

## A Seat at the Feasting Table

### *A Call for Inclusivity in International Larp*

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#### *Abstract*

As Larp as a medium of experience design and performance begins to take traction globally as a source of entertainment, increasingly larp communities are facing a problem that cannot be swept aside any longer: there is a distinct lack of inclusion of people of color in all levels of larp. In order to include people of color in larp, we must think intersectionally. Using autobiographical ephemera, critical race theory, and previous discussions around race and larp, I intend to inspire larpwrights, designers, players, and most of all people of color, to have a seat at the feasting table of larp.

#### *“But Where Can we Larp?”*

After finishing a short introduction to my thesis during a graduate forum at New York University Gallatin, curious students and bystanders surrounded me. I got asked the same barrage of questions I hear from people of color often. Where can they larp? How can they larp? Is larping *for them*? Is it just fantasy stuff? How much is it? Can you larp as anything you want?

Mostly importantly though, **“Where can you larp?”**

I had answers for some of those questions, but not all. Answering these questions require me to think intersectionally, especially within a US concept. The history of colonialism, means that race, gender, and class are linked together in a way that one cannot think of one without the other. In recommending larps to people of color, I must think of cost and location in

addition to interest. For instance, I hesitate to send people of color into all White spaces. Many boffer larps can be notoriously problematic, with their sects, “races”, and factions which routinely perpetuate racial stereotypes in coded language. In addition to this, in the US, race and wealth are intrinsically linked together. This means some forms of larp are more accessible than others. Parlor larps, freeform, jeepform, and InterCon styled larps are all far more accessible than a big budget international larp, but even in those styles, there is a distinct lack of writers, players and spaces which are helmed by people of color. In short: As is stands, larp is very White, and if it is to go truly international, to reach communities the world over and back, it’s going to need to be more inclusive of non-Western, non-European, and non-White people.<sup>1</sup> This means, it’s not enough to put the few larpers of color on your brochures, we must encourage, support, and nourish larpers of color and encourage them not only to play, but to *create*. In encouraging more diverse involvement at all levels of larp, larp’s international appeal will not only reside in a few select areas, but spread far enough so the benefits of larp can be extended to those who are systematically oppressed.

*There Were no Wardrobes for Children Like Us*

If I close my eyes I can still see myself peddling my purple 10 speed bicycle, my clunky scuffed sneakers caught in the rhythmic cycle of going forward. On Saturdays, I escaped to the “good park”, past the “bad park” where broken glass and drug dealers clumped together among 200-year-old trees and a ripped-out gazebo who wires still stick up like metal snakes. The good park is where most of the wealthier (and ostensibly, White) kids lived, and since I was 14, I could go all by myself, so I can be weird in peace.<sup>2</sup> I carried a large leather bag with a Portuguese roll (papa secos) with thick fresh butter and honey that I will dub “journey bread”, some cheap chocolate, and a can of ginger ale I will say is ale. Inside that bag was also a journal. A complicated thing written in pseudo-medieval fantasy code, so that later, it will be indecipherable to anyone except myself. I pedal hard and fast, and dream myself on a horse riding through the countryside. But I have never seen a countryside. Nor have I been on a horse. I dream of swords, ball gowns, castles, pyramids, tricksters, and fairies. I rewrote everything I read so I could find myself. I wrote stories of girls who looked like

1. This assumption is backed up by Christopher Amherst’s findings in his 2016 Solmukohta article about the 2014 larp census. “Therefore within our cohort population the “default” is a White male between the ages of 20–34, who participates as cast/crew in live combat fantasy campaigns...”

2. I should note that in this case, weird is not a derogatory term. Indeed, the word itself comes from the Anglo Saxon *wyrd*, meaning someone who control’s their own fate. I intended to control mine.



*My own character for Dying Kingdoms: A'isha Elvenhart. A'isha is a direct outcome of me being able to create the character I always wanted to see in a fantasy novel. Photo by the author.*

me, or my cousins, or my friends. I put us at the center of the universe, and found something that gnawed ever at my heart.

This fantasy was not made for me. The feasting table where heroes came to from adventurers did not include me. It was reinforced with every book cover, with every fantasy race described as “beautifully pale with flaxen hair”. I wanted

so badly to be among the heroes laughing and feasting together, but I quickly found out that I was not invited to play in these fantastic worlds, simply because I did not exist in them.

In most of the books I read, which are the basis for much of the fantasy genre, people of color were either nonexistent or portrayed as evil. White children found Narnia. White children fell through tree knots, found secret keys, and became royalty in unknown lands. They were the chosen ones who inherited magic powers, danced with the Fae during the full moon, and were called to perform wild serenades to powers eldritch... There was no magical Kingdoms for children who looked like me, and it went even further than erasure from fiction.

Our faces were not only blocked from the very stuff of imagination, they were erased from actual history. The tales of Africa, Asia, and South America were all left out of our instruction, or only spoken of in terms of colonialism. This effectively curtailed large swathes of my own imagination. I could no more imagine a free Black woman in 18th century England as I could imagine a Black Lucy shooting arrows. The former was as fantastical and improbable as the latter.

“What if though,” I thought, “What if could just make up my own stories?”

And so I did. Under that tree in the park, I wrote myself the stories I wish I could play and see. I wrote the characters of color I so desperately needed, and eventually I began to wonder. What if people could play dress up and actually become their own stories? I brushed this notion off as a dream, another strange fantasy. It took almost fifteen years before I heard the term, “Larp.”

The first larp I attended was an American Boffer larp based in Southern California, known as *Dying Kingdoms*. Indeed, the number one way my friends convinced me to go, was by saying I wouldn't be alone as the only PoC. It is a universal truth that when entering an unfamiliar space, a person of color (PoC) hopes to not be the singular person of color in attendance. PoC have been taught that when you place your body in a space where you are the only PoC, you are potentially opening yourself up to discrimination, harassment, tokenism, and possible injury.

This internal *knowing* can be described as having multiple consciousnesses. These multiple consciousnesses were first talked about by critical race theorist



*Diana Leonard as Wallad Mustakfa, a warrior poet and ambassador based on Wallada bint al-Mustakfi, a 11th century Andalusian poet. Diana was integral to drawing me into the story, and encouraging me. Photo by the author.*

W.E.B Dubois who coined the term *double consciousness*, which refers to the inability of Black Americans to be seen in the singular, rather each individual must carry the history of their oppression and what others view them as. (DuBois, 1994) This theory was made an international theory when another critical race theorist, Frantz Fanon explored the concept in other countries.

Fanon posited that people of color carried not only themselves this way in their own countries of birth, but wherever they went in the world. (Fanon, 1968) PoC are not truly allowed to live by just their nationalities, they can never be *just* an American, Norwegian, or Briton. To Western hegemonic society, PoC telegraph our otherness, and that otherness lives in a seemingly unescapable narrative of Western colonialism and White Supremacy. To live and survive, we must follow unspoken rules, which include giving up playing pretend, and any hobbies left outside of what the mainstream prescribes for.

For PoC who remain locked into the small boxes placed upon our bodies, playing outside of normative boundaries and seeking joy in the face of overwhelming oppression is a revolutionary act. It is my belief that larp is not only play, but also a method. It is a tool to discover and explore different roles and selves. For PoC this is vital, and the combination of systemic oppression, media misrepresentation or complete lack of representation allows larpers of color to take on those roles they would never ordinarily be allowed to take on. Creating a narrative of liberation for oneself is a revolutionary act. Larp as a medium is not a luxury to be discarded, it is a tool for self-liberation. It is among the ever-growing proudly geeky hobbies of PoC, all of whom are striving for recognition in the world we share.

Encouraging all people of color to see themselves outside of the confines of what they are told they *must* be, rather than what they individually *are* according to the dominant narrative, is very important, and drives many new areas of scholarship within popular culture. This includes Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism is a movement that seeks to redefine Blackness for the future ever looking forward and backward in history for inspiration. As art curator and Afrofuturist Ingrid La Fleur said in her TedTalk *Visual Aesthetics of Afrofuturism*, “I see Afrofuturism as a way to encourage experimentation reimagine identities, and activate liberation.” (LaFleur, 2011) I believe that larp can absolutely fit this description. Larp provides what Sarah Lynne Bowman calls “trying on different hats” of self-hood. (Bowman, 2010) She states, “Roleplaying environments provide a safe atmosphere and experience for people to collectively enact new modes of self-expression and experience a sense ego permeability while still maintaining their primary identity in the “real world”.” The ability to not give up ones’ inherent identity as a person of color, while still being able to explore different modes of self is a direct pushback to a society that says you only have one sense of self. Larp brings exploration and joy, and allows us to recreate ourselves and communities.

*How We Can All Eat at the Feasting Table*

If larp can be a tool for investigating self and breaking out of the confines of the hegemonic dominance of White Supremacy placed on players of color, how then do we invite more potential larpers of color to the table? How do we make larping an activity that is welcoming and exploratory for all? We have seen larp media become slowly more diverse, but the larps themselves, the organizers, the variety of larps, and who is [laying them needs to be further considered. Below, are my suggestions for making larp more accessible to PoC.

*Blackface is not a Homage*

Let's start at the thorniest of problems. One of the most frequently asked questions and debates when it concerns people of color and larp has to do with painting one's skin to be perceived as other. There have been arguments made that painting oneself in Mehron burnt sienna is fine because the White player in question wanted to "authentically" play a Black person, or an Arab person. To this we say something simple.

No.

The history of painting one's skin in cork or paint to stereotype and lampoon people of color is not just an American problem, and no matter how many times large swathes of PoC explain that it is not remotely okay to do so, inevitably someone pushes back and says, "But it's a homage!"

It is not a homage. If you would like to welcome players of color, the first thing one should do is make them feel safe and welcome, which means avoiding race facing.

Race facing, the act of changing one's skin tone or facial characteristics to play a different race is unacceptable as it draws upon a legacy of ridicule, subjugation, and racism. If you are painting yourself brown to play an Arab, you are in the process of being ignorant. PoC come in all shades, including shades that include White people. By painting yourself you aren't being more authentic, you are at best being insensitive, and at worse being racist. So, put down the dreadlock wig and the brown greasepaint.

A game or gaming culture that encourages face painting to portray the "other" is one that is unwelcoming to PoC.

*Stop Asking for Free Labor and Start Encouraging Designers of Color*

By the time you've read this article, at least one White person has signed up to a Larpers of Color group to ask the question, "Hey can someone check my game out and tell me if it's racist?"

PoC, whether they are larpers or not, tend to continually do this type of free labor. We will pour over scripts, manuals, art, and all game material to make sure there is one less accidentally or intentionally racist game in the world. Larpers of color want other PoC to larp, so very often no matter if we are busy, working on our own projects, tired, out of resources or just plain broke, we are checking and rechecking people's work all for a simple, "Thanks for the Help." Meanwhile the game receives some invisible shield, ("Hey, a POC said I could do it!") and the person of color barely gets a nod in the margins of the creation.

If we want to truly write expansive and diverse stories, then we must stop expecting people of color to do free backend labor and start inviting them to the planning in the first place. If you are going to write about radical werewolves from Mexico, maybe ask around and see if there's a Mexican larper who has had that idea and wants to collaborate and then pay them if you can. Or even better, do that and offer to mentor larp designers of color so we can create more expansive worlds. Instead of writing *about* PoC, provide a community which invites PoC to write about *themselves*.

Case in point, Abrihette Yawa's Intercon styled larp, *The Droid Auction* is based on the Afrofuturist mythology created by singer and actress Janelle Monae. Set in Monae's world of Metropolis, the players, many of whom were PoC, were charged with dealing with the death of Cindy Mayweather, a charismatic droid leader. The various factions played against and with each other using the dance, music, and a created mythos which included people of color. This game alone, brought me to Intercon, a larp convention that has been running for in the Northeast for the last 25 years. By its very existence and the creator behind it, I thought that the larp would be welcoming to me, and it was.

Once there, I found greater connections to other players of color who are now collaborators and friends. I felt so confident after the larp that the jacket I wore as a part of the Electro-Phi Betas (my faction) was the jacket I wore to Knutepunkt. That piece of ephemera gave me confidence to enter a space I was unfamiliar with.



*Truly Understand Oppression Play*

In Mo Holkar's excellent 2016 Solmukohta article *Larp and Prejudice: Expressing, Erasing, and Exploring the Fun Tax*, Holkar explains, "Larp designers who choose a real-world setting – historical or contemporary- are faced, whether they realize it or not, with a set of decisions about how to portray the social prejudices (based on gender, race, sexuality, class, age, etc.) of that setting." (Holkar, 2016) I agree with Holkar when he speaks later of the notion that players for whom these are actual marginalities in their real life may have some bleeding in when these are portrayed. This type of bleed is not fundamentally a problem. Writers however need to inform players beforehand and give them consent, and do their due diligence to actually understand how fundamental oppression is in PoC's daily lives.

Oppression play is not something to be engaged in lightly, especially if you plan to open larp to international audiences and invite PoC. You cannot just invent factions that call for racist stereotypes, and then say, "These aren't racist, we just wanted to introduce oppression play." One can't simply write a larp about the Western expansion in America and then conveniently tell players that people of color are available to play without understanding what oppression play around that entails. Trying to escape it by handwaving away racism, ends up erasing PoC and their histories as well.

If one is seeking to include oppression play that deals with racism against a group, it would behoove you to understand that oppression is never just on the surface, inside and outside of game. Oppression is physical and mental. It is all encompassing and suffocating. It is deadly even when it seems benign. Instead of trying to write about an oppression that you cannot grasp, instead ask a player of color to the table when you design.

For an example of this, see Kat Jones' excellent work when rewriting characters for the American run of *Just a Little Loving* (Edland & Grasmø, 2017). In reflecting the more diverse cast of the American run, Jones allowed players to play on their own race within the game which did not detract, but enhanced the setting and reflected the realities of living as a person of color in New York during the early aids crisis.

*Write for Your Own Communities*

Over the summer, I got the truly heart wrenching experience of playing Troels Ken Pedersen's *Gargantuan* (Pedersen, 2016). The work on the surface looks like

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a fun romp that combines steampunk and fantasy with Elves and Goblins at each other's throats. However, this is a roleplaying scenario that is much more. As you play, the racism and horror of this world begins to wash over you, and the strict game mastering drives you to the dark places of complacent racism that makes you see things in new ways.

The Game was not written for me, even though I played it with a certain fatalistic glee. The Game was ostensibly written for those well-meaning White people who do not truly get how deep and horrifying racism can be. As a scenario, it exists to me as one of the best ways White people can write within their own communities. In this Pedersen is not seeking to liberate PoC, but rather speak to his own community about the insidiousness of racism.

In designing larps meant for social justice, well-meaning White designers will write what they think is apt social commentary that includes PoC and seeks to liberate them. To this notion, I will put forth an activist saying that has been said by writers and activists of color from Audre Lorde to Augusto Boal: Liberate yourself.

Write games that explore racism within Whiteness. Write Games that explore prejudice within Whiteness. I would rather see a million games about White feminism and its lack of intersectionality than see another fantasy parable about racism that is directed toward "freeing" people of color and "seeing the other side". How can you see the other side when you haven't investigated your own yet?

### *We are Not a Monolith*

People of Color are not one massive group that agrees on everything. In fact, I hope some disagree with me, as surely I have disagreed with them. People of Color are not a monolith. It is impossible to get a rubber stamp of "not racist" on any of your games even if you consult a PoC. Latinx, Black, Middle Eastern, Indigenous, and Asian diasporas are massive, and though some may overlap, they can't wholly speak for each other. I cite my Blackness, but that Blackness itself is specific to a context of the Black diaspora and to the Black American diaspora. It can inform generally about the struggles of PoC, but it cannot be used to rubber stamp your portrayal of Chinese people in the Western expansion.

*Listen*

Let's try and assume the best intentions, and listen. If PoC can continually try to see missteps as non-malicious, then the folks who make those missteps can at least listen. Being informed that something you've done is racist is not actually the worst thing that can happen to you. Having someone say, "Hey, this thing you designed is racist," is not the worst thing that could happen. Refusing to listen and becoming defensive is much worse, and even then, one can come back from this by listening and understanding. If someone is talking to you about cultural appropriation, it is not actually going to help you by talking about how people dress up as Scandinavians. Theoretically there were PoC in Viking dress, as the Vikings were a people who traveled widely and intermingled with others. That's plausible. You needing to put on greasepaint in a Wild West larp for "accuracy" is not.

Listen to PoC when they tell you that something is not okay. Listen to PoC when they tell you they are uncomfortable. Reach out hands to players of color. The moment you stop listening, larp stops growing.

When People of Color Come to the Table We All Benefit Imagine a larp written based on Chinese Wuxia films and steampunk aesthetics set in San Francisco in 1910. Imagine a larp based on the Nautch girls in Lucknow, India who fought against the British Raj by creating a matriarchal system that bypasses inheritance laws. Imagine a larp created by PoC that explores the heights and joys of being alive and living with freedom. These are not far flung ideas.

As larp grows we need to realize that we are at a turning point. If we design intersectionally, and are inclusive and supportive of people of color, we can truly allow larp to grow beyond a hobby for some, and blossom into strong liberational and exploratory tool for all. Encourage players of color to come to larps, encourage them to write. If you are a PoC, reach out to other players and designers, and do not be afraid to speak up when you see injustice. We deserve to create ourselves just as much as anyone, and it is a necessary and revolutionary act to do so.

When people of color are invited to the table we are bringing vast amounts of new thoughts, ideas, and growth. To go global, to be international, we must realize that people of color exist and are here to play. We deserve to find the doors to Narnia, to duel at dawn in Regency garb, to bash back with foam shields as Elves, to bring Bruja magic to your wizarding schools, to see ourselves

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as whole and valued members of an ever-growing international community. When you invite us to the table, you are inviting the world to play. To this we say from the table that we can all share, “Skål!”

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*Nauí Ocelotl. Aswahi Warrior, played by Ruben Garcia in Dying Kingdoms. Due to the way Dying Kingdoms allows players to co-create “cultures”, players of color are supported and often feel welcomed when playing within their own culture and others. Photo by the author.*

