A Song of Burning Wood: Colonization and Memory in *A Song of Ice and Fire*

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"Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you."
- Isaiah 60:10

For Jason Magnon-
You would have understood that
"History… is a nightmare from
which I am trying to awake."
— James Joyce, *Ulysses*

Introduction

Background of colonization in A Song of Ice and Fire

George R.R. Martin's series *A Song of Ice and Fire* has outstripped many of its contemporaries in the fantasy genre in terms of popularity, in part because of the phenomenal success of its television adaptation, *Game of Thrones*. Viewers are captivated by the narratives of the country Westeros—also named the Seven Kingdoms—a fictional nation that parallels Medieval Europe. Part of the appeal that Martin provides is a world with a low moral standard. Readers and viewers explicitly relish the opportunism, selfishness, and violence of Westeros. Rather than focusing on the common folk or those displaced by colonial rule, George R.R. Martin focuses on aristocrats vying for power. However, there is an earlier wave of violence that has become little more than a backdrop for that action, but that provides context and resonance for it. The narratives of *A Song of Ice and Fire* are interwoven with Westerosi myths that date back to 12,000 years before the setting of the series, when the conquest of the Western continent by humans began. The colonization included attempted genocide and the displacement of indigenous non-human species, such as giants, "children of the forest", direwolves, and the Others. The only narrative points of view accessible to the reader are those of humans; thus the reader/viewer is not expected to consider the points of view of indigenous groups. These myths are worthy of critical analysis not only because they are repressed histories that inform the text's present-day conflicts. More importantly, the myths offer readers the opportunity to identify and examine the ways in which *A Song of Ice and Fire* offers a paradigm of a typical process for colonization: displacement of indigenous populations, forgetting, and mythologizing (as a technique of forgetting).

This paper begins by describing the displacement of indigenous peoples via a series of human invasions and informing the reader of the ways in which the efficacy of forgetting through mythologizing is configured in the series. The paper then frames the region North of Westeros as a foil to Westeros, and also explains the ways in which the Others are an unreal, yet, existential threat. "*A Song of Earth*" begins the recentering of the paper on the indigenous group, known to humans as "the children of the forest." The "children" are the primary reason that the Northern region of Westeros has a different identity from the rest of the nation. Although Northerners are descendants of the human settlers who did not attempt genocide on the "children," the North misinterpreted their culture. The discussion of the North's misinterpretation leads into an illustration of the extent to which the cultural/sacred work of "the children of the forest" is memory.

"Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you"

One of the myths which is formative for Westeros is the myth/history of the Long Night, which happened approximately 12,000 years before the present narratives. This period is roughly double the human history the real world has, but *A Song of Ice and Fire* intentionally has a much deeper history than our world. This might be Martin's response to Modernity's ephemeral perception of history: his individual backlash against "our hopelessly forgetful modern societies" which "organize the past" through the dilated lens of history.[1] Theorist Pierre Nora explains what Modernity has done to historical perception:

> Indeed, we have seen the tremendous dilation of our very mode of historical perception, which, with the help of the media, has substituted for a memory entwined in the intimacy of a collective heritage the ephemeral film of current events.
>
> The "acceleration of history," then, confronts us with the brutal realization of the difference between real memory-social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies-and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past.[1]

In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Martin insists upon a world that does not forget as quickly as our modernity. While Westeros does repress memories of millennia past into myths, these myths survive, and provide a window into the collective unconscious of certain groups in the present. The Northern region of Westeros remembers the most about the Long Night, and displaced groups such as "children of the forest", the Others, direwolves, and the Giants.

The two characters from which we hear most about myths of the "children of the forest" are Old Nan and Maester Luwin, who live in the North of Westeros. Old Nan is the wet nurse that cared for three generations of Starks. It is noteworthy that we know her tales from the perspective of Bran Stark, who will join the "children of the forest." Old Nan tells Bran the story of the Last Hero, one of the First Men who lived during the Long Night, a Winter which lasted a generation. The myth of the Long Night describes the designation of certain groups as "other" (that which is abject: separated from the self in order to maintain a coherent subject), and define the boundaries between normativity (what me might call "Westerotivity") and otherness.[2]

The Long Night took place in the Age of Heroes, the era which began after the First Men settled on the Western land mass, once the First Men and the "children" brokered a peace. The Long Night is crucially characterized by the swarming of the Western continent by the Others, who were killing humans *en masse*. The Others, indigenous undead and undying beings, essentially waged an apocalypse against humanity. Profoundly threatened, the humans had the Wall built to ostensibly keep the Others confined to the desolate Northernmost region of the continent. The myths suggest that Brandon the Builder, founder of house Stark, enlisted the giants and the "children of the forest" to help build the Wall. The "children" would have imbued the Wall with their magic to make it impenetrable to the Others. Regardless of the "children's" and giant's generosity, the humans' reactionary panic caused them to feel abjectly threatened by all groups outside of Westerosi boundaries of normalcy, not just by the Others. Thus, in the process of displacing the Others, the humans displaced all other non-normative groups as well, such as the "children," giants, and some humans who

were unable to conform to Westerosi normalcy.

Old Nan's tales: abject others abjured

Much emphasis is put on Old Nan's age, and readers are encouraged to see her as having more connections to the memory of the ancient past in which non-human species coexisted with the First Men. The problem is, although Old Nan gives no indication that these narratives are false, no one expects Old Nan's narratives to be more than myth. The fact that the narratives she provides are called "stories" and are not granted the same level of credibility as Maester Luwin's narratives is one of many examples of the severely patriarchal culture with which Martin structures the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Old Nan's tales are misread and their subversive force ignored. That Westeros sees narratives such as Old Nan's as myth allows present Westeros to unconsciously continue the erasure of the ancient past. After being separated by the Wall for approximately 8,000 years, many humans believe that the "children of the forest" were never more than myth. This erases the possibility of acknowledging their influences on human cultures as well as almost all of the "children's" actual existence and prevents any reparations to the "children of the forest." This is exactly how conquest functions in the real world: colonization depends on the process of displacement and forgetting. In discussing Ursula LeGuin's fantasy/sci-fi novel *City of Illusions*, notable author Judith Caesar offers an observation that I argue starkly echoes the process of forgetting which happened to Westeros over time:

> In *City of Illusions*, mind-razing, the destruction of a person's memories is developed as a metaphor for the process of colonizing the minds of a subject people. It suggests the ways in which history can be ignored, destroyed, or misinterpreted; the ways in which cultural values can be distorted and misrepresented.[3]

Caesar recognizes that *City of Illusions* illustrates the ways in which understanding and manipulating the thoughts of the members of one's own group as well as the colonized group is a powerful tactic of colonization.

In *A Song of Fire and Ice*, narratives told by Westerosi people to other Westerosi people destroy knowledge of the colonized societies. This manipulation of knowledge functions the way Judith Caesar argues mind-razing functions: the Westerosi raze human minds of the "children." Creating master narratives that are hostile to indigenous peoples or erase them outright is a characteristic of colonization. The colonizers use a double process of silencing and forgetting. Myth becomes an opportunity to forget: to naturalize an order. Memory, for theorist Pierre Nora, is authoritative for each group that depends on it.[1] History, for Nora, is in conflict with memory. History, because it pretends to be objective, destroys memories of colonized groups. History and archiving are techniques developed in response to the disappearance of memory, and are in fact, techniques of forgetting. Indeed, mythologizing is a form of remembering that enables the hearers to forget. Both *City of Illusions* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* show us that mythologizing is an effective tool for ensuring that the colonized societies stay displaced. Yet, the texts create opportunities for remembering, creating a parallel and counterweight for the vehemence and the violence of the present.

These myths work to construct Westerosi identity and, in some cases, particular regional Westerosi groups. The apocalypse and subsequent building of the Wall left a legacy in contemporary Westeros: The Wall is used as a symbol of national identity by constructing the North of the Wall as a foil to Westeros. The Northern Westeros-Northernmost wilderness foil serves as a mirroring structure that recalls Joseph Conrad's discourse of Africa in his novel *Heart of Darkness*, another work of literature which concerns itself with colonialism. Renowned author Chinua Achebe sees *Heart of Darkness* as participating in a larger Western cultural discourse on Africa. "Quite simply it is the desire— one might say the need— in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest."[4] In like fashion, "North of the Wall" is what Westeros is not. The collective lives of the people of Westeros constitutes normalcy and Civilization; North of the Wall constitutes the Other.

For present day Westeros, the Wall evokes memories of before the Wall was built, when abject otherness rampaged across the Western continent. Thus, the Wall is a symbol of national identity because it is a visual manifestation and reminder of the illusory security and normalcy Westeros felt it needed after it was built. The hostile Northern Wilderness is spoken of with leftover horror of the apocalypse because it represents another potential apocalypse to Westeros. Because the North of the Wall is at once remote and vaguely familiar, Westerosi make it a space of negation. "In the Seven Kingdoms it was said that the Wall marked the end of the world" so that the possibilities of the reality there can be forgotten. [5]

As their name suggests, the Others represent the epitome of this foil to Western identity. They represent a particular kind of otherness, one that is nightmarishly apocalyptic in nature. They are the epitome because not only are they dangerous to humans, but their otherness was so enormous in scope that it almost, and still has the potential to, exterminate humanity. Because Westerosi people have not seen an Other since the Wall was built, Westeros is able to repress memories of the Others and the near-genocide they performed. Despite the Wall being 700 feet of evidence that something horrible occurred to cause its creation, the Others were mythologized to preserve Westeros' state of normalcy. If Westeros had continued to acknowledge the Others' existence, they would have had to accept the idea of another potential end of humanity. In Freudian terminology, the Others are *unheimlich*, a word which describes something that is horrifying by virtue of being familiar: The horror comes from the threat of the return of repressed memories.[6] The idea of the Others brings repressed memories of human extinction to the surface, which Westeros can only handle as myth, lest its perception of the longevity of humanity fall apart.

Yet, on some unconscious level, Westerosi are aware that the Others exist, even if the horror of their existence is largely ameliorated by mythologizing the Others. The Others are even more *unheimlich* because part of what has been repressed about the Others is that they were humans who were transformed into the Others by the "children of the forest" to protect themselves from the humans. Julia Kristeva, who has done much work on the ways in which our culture constructs the self and other, explains abjection:

> The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.[7]

Kristeva's definition of the abject is applicable to the construction of the Others because the abject refers to that which threatens collapse of meaning caused by loss of distinction between the self and other.[7] Westerosi humans do not even have to know about the common genetic origin of the Others for the Others to be abject. The Others are already similar to humans because both humans and the Others are genocidal and apocalyptic, depending on perspective. Trying to protect themselves from dissolution, the *super-egos* of

Westerosi reject memories of the common (in)humanity of the Others, who would remind humans of their own genocidal *Id*.[6]

A Song of Earth

The readers of *A Song of Ice and Fire* do not hear the perspective of the otherized and displaced groups. Rather, the reader knows of these groups from Westerosi myths, thus the reader is not expected to consider the points of view of indigenous otherized groups. However, this paper works to denaturalize the narratives of the humans of Westeros, in part to suggest that viewing and reading *A Song of Ice and Fire* from the perspective of displaced groups –particularly the perspective of the "children of the forest"—is a valuable practice.

In the most recent book in the series, *A Dance of Dragons*, we meet the "children" through Bran Stark, who travels north of the Wall to meet them. The "children" tell Bran that, in forming a group identity, the name they choose for themselves is "*Those Who Sing the Song of Earth,"* and that they also accept the name "*Singers"*.[8] Until this point, we have known them as "children" because when humans began settling on the Western continent they imposed that name. Although "*Those Who Sing the Song of Earth*" is only a translation of the name they have for themselves into the Common Tongue, using the names they use for themselves is a necessary first step in centering the margin because the human's renaming erased their ability to represent themselves. The renaming is also anthropocentric, or "human-centered," in the sense that it defines *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* by their physical difference from humans. *The Singers* are about the size of a human child, thus by comparing them to human children through naming, the term reveals itself as human-centered. By changing the name of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* to "children," (e.g., beings not capable of autonomy) humans manipulated the knowledge of *the Singer's* group identity and of their individual identities as adults with agency. Although it was clear to humans which *Singers* were adults, they knowingly referred to adults as "children", which denies the personhood and agency of adult *Singers*. Therefore, humans manipulated knowledge by constructing *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* as children: inferior to adult humans within the value system of humanity.

The title *A Song of Ice and Fire* refers to the prioritized Westero-centric narratives of aristocrats vying for control. In contrast, songs of Earth consist of narratives of being indigenous or of being one of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth*, which/who are necessarily obscured by virtue of the title of the series being *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Following the pattern of title as a metaphor for narrative, this paper is *A Song of Burning Wood* because it is largely about the colonization of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* and because it provides a different way to read the title and meaning of the series itself.

Before the *Singers* were displaced, their identity as *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* (in contrast to "the children of the forest") was self-evident. The second wave of invaders, the Andals, forced the exposure of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* into contact with human processes of history. *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* have always been "peoples of memory, " but before the Andals, they were able to live within memory.[1] Since the destruction of the self-evident nature of their memory (and most of their actual memory), the preservation of their remaining memory has become emphatically important. The invasion of the Andals represents:

> A particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn-but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de memoire*, real environments of memory.[1]

The remaining communities of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* and the memorials of their culture constitute sites of memory because they no longer have access to their real environments of memory: the entire Western continent before the conquest of humans.

Deforest and conquer: "The North Remembers" imperfectly at best

Readers are often reminded that the blood of the First Men runs through the Stark veins, and much of the population of Northerners. This means that they are descendants of The First Men, the first group of colonizers, who did not engage in genocide, but were still invaders. They invaded and settled on the Western land mass, but they did not kill many of the *Singers,* and, just as crucially, they did not burn down the weirwood trees (trees which formed the *Singers'* culture). And although they were more successful at gaining territory than *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* were at keeping theirs, this process took thousands of years, during which time The First Men were influenced by *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* and brokered a peace with them. The North was the penultimate kingdom on the Western continent to lose their independence and become part of Westeros. The Northern phrase "the North Remembers" perhaps refers to the thousands of years of separation from the other kingdoms of Westeros, during which time their own regional identify flourished. It could also refer to the time before the Andals murdered most of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth*, from whom the North developed certain pivotal points of their identity, such as their religion and narratives. The North is constructed as a place that is not as disenchanted as the rest of Westeros. This state of enchantment causes the other six kingdoms to see the North as shrouded in ominous and backwards traditions. The cause of Westerosi prejudice against Northerners is that most Westerosi believe that the North excessively preserves old narratives and traditions. Westeros is prejudiced against Northerners because, to the rest of Westeros, the existence of The Northerner's different perspective and identity undermines Westerosi perception of their culture as natural.

Maester Luwin tells Bran Stark that the First Men adopted the faith in the Old Gods from *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth*. Even when the Andals conquered most of the First Men's land, the First Men prayed to the gods of the *Singers*, and that is why house Stark and other houses in the North keep the *Singers'* gods, now called the Old Gods, in the present. This is the major difference between Northern and non-Northern Westeros, although religion is very valuable to most characters in the series. Yet, it is acknowledged that faith in the Old Gods runs deeper, and is practiced with more gravity than the non-Northerners worship The Seven (New Gods). In order to pray to the Old Gods, The Northerners preserved some weirwood trees, which are fundamental to the culture of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth.*

One of the *Singers* (the one Bran nicknames "Leaf") explains to Bran that her people and the weirwood trees used to thrive all over what became Westeros. When the second wave of colonizers, the Andals, "burnt down the weirwood groves, [and] hacked down the faces", they mostly succeeded in destroying *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth's* collective knowledge, memory, and method of empathizing with other communities of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth.*[9] The burning of the weirwood trees is akin to the actual colonial tool of burning and falsifying the documents of indigenous people because both exemplify the "rewriting or suppressing their history".[3]

Even though the Old Gods are worshipped with sincerity, and although the First Men did not kill many of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth*, the adoption of certain parts of the *Singers'* culture constitutes another manipulation of knowledge by humans. Although in this instance the manipulation of knowledge was

accidental, and the Northerners have always had a genuinely profound reverence for the Old Gods. Still, the North only partially remembers the religion of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* because by virtue of not being *Singers,* the Northerners could never have learned the full function of the weirwood trees or the full extent of their relationship to *Singers* and the Old Gods. The North's use of parts of the *Singers'* culture suggests the "way cultural values can be misrepresented," in that Northern humans use weirwood trees as altars to pray to the Old Gods, and believe that they are sacred to the Old Gods.[3] To *Those Who Sing*, the weirwood trees *are* the Old Gods. Northerners did not misrepresent *the Singers'* culture with the intention of undermining it. They misrepresented it because the full nature of the weirwoods and *Those Who Sing* is unintelligible to almost all humans. Not only are the trees literally the Old Gods, but they are a telepathic way for *Those Who Sing* to preserve their memory and culture. This misinterpretation of the weirwoods is echoed by Northerners giving the weirwood trees a much less *unheimlich* name: the Heart Trees.

The Singers remembered

The weirwood trees function as conduits for the consciousness of shamans called greenseers through which they could access the memory, and experience the present from the perspective of the weirwood trees. Thus they could communicate with other communities of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth*, and access memories of the greenseers. In this way, the weirwood trees are like the literature of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth*, and thus Le Guin's mind-speech, a form of empathy and telepathy, which "gives the power to understand the thoughts and feelings of others, as a common literary language does when combined with literary sensitivity and empathy."[3] Mind-speech functions in *City of Illusions* as literary language functions in the real world. At the very least, greenseeing functions in the way Caesar argues mind-speech functions. In *A Song of Ice and Fire,* the character Jojen from compares greenseeing to literature:

> A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. The man who never reads lives only one. The singers of the forest had no books. No ink, no parchment, no written language. Instead they had the trees, and the weirwoods above all. When they died, they went into the wood, into leaf and limb and root, and the trees remembered. All their songs and spells, their histories and prayers, everything they knew about this world. Maesters will tell you that the weirwoods are sacred to the old gods. The singers believe they are the old gods. When singers die they become part of the godhood.[8]

Although Jojen only compares greenseeing to literature, literature is only a part of the interconnected web of meaning that makes up culture. The *Singers* did not need written language, or any means of archival because their lives *were* memory: There was no distinction between the past and the present. Rather, the present was a constant living of memory, and this was the essence of their entire culture. Pierre Nora would characterize the *Singers'* culture as Pre-Modern, because the acceleration of history had not yet swept away their memory.[1] The culture of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* was born of memory; their culture was founded in its name.[1] However, as the number of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* and their weirwood groves dwindled, they began to fall prey to the stagnation and isolation that LeGuin represents in *City of Illusions*. It is not clear whether the weirwood trees have always appeared the way they do in the present, with faces, white bark, red leaves, and red sap coming from the eyes which resembles blood. Perhaps the white bark represents the memories of the shock of attempted genocide: as if the weirwood beings blanched with the murdered *Singers*. The fact that they appear to be crying blood is an embodiment of the grief which the trees help process as memorials.

Winter is coming

Interestingly, Martin's trademark irony shows how the colonizers tools can backfire. Westeros's practice of erasure has been in the process of backfiring for 8,000 years, and begins to become visible to certain humans in the present setting. The human's use of erasure works in two ways. The physical genocide of *Those Who Sing the Song of Earth* caused them to protect themselves: They weaponized human beings by transforming some of them into the Others. Westeros's propagation of the belief that non-human peoples never existed allowed the Other's army to build itself up to an indomitable size. The Brothers of Night's Watch repeatedly ask every house for more men to join them at the Wall because of signs that the numbers of the Others are growing. They invariably refuse because the Others, like all non-human peoples, were never more than myth. Indeed, the humans' technique of colonization enables their destruction.

Even the existence of racial "others" in Westeros threatens the nation's boundaries of the self. Constituting certain peoples as "alien" is the most effective way of forgetting that humans invaded Westeros. "This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion".[2] Expulsions through the building of walls is the most effective way for dominant groups to forget the common humanity between themselves, and the groups they have displaced.

Perhaps thinking about the colonial past, present, and future is terrifying, and processing the horror we feel is more possible through fantasy, whether the process of trying to understand colonialism is conscious or unconscious.

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