them keenly aware of individual character's motivations and stakes of losing the 'game' (losing power often equals losing family members and heirloom). Such a detailed history places Westeros at the center of the major character's lives and posits the Seven Kingdoms as the 'home-base'. Due to extensive contextual knowledge about Westeros culture and involvement with leading characters, the audience easily adopts the lead character's worldview and accepts the showrunners' partisan framing of the World. At the same time, in embracing Westeros as the home-base, the spectators are positioned to view other parts of the GOT universe through the lenses of the Realm's characters, that is, they are predisposed to perceive the rest of the GOT world as the other.

**OTHERING ESSOS**

The idea of other primarily refers to cultures and people living on the eastern landmass opposite of Westeros called Essos. Though geographically larger and culturally richer[3] than Westeros, Essos is primarily presented as an obscure area filled with scorched deserts, steppes, and slavers' port cities that hide carnal delights and dangers. Other than discussing a looming threat in the form of an exiled Westeros princes - Deaneries Targaryen, Westeros characters do not pay much attention to this continent or its rulers. Targaryens are interesting to Westeros nobility because they are the legitimate rulers of Seven Kingdoms and one of the eldest great houses. However, about twenty years before the start of the show's main action, they are brutally slain in a civil war and ousted by other royal clans. Deaneries and her brother Vyserion barely escape persecution by traveling to Essos but never really give up the claim on the royal throne (aka Iron Throne). Asides from Deaneries, whose entire story arc revolves around a desire to leave Essos and return to her homeland, no major characters engage with this

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3 Essos is a home to one of the earliest and most powerful GOT civilizations known as Valyria. Valyria is the ancestral home of House Targaryen and their dragons.

Eastern continent. Viewers are hence primed to see Essos as a foreign land or a temporary stop in the unraveling of the show's main plotline.

In constructing this world, the showrunners use Orientalist imagery and paint the continent as an inferior antithesis to the more advanced Westeros, which surpasses Essos in knowledge, technology, and modernity. Compared to the rich lore of Westeros, Essos is an empty backdrop filled with the most superficial clichés of colonialist art and motifs which were in European history used to justify the exploitation of oppressed lands. For example, white Deaneries is presented as a liberator of slaves and embodiment of progressive ideas, while the 'darkish' skinned locals (examples of truly dark skin are rare) are painted with crude brush strokes that highlight their barbarism, exoticism, and proclivity towards treachery. Similar lack of nuance is noted in representation of Eastern landscapes. Whereas Westeros panoramas are conceptually and artistically grounded and shot in specific European locations, the three Slaver's Bay cities that Dani conquers in Essos (Astapor, Yunkai, and Meereen) consist of non-specific CGI sites that seamlessly blend a variety of Oriental motifs and shooting sites across Europe and Africa. Traditional oriental landscapes tend to be non-specific and often include romantic ruins of ancient cities (such as GOT's Ancient Valyria), scorched deserts and steppes (The Dothraki Sea) or copious oasis or bazaars.

The purpose of mysterious ruins and hostile sceneries is to show that this continent's greatest days are long gone and that Westerners have a moral duty to preserve its memory by recording it or even 'taking' home some of its artifacts. European colonialists of the 19$^{th}$ century have frequently used this discourse to frame their looting of overseas relics (especially in Egypt and India) as a preservation of a romanticized past. By dehistoricizing and lumping together heterogeneous cultures, they were able to create a monolithic Orient that enticed their imagination and inherently lauded the Western superiority. Orientalist artwork from this period often revolves around similar nondescript deserts, bazars and oasis - which could be anywhere and nowhere at the same time. Deserts represent danger and mysteries of this strange world, while bazars and oasis typically inspire European lust for hidden treasures. These landscapes and images often pop up in the works of Orientalist painters like Eugène

Delacroix, Jean-Leon Gerome, Rudolf Ernst, Gustav Bauernfeind, Stephan Sedlacek. In fact, many of the GOT sets and costumes bear a rather striking resemblance to Orientalist artworks. Essos scenes in which Daenerys is attended by her servants calls forth harem images by of Jean-Leon Gerome, while Ilyrio's bath scene from the show's first episode looks remarkably like *The Harem painting* by Philippe van Bree. Her throne room inside the Meereen pyramid and costume are evocative of Rudolph Ernst's famous work *Salomé and the Tigers,* while Khal Drogo's tent resembles Renoir's *Parisiennes in Algerian Costume or Harem*. Likewise, the costume of The Unsullied and Slaver's Bay guards seems to be inspired by Ludwig Deutsch's *The Palace Guard*.



Figure 1. Left: Renoir's 1879 'Harem' painting; right: GOT Screenshot (S1E3).

These beautiful images are thematically about Orient, but they reveal more about European art connoisseurs than they do about the world they allegedly portray. As most of the Oriental painters never traveled to the far or Middle East, their works are populated with sensuality and mysticism without any links or references to specific Arab cultures or locales. Orientalists pay no attention to the understanding of context but commonly lump unrelated cultures of the east together. That is the reason why Meereen skyline features pyramids that resemble those in Egypt, a temple with statues

of Hindu Garuda[4] and a Fighting Pit that resembles Roman Colosseum. The intention of such interventions is not to paint a consistent world as much as it is to create a magical backdrop that will highlight the charm and sensuality of young Deaneries Targaryen. The dissonance of the Essos landscape is not jarring to audiences either because we have seen similar interventions in many fantasy products and Western popular culture. As mentioned before, Essos is a colorful backdrop that highlights the paleness and grand superiority of beautiful Deaneries. The first time we meet her in season one, she is living in the opulent villa of Illyrio Mopatis, a white merchant from the Free City of Pentos. The Free Cities are nine cities located at the western edge of Essos that engaged in extensive maritime trade with the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. Illyrio's name[5], manner, and surroundings indicate that this character was heavily inspired by the medieval city-states of the Adriatic, like the Republic of Venice or Republic of Ragusa (modern-day Dubrovnik - the primary shooting location of Westeros capital). Much like their European counterparts, the Free Cities link the GOT's East and West via the sale of goods and established transport routes.
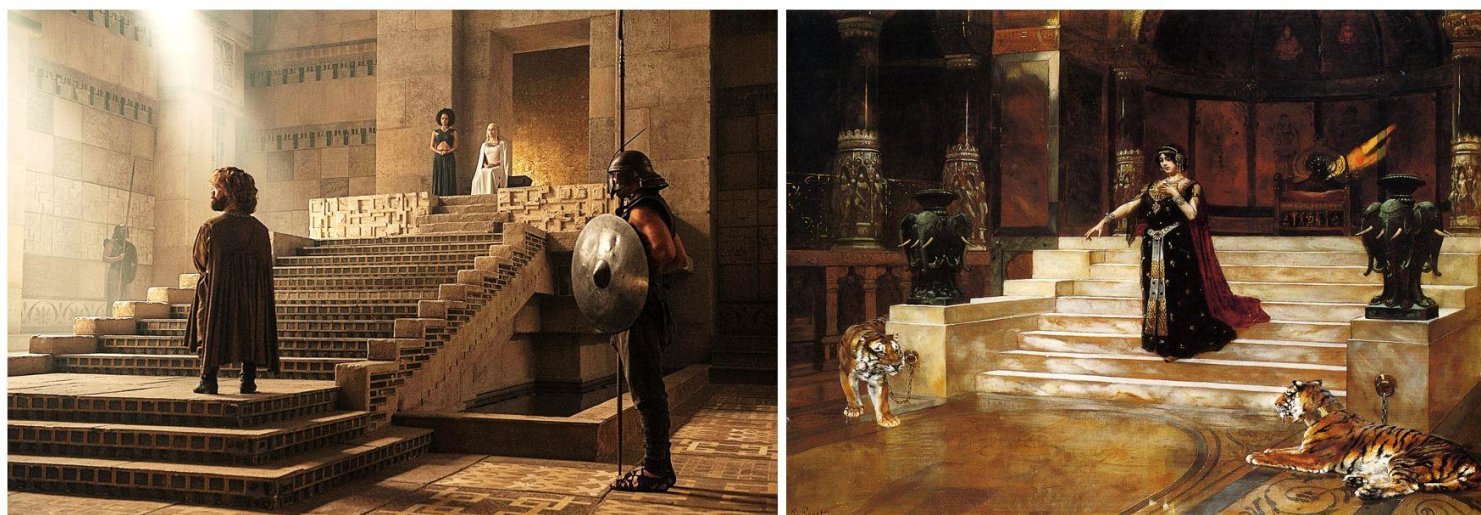


Figure 2. Left: GOT Screenshot (S5E8); right: Ernst's Salomé painting (1800').

4 Garuda is a legendary bird-like creature in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain mythology. Garuda is typically associated with the Hindu god Vishnu.
5 Historical Illyria was located in coastal parts of modern-day Albania, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**CONSTRUCTION OF ESSOS' HABITANTS**

In these exotic cities, the residents are typically conniving and threatening foreigners who represent a meeting point of ambiguous values and morality systems. Though many of the Westeros characters behave in an equally sly manner (if not worse), viewers can also learn of their complex inner lives and recognize their motivations. They are presented as more complex individuals with contrasting motifs and rich inner lives, rather than black and white illustrations of cruelty. On the other hand, Essos characters are quite simple and straightforward. For instance, the merchant Illyrio is one of the many characters whose background and humanity is quite obscured on the show and insufficiently explored. He seems superficially polished and cultured while at the same time acting as a shrewd merchant whose wealth rests on shady business deals and human trafficking. Although he helps Daenerys and her brother, he is quite calculated and driven by financial gain rather than altruistic desires. Like other merchant characters, such as slaving ship captain Malko, traitorous Xaro Xhoan Daxos, or Hizdahr zo Loraq (all of whom are played by black actors), Illyrio is morally duplicitous and threatening. When he arranges a marriage between Daenerys and Khal Drogo, he doesn't do it out of true belief in her claim, but because he wants to ensure an eventual return of investment. Marriage is an opportunity for Daenerys' brother Viserys to gather an army and return the throne – along with favors that Illyrio has bestowed upon him. Khal Drogo and his horse-riding Dothraki, with their naked torsos and undecipherable guttural language, are the less glamorous representation of Orient. Their 'savagery' and lack of culture are expressly highlighted when pitted against the backdrop of Illyrio's renaissance villa and finery worn by his wealthy guests. In the scene where we first meet the Dothraki leader and Daenerys' future husband, Viserys describes him in the following words: "he's a savage of course, but he's one of the finest killers alive." This framing of Khal applies to the Dothraki tribe overall who, compared to cultures of Westeros, are portrayed as primitive, inferior, barbaric and foreign.

While the GOT spends a considerable amount of time explaining power relations of Westeros and origin of its many customs, there is no attempt of showrunners to understand intricacies of tribal relations or understand the roots of their behavior. They

are portrayed as a society that is ruled by tradition rather than reason and acutely prone to treachery. After Khal Drogo's death, most of the tribe promptly turns on Daenerys by leaving her to wonder in the seemingly never-ending desert. She is eventually rescued by another merchant Xaro Xhoan Daxos who then conspires with Daenerys's handmaiden to steal her dragons. Likewise, Daenerys' love-interest Daario Naharis casually kills his superiors during the siege of Yunkai, as do slaves who slaughter their corrupt masters. Such disloyalty, treason, and cruelty are not endemic but are consistently portrayed as a culturally standard of Essos. Even their entertainment, such as fighting pits, gladiator games, or sexual decadence along with slave exploitation illustrates the perverseness of the Oriental stereotypes and solidifies Said's notion of implied superiority of Western civilization.

**WHITE SAVIOR**

One of the show's most remarkable scenes comes when Daenerys frees Armies of Essos slaves, the unsullied, and other oppressed citizens. We are led to believe that until then, thousands of people have allegedly accepted slavery and had been unable to free themselves. They had to rely on their *white* 'mother' (Mhysa) to bring them freedom, culture, humanity, and modernity. In portraying them as children in need of a white savior and liberator, the show promotes racist narratives, which were in the colonial times used to justify Western hegemony and exploitation of Occident.

Gramscian understanding of hegemony and relations with color characters inevitably implies the notion that authorities legitimize their dominance over people and territories by imbuing their own rule with a patina of moral justification. By blanketing coercion and exploitation with intellectual and moral legitimacy, the West weakens counternarratives hence securing its dominance. In other words, by presenting colonies as childish successors of once great civilizations, hegemons can present themselves as custodians of the heritage rather than their exploiters. As already mentioned, this rationale has justified Western looting of numerous historical artifacts from places like Egypt, India, China, and others, whose cultural relics are still dispersed across European museums (BOON et al., 2018). In addition, the fictional Orientalism of Game of Thrones,

much like in our own world, is more articulated by the pointed absence of non-white voices than their discourses or actions. The total number of analyzed episodes was 67, and people of color represented in average 8% of the total number of characters. Representation within episodes ranged from zero percent (no people of color in 6 episodes) to 30.2% (1 episode). Table 1 illustrates the diversity of the cast per season and the range of diversity within each one.

Table 1. Diversity in Game of Thrones[6]

| Season | Average diversity of the cast per season | Range of representation |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Season 1 | 8.64% | 2.33% - 13.64% |
| Season 2 | 6.84% | 2.22% - 10.87% |
| Season 3 | 5.21% | 0% - 12.12% |
| Season 4 | 7.88% | 0% - 15.8% |
| Season 5 | 9.92% | 0% - 20.6% |
| Season 6 | 10.57% | 0% - 30.2% |
| Season 7 | 7.52% | 0% - 17.14% |
| Total Average | 8.08% | |

Furthermore, all the characters of Westeros speak flawless English and have recognizable names such as Rob, Catelyn, Jon or Jaime. On the other hand, as we go further East, characters either start speaking in heavily accented and broken English or the fully unrecognizable language of the Dothraki. Easterner characters' names are also more difficult to pronounce and are replete with X's, Q's and Z's, (like Qotho, Prendahl na Ghezn or Xaro Xhoan Daxos). Such names and accents cue the audience that these

6 Cast of the show (seasons 1-7) was collected from the IMDB (www.imdb.com) and categorized based on all performers' ethnicity and descent. Ethnicity and descent were determined based on each artist's personal website and other online materials involving actor-interviews or articles containing self-explicit mentions of their race. Percentages of people of color were obtained per episode in proportion to the total cast, and then an average was calculated for the entire season and TV series. A complete list of characters is available from the authors upon request.

individuals are exotic foreigners or 'others' who serve to highlight the identity of the central protagonists while also underlining the superiority of the West. Disney's cartoon Aladdin is often cited for using a similar approach in the portrayal of Arabs and the Arabic world. Aladdin and Jasmine have somewhat western features and speak in flawless English while virtually all the show's other characters have accents - which cues audiences *not* to trust them. Alienation and foreignness of Essos characters are further emphasized by the fact that none of them stays long enough to impact the main plot or reveal some rationale that justifies their vile behaviors. Westeros characters (namely Daenerys and her suite) meet Essos people in passing and interact with them fleetingly without ever losing an upper hand in these exchanges.

Exceptions are two rather reserved former slaves, Missandei and Grey Worm (Torgo Nudho), who appear extensively through seasons 3 to 8, but who generally speak in response to Deaneries. They do not show any signs of independence and their stories revolve around attending Daenerys and attending to her agenda. They eventually do get a romantic subplot and increased screen time but their involvement in the show does not further the overall narrative and appears more of an afterthought rather than a vital drive in furthering the story. Though freed from Essos bondage and servitude, they still operate as the 'help' and embody Eastern other. When Daenerys and Grey Worm mourn for Missandei in season 8 (episode 5), Daenerys shows Grey Worm the only possession that Missandei has brought from Astapor: the chain choker. The scriptwriter's decision to use the chains reinforces how Missandei's identity is tied primarily to her captivity and stands out as her defining feature. At the same time, Grey Worm is in the show's finale shown as a merciless killer who revels in murdering POW and embraces vengefulness. During the sack of King's Landing he is pitied against Jon Snow and Davos Seaworth (white characters) who try to prevent any unnecessary bloodshed in the city. Grey Worm, as the racialized character, is put in the contrasting position and insists on

killing enemy soldiers - despite their surrender. Yet, Missandei and Grey Worm belong to the 8% of the show's non-white characters and they do stand out for consistent screen time and the number of lines.

Other non-white characters appear rather sporadically and usually in the form of faceless slave masses, rows of soldiers or servants who perform a variety of menial tasks. Still, even these roles are mostly played by white extras in tattered costumes and ruffled-up makeup that evoke a racist and painful history of blackface and minstrel shows of the early 20th century US. Just like blackface was a distortion of authentic culture or blending of culture with the purpose of providing entertainment for the Western audience, Oriental constructs – even in a fantasy show – are a mirror image of quiet fantasies that lay dormant in our own world for the entertainment of western audiences. Although Westeros and Essos are not real places, they feed into the collective consciousness of global audiences and entrench Oriental stereotypes that have been imprinted into the Western psyche over the last 500 hundred years.

**CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

Although HBO's show Game of Thrones has broken many stereotypes in its portrayal of gender, sexuality and fantasy conventions, it has also relied on Orientalist stereotypes to construct the imaginary continent called Essos. Though the worlds of Westeros and Essos both belong to the imaginary realm, they are strongly grounded in the European imagination and colonial history which has used its hegemonic dominance to perpetuate the notion of East as its inferior antithesis. Being one of the most popular cultural products on the globe today, the GOT has the power to set the creative agenda for aspiring content creators and to pave the way for how we see power-relations in our own world. Unfortunately, as the above-presented analysis shows, GOT does not try to

engage with Essos characters or its landscape on a deeper level but instead uses it as a backdrop that highlights the cultural superiority of the West. The framing of Essos supports Edward Said's notion that Orient is a Western construct, which dehumanizes people of the East while at the same time substituting a true knowledge with judgments and stereotypes that feed into the popular imagination.

In his book Orientalism, Said (1978) notes: "The Orient is watched, since its almost (but never quite) offensive behavior issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity; the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached, always ready for new examples of what the Description de l'Egypte called "bizarre jouissance." Viewers of the HBO show are invited to identify themselves primarily with Westeros' Seven Kingdoms (inspired by Europe) and to immerse themselves into its meticulously constructed world while observing the Daenerys Targaryen's slapdash exploration of Essos. Her journey of Essos does not unravel any significant information about the cultural context or history of an allegedly illustrious continent with rich history and instead focuses on familiar Oriental tropes like barbarism (slavery and treachery), exotic delights (sensuality and carnality) and mysteries (bizarre religions and dark magic) that paint Daenerys as a progressive heroine, while dehumanizing everyone around her. In other words, the Orient is a living tableau of queerness upon which the grandeur of a more advanced Western civilization is hailed as a more advanced and normalized variant of the world. This division has a long and established tradition of representation in European literature, news, art, film, and television - which is the primary reason we can easily recognize it even within a fantasy genre. It is difficult to imagine harems, pyramids, desert caravans, unreliable bazaar traders and oases without evoking an imagined culture of monolithic East (which is usually an amalgamation of the Ottoman Empire and Persia along with a variety of cultures from the Arabian Peninsula). Likewise, the imagery of knights, knight tourneys,

medieval castles, kings, and queens inevitably evokes Western-European societies of the United Kingdom and Spain. Such stereotyped iconography is so thoroughly ingrained into popular imagination that, despite the show's fantasy setting, its motifs are easily recognized and located on our own geography. Moreover, like in our own world, non-white identities inhabiting Essos are rarely given a chance to speak for themselves. Most of the screen time is dedicated to Westeros culture, world, and intricacies involving its white characters. Conversely, only 8% of the show's performers are non-white and none are a vital element of show's central storyline. They have very few lines and are a living embodiment of Oriental clichés involving landscapes, psychology, and ethnicity. Hence, rather than using fantasy genre to question or uproot enduring cultural stereotypes, GOT reinforces the old world division and strengthens the discourse which was in earlier centuries used to highlight the Western superiority and justify the exploitation of the East.

Since the show is a cultural phenomenon which has broken rating records and spawned at least two prequels along with numerous videos, memes, and other popular media artifacts, its example is likely to be perpetuated in the future. This means that we are likely to see a renewed emergence of works that fetishize and romanticize cultures of the East, without trying to understand its heteronomous people or their heritage. Despite the ever-improving transnational flows and increase of global communications, access to information has not been accompanied with an accurate and open-minded representation. Instead, productions like GOT highlight the global East-West division and show that even the most original Western authors show a proclivity towards the Oriental fantasies that embody hidden desires and inflate the values of authors' own cultural identity.

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Pintura Odaymar. Gratitud