Colin Gioia Connors: We're back again with the second half of our interview with linguist Dr. Matt Boutilier. If you missed part 1, you may want to go back and listen to that episode first.

In part 1, we discussed the Nordic languages of Tolkien's Middle Earth, and the kinds of linguistic stereotypes that manifest in Tolkien's writings. In part two, we consider more broadly how we imagine the past in medieval fantasy, and how those perceptions translate into racial typecasting in film.

*[Intro music starts]*

Welcome to Crossing North: a podcast where we learn from Nordic and Baltic artists, scholars, and community members to better understand our world, our communities, and ourselves. Coming to you from the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, I'm your host Colin Gioia Connors.

*[Intro music ends]*

Popular literature and movies today shape so much our perceptions of the past. Like when we think about Elves and Dwarves in Old Norse sagas a lot of that imagination we are getting from these retellings, from Tolkien and other people, so it's really important to be critical of the way that we see them in movies today. Your question earlier of how might a young Asian person see themselves in the literature may be more influenced by the movies today than by the text itself.

Matt Boutilier: Yes. I think that the movies are in some way equally influential at least nowadays.

Colin: So Peter Jackson had to make some choices about how he was going to represent people.

Matt: Yes, he did. [*laughs*]

Colin: Would you tell me about those [choices]?

Matt: Yes, well, I guess it is pretty visible in the movie itself. You get the idea that Elves are tall, thin, blonde, white people. I mean in the
Peter Jackson version I think that is a requirement somehow. I guess maybe not necessarily blonde, maybe some Elves have like, lightish brown hair, but...

**Colin:** But they bleach.

**Matt:** Yeah.

**Colin:** At least that's how they look.

**Matt:** Yeah, that is how they look! Right? I think that almost all of them are basically blonde. Anyway, certainly as far as I can remember all of them are white, and it seems from the movies that hobbits are all pretty much white, as well. So yeah, I don't know how that casting decision was made or communicated for *The Lord of the Rings*, but something very interesting happened when they started doing *The Hobbit* movies. Somebody, some casting director who I believe is unnamed posted an ad, a casting call for auditions so you could audition to be a Hobbit in the first installment of the new *Hobbit* trilogy. And, I have the ad in front of me here, a copy of it, and they say, “Essential requirements: men and women, 16-80 years old,” so pretty broad variety there. We're not accusing them of agism, certainly. “Men must be under 180 cm (5'7”), women must be under 158 cm (5'2”), and should have light skin tones.” That is explicit on the bill. And then at the end it says, “Please note, this casting call is for people who fit the above requirements only.” So they are pretty clear that they are looking for white people for Hobbits. So, someone lost their job over this because there was a woman of Pakistani heritage who was either a resident of New Zealand or a New Zealand citizen and she auditioned and they told her no because her skin was too dark, basically. The casting director in question lost their job over this. I don't know if it was only the responsibility of this one casting agent or whether this came from higher up. I have a hunch that this person lost their job and was taken to blame as a scapegoat, but the opinion was more widespread than this one person, that Hobbits should be white because, you know, if you look back in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which came before the *Hobbit* trilogy, the Hobbits are all white, and the Elves are all white. So why wouldn't it be the same? So, [*beleaguered sigh*] again, for lack of a better word, very interesting to me that we as a culture now, perhaps thanks to Peter Jackson, but maybe since before Peter Jackson, perceive the Hobbits as white. And maybe that's because we have Tolkien's idea that they are like rural English people. I mean, they have this sort of rural English country life, I guess. But at the same time I wonder why that is the case, why that *has* to be the case. Even in mid-century England there were people of color. This is about to get a lot more complicated, but I think that a lot of what this has to do with is the sort of societal perception, not necessarily of mid-century England, but all of medieval Europe, or most of medieval Europe, as basically a time before the “racial mixing” or “ethnic mixing” that we are perceived to have nowadays. But there is this myth out there that there were only white people in medieval Europe, and this is supposedly before any influx of immigrants who didn't have skin that was very white.

**Colin:** Right, and this is an idea which is totally wrong because people traveled, cultures met, the medieval world was a globalized one.

**Matt:** Of course! Yeah, people were trading with people from all over the world, and with trade comes immigration. I was just watching a documentary the other week—this isn't about Europe—about central and western China and in particular, the Silk Road, and basically all along the Silk Road you have these hubs of Islam that cropped up in the early Islamic period, and the reason for that is that just by trade alone religions can spread and languages can spread and cultures can spread. And of course this was happening in Europe, too, in and out of Europe. This happens all the time *everywhere*. As long as there is transportation and economies, there are people moving, and there are languages moving, and there are cultures moving. But for some reason, we tend to envision medieval Europe as a place of what we would nowadays call white people. Even though their perceptions of race in the Middle Ages were kind of different from our own.

**Colin:** With Tolkien's medieval fantasy we tend to project back that idea of the medieval world being a white world and think of the Hobbits as being white when that really says a lot more about us and our world today, because it's a work of fiction—it's *fantasy*. There
is no reason the Hobbits have to be any one skin tone.

**Matt:** Exactly. It's fantasy. It's fiction. A couple years ago there was a miniseries I think about the Trojan War. I think it was called—it's not the movie *Troy*—I don't know if it was called *Troy* or what, but Achilles, the main character, was cast as a Black actor.

**Colin:** Oh yeah! I watched a few episodes of this on Netflix.

**Matt:** Yes, do you remember what it's called?

**Colin:** I think it's just called *Troy*.

**Matt:** Okay, I think it might be *Troy: Fall of an Empire*, or *Fall of a City*, [*ding! sound effect*] or something like that, something dramatic.

**Colin:** Yeah, I'll add it in in post-production. But yeah, right, and they have all of the Greek gods in it and a lot of the gods are cast as Black actors, too.

**Matt:** And I remember when this came out or when the casting was announced there was this big thing on the internet like, “How can Achilles be Black? It just doesn't make sense, he was Greek! Look at Greek people.” But okay, first off, the epics of Homer are essentially fiction. Of course they are based on some factual reality, but we have no idea what the historical Achilles looked like—let's assume there was a historical Achilles, which there probably was not—we don't know if he was tall or short or what color hair he had, or if he had a beard or not, or if he had pierced ears or not, or what! Well, I suppose maybe some of that is cultural. But there was so much interchange between the Greek islands and the Mediterranean and North Africa and even further into Africa—people were coming from all over the place and going all over the place. Anyway, the point is, a lot of people objected to this casting because they said it was historically inaccurate and I think we tend to have the same reaction against casting people of color in Middle Earth as Hobbits. I mean, theoretically, because I'm not sure it has ever happened. We have this idea that they should be white.

**Colin:** Yeah, I think that people get upset with casting choices and other kinds of artistic decisions in films when they don't match a person's imagination of that world. And so that really says a lot more about the audience and their ideas than anything that necessarily is in the text.

**Matt:** Absolutely. I mean, I think I would extend that and say that *The Lord of the Rings*—how it's written—probably says a lot about how Tolkien saw the world for better or worse and the assumptions he made about the world. And yes, if readers are imagining when it is not explicitly indicated that everybody in this fictional medieval Europe has light skin tones as the casting bill was asking for, then exactly, I agree with you, it says a lot more about the people assuming that than it does about Middle Earth itself and certainly more than it does about medieval Europe itself. But people for some reason hate being told that the real medieval world was not like that. There was also, I think a year ago, there was this whole stink on, I don't know, Facebook or Twitter maybe—the body of somebody or a tomb was dug up in England or the UK somewhere and this person genetically had traits that we would consider African or North African. And all of the historians were like, "Well, of course!" Because people were going all over the place back then just like they are now. There were movements between cultures, and people brought their languages and their religions with them, but, and I don't know how you can argue against facts, but a lot of people tried to say, "Well this is impossible," or "What's going on here? This is an outlier. Surely there were no Black people or people with darker skin in England. How is this possibly a thing?" People are really opinionated about this, who, let's just say, don't have degrees in history or anthropology.

**Colin:** I think one thing I want to talk about with the films is that they changed a number of things from the books. We're already talking about how just the choice of who you're casting is a deliberate decision that is not based on the books, so you can't make a
faithful retelling when you have to imagine so many things and make creative decisions in the film that you are going to make. So it is
hard to criticize the filmmakers for not being true to the book because they have to make choices. But they also made a lot of
interesting choices that were, I thought, really great, and really offer some hope for how we think about texts that we've read and love
so much, and seeing different versions of them... and that is just how they change the roles of women in the films. I said before how I
recently read the lord of the rings for the first time. I saw all of the movies when I was in high school, and now I am starting to rewatch
them, and I'm rewatching them with my wife, who is also a historical linguist, also a huge Tolkien fan, so as we're watching the movies,
she's pausing it every five seconds to tell me, like, fill me in on extra trivia and things from the books. It's fantastic. And it is so helpful
because a lot of things go over my head, and definitely went over my head when I was fifteen years old and watching the movies.

Matt: What kinds of things?

Colin: So early in The Fellowship of the Ring, Frodo is going to Rivendell and he is getting really weak, he's not going to make it, and so in
the movies, Arwen picks him up, puts him on her horse, and takes him all the way to Rivendell. And that is different, it is a different
character in the books. And that choice is market driven, the producers of the film will say “Well, this film would probably be more
appealing to people if we had more women in it, so how can we increase their roles?”

Matt: So what? I think that's great. Like I said, they are editing it for a time and a place—for a particular audience. They are taking their
audience into account, which is fantastic.

Colin: Yeah! And that's what all storytellers do in all times. So it's not a bad thing. And if we're trying to say it's medieval fan fiction,
then this is the most medieval thing that you could do is to make changes to the story based on what your audience wants to hear.
When you are doing oral storytelling, and that is where a lot Tolkien's inspiration comes from, are Old Norse texts, Beowulf. They all
enjoyed some oral composition before they were written down and put into the form that we have today. Someone is telling a story,
they know all of the beats of the story that they need to hit, and they might take some of those beats out if they know they are not
going to play well with the audience, and they might give some characters a bigger role if they know people really like those
characters, and so a lot of the meaning is in the context of what the audience knows and what they are looking for in the experience.
So Arwen coming into this moment makes total perfect sense for the way the stories are told. It gives a lot more meaning to the
relationship between her and Aragorn, and it is this kind of swapping in and out of characters that happens all the time in oral story
traditions. If you are thinking about Old Norse sagas, we have in some cases multiple versions of the same story and you can see this
kind of thing happening. In other cases we only have one version, and it makes you think about just the multiverse...

Matt: ..of what there might have been...

Colin: ...yes, of what there might have been and what people [told] when they retold them in their own lives.

Matt: That's a good point, absolutely. To change a story—you are inherently, just by casting anybody you are making a statement
about something previous, something prior, or you are deliberately changing something, or you are subconsciously changing
something, and that's all fine. That's all very natural and that's how storytelling works and has always worked. I mean, Tolkien took the
character Gandalf or at least the name from Norse mythology and turned him into, not a man, exactly, but a wizard. So yeah, it's all
retelling. I was thinking also of, I don't know if anyone listening to this is familiar with the Nibelungenlied, the Middle High German, or
at least the Middle High is the most famous version, story of Siegfried and the Dragon and Siegfried's death, but I believe it is
Brunnhilde who is an important woman in the saga, who maybe in the Norse version of the story, The Saga of the Volsungs,
Brunnhilde's character is a valkyrie. She's this spirit who ushers the dead to Valhalla like a psychopomp, but in the German version she
is Queen of Iceland or something, she is a human princess, and somebody, in some version was like, “Huh, I like this way better let's
make her that.” It's a woman both ways, it's not replacing I-don't-remember-what-the-male-Elf's-name-was with Arwen. But yeah, they
are adapting it to a time and a place.

**Colin:** Yeah, so I think there: what is the crux of the story? What is the foundation of it? What are those important beats that hold the story together? The idea of good versus evil is really the big theme of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is fun to think about what kind of retellings could be done in the future also with this story.

**Matt:** Yes, I do think it's unfortunate, as long as I am airing all of my grievances about the Peter Jackson version, they have the sort of foresight to give women a little bit more action there with Arwen, which I think is great, but really didn't do so much at all with race. I hope that maybe there will be a future version of *The Lord of the Rings* with some more representation for people of color.

**Colin:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Matt:** I think it is problematic and I think the Peter Jackson versions in this case really do sort of reinforce certain not-necessarily-un-white-supremacist ideas or notions or patterns, we'll say, in the original text.

**Colin:** And I think that at the end of the day it doesn't really matter how globalized or racially diverse the Middle Ages actually were. When we retell these stories in film and in different media, the important thing is not: how was it back then and how should we do it today? But really, what do we want the future to be like? Let's just make choice based on what we want.

**Matt:** That's a good point.

**Colin:** So why not just say we want a world in which people with all skin colors can get roles in Hollywood?

**Matt:** And are represented in any part of the society. Why should our real world racial difference translate or map onto a fantasy world necessarily? Why should they all be what we in our world consider white? That doesn't really make sense if you think about it.

**Colin:** Yeah and it doesn't make any sense that a story of good versus evil should just be for white people.

**Matt:** Exactly! Right, that's what gets me. Well said. It is our story, I guess, as a society, us, our story to change and to adapt. So Peter Jackson and his ilk, you know, people who are making movies about *The Lord of the Rings* or about *Harry Potter* or about anything are inherently making so many decisions left and right that you can't just take a book and objectively translate everything into a movie, like you were saying. As soon as you cast, you know, even Viggo Mortensen as Aragorn, you are making a statement about Aragorn, or you are suggesting something about Aragorn—his height or his face or his, his, you know, eyes, his stare. I think he has, he has, you know, [*dramatic pause and then seductively*] those eyes—you are making a statement that is not canonical, you cannot justify it anywhere in the text, but you just think it would be cool if Aragorn had Viggo Mortensen's eyes. Okay, good, go for it. Maybe while you are at it try to give representation to communities that aren't necessarily referenced probably as much as they should have been in the original text. It's your material to do what you want with. It's such an opportunity!

**Colin:** If you enjoyed our discussion, you should definitely go listen to The Tolkien Heads. They occasionally have guests on the show, like on episode 62, when I joined the Heads to close-read the Ride of the Rohirrim and delve into the Indigenous stereotypes that manifest in Tolkien's description of the Wildmen of the Woses. Go to thetolkienheads.com or subscribe wherever you get your podcasts from. Links to The Tolkien Heads can be found in the show notes for this episode or on our website.

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SHOW NOTES

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Listen to more of Dr. Matt Boutilier on The Tolkien Heads podcast.

Colin is a guest on Episode 62, "The Ride of the Rohirrim."

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