
Editor's Introduction

'And the walls became the world all around': An introduction

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This special issue got its start in Kalamazoo's Bell's Brewery, when Eileen Joy – whom I'd just met – dared me to come up with a BABEL-sponsored session entitled, 'What a World!' It was a challenge I happily accepted, and I immediately set out to find a viable and urgent topic. The idea of a session focused on medieval world-building quickly materialized, and I eventually sent out the following session description:

The session seeks to explore worlds built through varying states of incredulity, wonder, a desire to control and contextualize, or even built out of nostalgia and/or a desire to escape (however briefly) one's own circumstances – from the translocated Holy Land of the mystery cycle plays, to the worlds encountered through chronicles, histories, and travel narratives, to the landscapes and cultures of Arthurian romance. How might the concept of 'world-building' invite fresh considerations of medieval literature? How does it simultaneously reflect the desires authors have to create something new even as they (or their texts) admit the impossibilities of such projects? To what extent do engendered worlds

allow and invite contemplation upon the many ways in which humans, as readers and receivers of texts, ineffably participate in this process of creation?

A year later, I found myself fortunate enough to have gathered seven vibrant speakers, each of whom took up the themes and investments of the session with tremendous care. The papers spoke to one another so beautifully that a special issue quickly took shape, and the articles that you have in this volume are the product of a long process of expanding and re-envisioning the ideas that germinated in our initial 2014 session and its ensuing Q&A. I am inordinately grateful to Eileen for taking a bold chance on – at the time – an early career adjunct professor, and to both Myra Seaman and Lara Farina for their constant support, encouragement, and advice as we’ve moved to the finish line. I also want to thank the inimitable authors of the articles in this issue and the anonymous reviewers who, through their keen attention and generosity, modeled the kind of humane and rigorous feedback we all hope to receive when we send our work out into the world. Special thanks are also due both to Mary Kate Hurley and Asa Simon Mittman for their astute insights and feedback on this introduction, and to Cord Whitaker, Dorothy Kim, and Jonathan Hsy for their sage advice on how to shepherd this issue to publication.

About a year after the ‘What a World!’ session had taken place, I found myself curled up in bed reading *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (Johnson, [1955] 2015) and *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, [1964] 2012) to my daughter. As I turned the pages, I couldn’t help but notice a common theme: a little boy finds himself dissatisfied with his world and decides to build a more pleasing one. In both instances, their endeavors nearly backfire. Max finds himself surrounded by terrifying beasts who very much want to eat him. Harold nearly drowns and falls to his death as he, quite literally, draws a world around him with his purple crayon. Both, however, acquire agency over their imagined worlds. Max gains mastery over the Wild Things and becomes their king, and Harold ingeniously draws his way out of every disaster he accidentally creates for himself. Eventually though, both grow tired of the worlds they’ve conjured and return to the safety of their bedrooms. Max travels back the way he came: ‘in and out of weeks and through a day and into the night of his very own room’ (with supper set aside for him by his presumably long-suffering mother). Harold’s homecoming is, however, more unsettling and uncanny. He cannot find his room after journeying far and wide and drawing his world into being, but he arrives there by remembering that his window always encases the moon. Picking up his trusty crayon once again, he draws his bedroom window and bed and curls up into it for a good night’s sleep. The end of *Harold*, then, gently but emphatically suggests that the act of world-creation is not as easily disentangled from our movements through the ‘real’ world as we might want to think. Admittedly, there is much that has been and should be said about the gendered implications



of these kinds of stories (i.e. the tendency for such stories to center the experience of cisgender white boys, for instance, and the rate at which said boys are actively encouraged to be agentic builders of their worlds in ways that cisgender girls, children of color, and LGBTQIA children are not). At their core, though, these stories reveal a desire to encourage imaginative world-creation in children from a very young age. These books invite their readers and listeners, however tacitly, to imagine possible worlds of their own and to create them in whatever way they can.

Norman Holland, John Tooby, Lena Cosmides, and others have observed that humans seem to have a distinct ability for this kind of ‘sub-creation’¹ and are encouraged to create in this way from a strikingly early age, so much so that one is hard pressed to find a culture that does not exhibit an investment in types and forms of imaginative world-building (Wolf, 2012, 3–6). We have always been world-builders, it would seem. Tooby and Cosmides, in particular, argue that humans are not only able to create these worlds but to distinguish them from ‘the real’ through a process of ‘decoupling’ (Cosmides and Tooby, 2000). This process is, incidentally, what Max in *Where the Wild Things Are* seems to enact in the closing pages of the book, but what *Harold and the Purple Crayon* pointedly resists and thwarts.

Karen Barad, in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, offers – however indirectly – a complication of this process of ‘mattering’ that I think is helpful to an understanding of world-building and its affective and agentic power. In her theory of agentic realism, ‘the primary ontological units are not “things” but phenomena,’ which she defines as ‘dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations of the world’ (Barad, 2007, 141). Rather than being mere results of human-engineered experiments or, in the case of this special issue, acts of imaginative creation, phenomena are, she argues, ‘different patterns of mattering [...] produced through complex agential intra-actions of multiple material-discursive practices or apparatuses of bodily production’ (Barad, 2007, 140). Her neologism ‘intra-action’ signals the ‘entanglement’ of various agencies (rather than ‘interaction,’ which, as she points out, suggests inherent separations). In her formulation, then, the act of observing and of making meaning out of phenomena does result in a ‘cut’ that allows the observer to gain knowledge about what they are observing and encountering, but that cut is merely temporary or artificial (Barad, 2007, 175). By acknowledging the simultaneous necessity and ephemerality of these agentic cuts, then, she asks us to see that ‘we are not outside observers of the world’ nor ‘are we simply located at particular places *in* the world;’ we are, rather, ‘part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity’ (Barad, 2007, 184). Her theory of entanglement thus offers a compelling complication to the tidy, and perhaps comforting, division of creator and created apparatus, of observer and observed object. Barad’s work is particularly useful as we consider acts of world-building because it allows us to see created worlds not only as contained units under the

1 This is Tolkien’s term for world-building accomplished by drawing on pre-existing ideas, phenomena, etc. ([1947] 2000, 41–42).

mastery of a distinct creator (and/or under the mastery of an observing audience) but as agentic objects that matter in a distinctly verbal sense. In other words, constructed worlds might be created entities/objects, but they can and do take on lives of their own and have the capacity to enact palpable changes in their surroundings. The mattering of these engendered worlds, both medieval and modern, can have tremendous consequences, especially when aspirational, imagined worlds actively encourage the diminution or erasure of whole peoples, cultures, and religions. Considering the agentic potential of aspirational worlds engendered through acts of sub-creation, then, becomes a matter of ethics, and the ethical stakes at work here lie at the heart of this volume's purpose. Each of the articles presented here, while distinct in their approach to world-building in medieval literature, addresses the study of world-building as a particularly urgent one – one that can amplify our knowledge and understanding not only of medieval literature and culture but also of our current moment. Moreover, as Valerie Johnson suggests, theories of sub-creation and world-building can change for the better the way we approach the medieval in our classrooms.

Oz and other sub-creations

'Oh what a world, what a world! Who would have thought a good little girl like you could destroy my beautiful wickedness?!' (Fleming, 1939, 2013). So screams the Wicked Witch of the West after Dorothy splashes water on her in the film *The Wizard of Oz*. The whole film, in a way, reflects upon matters of perspective, of thwarted or exceeded expectations, of not quite believing your eyes or trusting what you see, of creating contexts for experiences you never could have anticipated. The witch's final interaction with Dorothy is a moment in which Dorothy's existence and perseverance destroys the villain; yet it also may be read as a moment in which the witch melts not in spite of but *because of* her inability to imagine a world in which both she and Dorothy could exist. While the gist of this line accords with the final words the witch speaks in Baum's novel ('I have been wicked in my day, but I never thought a little girl like you would ever be able to melt me and end my wicked deeds' Baum, 2000, 225), the phrase 'What a world!' is original to the film, and invites meta-commentary. It calls us, as viewers and readers, to wonder along with the witch about the possibilities and exigencies of this engendered world. In this sense, the phrase 'What a world!' becomes as much an invitation to engage critically as it becomes a statement of wonder (or, at least for the witch, horror).

World-building is often both a response and a rejection, an act born out of a desire to create something different from – or at least in direct reaction to – what



one already perceives to exist in the world.² In this sense, it is the praxis of desire. Frank L. Baum, in creating the landscape and world of Oz, sought first and foremost to create a distinctly American fairytale, but he was also, according to Edward Wagenknecht, invested in teaching children ‘to look for the element of wonder in the life around them, to realize that even smoke and machinery may be transformed into fairy lore if only we have sufficient energy and vision to penetrate to their significance and transform them to our use’ (qtd. in Baum, 2000, xlix). In other words, Baum’s is an agentic world that continuously inspires its readers towards acts of transformation and sub-creation. Dorothy finds herself transported from the bleak and colorless world of the prairie – where ‘the sun had baked the plowed land into a gray mass’ – to a world of impossibly vibrant color, where ‘lovely patches of green sward [lay] all about, with stately trees bearing rich and luscious fruits’ (Baum, 2000, 18 and 34). Baum describes her, moreover, as being in a state of total wonder over her surroundings, captivated by their newness and – as we saw with both Max and Harold – mesmerized by their uncanniness. Dorothy’s story, not unlike Max’s and Harold’s, is a story about gaining mastery and control over a strange and perilous realm. And in doing so she seems to learn – or at least retain – the depth of her love and desire for the real: for home. As she explains to the scarecrow: ‘No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There is no place like home’ (Baum, 2000, 75–76). Dorothy, all throughout her marvelous journeying, never loses that seeming ability to ‘decouple’ the glittering world of Oz from the world she knows on the prairie; she dreams and longs for home with marked consistency, and in the final sentence of the book, she exclaims that ‘it is good to be home!’ And yet, it is certainly possible to interpret her journey as one inflected by only the perceived ability at decoupling. As the 1939 film suggests, for instance, the people she lives with in Kansas bear a striking and uncanny resemblance to several of the creatures she encounters in Oz (they are even played by the same actors). And so, in the closing moments of the film – when the color shifts back to sepia, and Dorothy wakes up from a purported dream – we are invited to consider the possibility that Dorothy, due to her imaginative journeying, might be able to do exactly what Baum had hoped to inspire in his child-readers: to perceive the beguiling nature of their surroundings anew and so transform them.

World-creation in this sense is a seemingly benign act of capacious imagination, but it is crucial to acknowledge – as I suggest above, and as the articles in this issue demonstrate with aplomb – the potential for harm in such endeavors. If we understand the worlds created in this way as ultimately agentic and therefore capable of affecting their own surroundings once created, then it is crucial to take seriously the things that they perpetuate. This power of sub-creation is something J.R.R. Tolkien acknowledged with incredible seriousness. In his essay ‘On Fairy Stories,’ he resists Coleridge’s idea that readers, in order to

2 See Wolf (2012, 16–64), Goodman (1978), Ryan (2001), and Cheah (2016).

engage with a work of fiction, need to achieve a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ and, instead, argues that what an effective work of fiction requires is the ability to instill in readers a sense of ‘secondary belief’ in the imagined world they encounter (Tolkien, [1947] 2014, 52). As Mark Wolf observes, Tolkien coined the terms ‘sub-creation’ and ‘sub-created world’ because of an awareness of how much overlap exists when using terms such as ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ (Wolf, 2012, 23–24). What is more, with these terms he sought to acknowledge the fact that sub-creating authors, as they build their imagined worlds, are always already relying on pre-existing concepts:

When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter’s power – upon one plane; and the desire to wield that power in the world external to our minds awakes. It does not follow that we shall use that power well upon any plane. We may put a deadly green on a man’s face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm. But in such ‘fantasy’, as it is called, new form is made; Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator. (Tolkien, [1947] 2014, 41–42)

But as Christine Chism has offered, Tolkien himself came to know all too well that sub-creation – both as an action and as the product itself – can have an underbelly. She observes that he ‘questioned the work of created mythologies with a particularly self-consuming intensity during and after the war,’ arguing that he

came to scrutinize his own world-creating enterprise because he had before him a parallel spectacle of world-creation gone wrong – in National Socialist Germany. Tolkien’s wartime investigation of the uses of fantasy is driven by the realization that mythmaking is not innocent, that it can become a killing tool: most dramatically in the National Socialist politicization of art, fetishization of symbols, and cannibalization of medieval narratives and histories into pseudo-historical racialist mythologies. (Chism, 2003, 63–64)

Much of the discomfort and concern for Tolkien seems to have come from the degree to which the Nazis and Nazi-sympathizers sought to appropriate Nordic/Germanic legends (to which Tolkien was deeply attached, and which were the source of much of his sub-creations) for their own racialized and genocidal ends. Chism sees Tolkien’s treatment of the Ring – that ‘instrument of dominion and death’ – as a Benjamin-esque antidote to the ravaging and ‘polluting’ powers of National Socialist mythologizing, because in making it an ‘empty allegory of the will to power,’ Tolkien offers a rejection of this kind of dangerous, ideological mythologizing (Chism, 2003, 80).



But while Tolkien rejected Nazism vociferously, especially in terms of its devastating, racialized myth-making, he still seemed to insist on the inherent nobility, even exceptionalism, of the North/Northern peoples. As E. R. Truitt observes, ‘there is nothing inherently racist about enthusiasm for the Vikings’ or the North more generally, but

ever since the 19th and early 20th centuries, the idea of ‘northernness’ that is so central to white supremacy has become an inextricable element of our Fantasy North. Many white supremacists view ‘the Nordic race’ as exemplary of white racial purity, and defend a fantasy of authentic whiteness in the guise of protecting cultural heritage. Nativist groups have grown more prominent on the far right throughout Europe and the US. Emblazoned in runes, organising under names such as the Aryan Brotherhood or the White Order of Thule, their members recite the slogans ‘Mass Immigration – Genocide of White Nations’ and ‘Diversity Is A Code Word for White Genocide’. (Truitt, 2016, ‘Fantasy North,’ n.p.)

The degree to which a kind of whiteness is privileged in *The Lord of the Rings* should certainly give us pause as a result, especially since Tolkien despised Hitler and his ilk because of their ‘[r]uining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble northern spirit, *a supreme contribution to Europe*’ (Tolkien, 2000, 55–56, emphasis mine). Tolkien seems to have held the Northmen as exceptional, but recoiled at the way in which such exceptionalism could be used to violent ends. This is crucial to keep in mind in the present, especially given the frequency with which white supremacists invoke *The Lord of the Rings* as a text that supports their worldview.³ This fact would certainly have appalled Tolkien were he alive to be aware of it, and yet it also points to the discomfiting possibility that, in drawing on the very same materials as the Nazis did for their own myth-making, Tolkien was only able to partially disinfect his narrative from the downright dangerous interpretive possibilities that might rise from his sub-creations. By focusing on and privileging the very cultures and types of peoples looked at so longingly by the Nazis, in other words, Tolkien could not, in the end, prevent a good many readers from taking his works as a tacit (or even explicit) glorification of a world dominated and controlled by white peoples. Many have pointed out that Tolkien’s world is diverse, and that the fellowship, in being comprised of various races and peoples (some of whom, like the elves and the dwarves, historically dislike and distrust one another) signals his anti-racism or cosmopolitanism.⁴ And yet, at the end of the day, there exist deep-seated limits on the so-called inclusivity of Tolkien’s sub-creation. If Middle Earth were a world made truly inclusive, for instance, why the lack of Orcs and Haradrim at the council in Rivendell? Why the exclusive centering and association of whiteness with martial and moral superiority? As Helen Young argues, while Tolkien might have been naturally drawn to the contours of a mythologized Europe, the privileging of Europe in

3 Stormfront has a vast forum dedicated to exactly this topic (*Stormfront Forum*, 2001–2017). Moreover, certain characters and tropes are used by contemporary white supremacists in dog-whistle rhetoric (e.g. Wormtongue). See, for example, Axe of Perun (2016).

4 See, for instance, Chance (2005, 173).



tandem with ‘the kind of racial thinking that imbue[s]’ Tolkien’s works becomes

much more troubling because [it resonates] with the political and power structures which have shaped the world historically in the past several centuries. Linking geography with race-thinking turns [his] works from Europe-centred, to eurocentric [...]. If [his] worlds reflect the socio-cultural contexts in which they were produced, it is their reception that has made them more than just historical artifacts. (Young, 2016, 30)

Because the basic structure of Tolkien’s created world is influenced not only by medieval literature but by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories about race (Young, 2016, 35–6), any efforts on Tolkien’s part to confront the dangerous mythologizing in his contemporary midst was limited by his insistence on centering only the stories of the fair-skinned characters and peoples. It is entirely possible, in other words, for world-builders – even those who, like Tolkien, seemed to have been deeply concerned and invested in avoiding the potential ethical problems of sub-creation – to overlook or fail to see the potential dangers of the worlds that they create. Chism observes powerfully at the end of her article that Tolkien’s world, because it resists facile allegory (in favor of viewing Middle Earth as a ‘key’ to contemporary events), allows readers across generations and ages the ability to see their own world made anew in its pages. The fantasy world, as she puts it, ‘bleeds into the external world in a way that is wonderfully undetermined and provocative’ (Chism, 2003, 88). I would add to this assertion by pointing out that this bleeding into the now is an ambivalent phenomenon. One can absolutely, to expand on her analogies, see a glimpse of Steve Bannon in Saruman, but one can also – and all too easily – see in Middle-Earth a space in which an ‘inherent’ white superiority is assumed and eventually realized.

It is vital, then, to attend to the matters of sub-creation and world-building with care and scrutiny, especially given our current moment and its startling exigencies. The white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville on August 12, 2017 were absolutely clear on the world they want to build, after all. Their insistence on a mythologized white medieval past, and their desire to see it realized in the now has given many of us pause, and has spurred a number of us to action in our classrooms, scholarship, and public writing and advocacy – and



for good reason, because we, as concerned medievalists, know all too well how dangerous these ideologies are, how quickly they lead to actual violence.⁵

Though they were conceptualized and written before the 2016 election and the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, the articles included in this volume do crucially apt work by drawing our attention to the power of aspirational world-building both in the medieval past and in our present moment. They are diverse in their offerings, but they all provide keen and urgent studies of the act of sub-creation and the instrumental potential of imagined, sub-created worlds. Three of the four articles center their attention on medieval world-creation, demonstrating vividly that the impulse towards aspirational world-building in the now is linked in forceful ways with the distant past. Asa Simon Mittman’s article ‘England is the World and the World is England’ offers a luminous reading of the Hereford Map as a world-building enterprise, and his reading of the map connects both the sub-creation of the mapmaker and the world-building endeavors of the medieval English church. As he suggests, there exist distinct and urgent links between the map’s images of Jews and its depiction of Britain, reflecting the anti-Jewish rhetoric that ‘acted as a necessary predicate to the expulsion.’ In his formulation, by insisting on a world in which the Jews ultimately are effaced, the Hereford map participates directly in the aspirational world-building at work in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England. His article, as a result, draws particular attention to the ways in which imagined and actual worlds are frequently made to elide, and his analysis is made all the more urgent by the fact that the anti-Semitic world-building at work in medieval England remains an ongoing, pernicious fantasy.⁶

Chris Taylor’s article, ‘The World According to Herod,’ offers a compelling reading of world creation in the medieval cycle plays. In focusing on the figure of Herod – both in the medieval pageant plays and in Zora Neale Hurston’s unpublished novel – he offers a cross-temporal examination of world-building predicated on the construction and enduring legacy of Herod as a literary figure and trope. In his formulation, the world that Herod seeks to build is only ‘an aspirational one, nothing more than a fantasized vision of secularism that doesn’t actually exist (or one that is mutually exclusive with the possibility of a Christian world).’ In comparatively examining both the cycle play depictions of Herod and Hurston’s attempts to rescue him from the seeming ravages of history, Taylor asks us to ‘more carefully consider the stakes of staging speculative history, in general, and of positioning Herod at such well-worn crossroads, in particular: Rome and Israel, East and West, Old Law and New, biography and fiction, secular and the sacred.’

Paul Megna’s essay, ‘Chaucerian Parrhesia: World-Building and Truth-Telling in *The Canterbury Tales* and “Lak of Stedfastnesse,”’ examines Chaucer’s aspirational world-building. Arguing that Chaucer persistently meditated upon *parrhesia* (candid, or forthright speech), he offers a reading of three of *The Canterbury Tales* – *The Second Nun’s Tale*, *The Tale of Melibee*, and *The*

5 See, among others, Kim (2017), Perry (2017), Livingstone (2017), and the series on race from *The Public Medievalist* (2017).

6 The marchers at Charlottesville, though they claimed to defend the statue of Robert E. Lee – itself an artifact of Jim-Crow era sub-creation – chanted ‘Blood and Soil!’ and ‘Jews will not replace us!’, the former of which is a translated Nazi slogan (‘Blut und Boden!’) from a time in which anti-Semitic world-building was given its most virulent expression. See Kiernan (2007, 418) and Neiwert (2017).



Manciple's Tale. He argues that Chaucer's desire to build imagined worlds is 'held together by desire for and anxiety about *parrhesia*,' and he detects a 'quasi-parrhesiastic utterance' in 'Lak of Stedfastnesse,' which compellingly suggests that Chaucer may not have always been the 'non-polemical' ironist many have claimed him to be. Megna's essay provides a keen study of the possibly co-productive nature of imagined and actual worlds in Chaucer's works, offering numerous examples of how Chaucer's meditations on – and potential usage of – *parrhesia* reveal a desire both to build imagined worlds and to make his own world anew.

Finally, Valerie B. Johnson's article, 'Engineering *Beowulf*: World-Building in a Multimodal Composition Classroom,' extends our discussion of world-building and its instrumental effects to the realm of pedagogy. She contends that a combination of multi-modal and world-building techniques, when introduced and implemented in writing-intensive courses focused on medieval literature, have the capacity to deepen students' investment in their own writing, especially as they encounter materials and worlds from the distant past. Johnson also suggests that we reconceive the classroom as an act of world-building, with the teacher and the students as the primary and secondary sub-creators. Doing so, she argues, transforms the classroom into a space of active and collaborative creation, and this transformation stands to benefit both educators and students alike.

These contributions, together with Christine Chism's review essay, collectively ruminate on the ways in which medieval authors, contemporary authors, and educators alike work to build and refashion the worlds around them through conspicuous acts of sub-creation. Our hope is that this special issue will encourage renewed attention not only to the processes through which medieval (and modern) authors seek to build aspirational worlds, but also to the ways in which their created worlds are ever intertwined with and capable of influencing the worlds through which their creators move – for better or for worse. For literature, as Pheng Cheah observes so well, is never 'merely superstructural. It is instead an inexhaustible resource for reworlding and remaking the degraded world' (Cheah, 2016, 186). And in that spirit, we offer here an array of arguments and readings that, we hope, will invite reflections on the ethical stakes at play in the aspirational worlds we humans are inclined to create. After all, as Harold and Max discovered at the end of their respective stories, our monster-filled worlds are, in fact, ones of our own making, and the ability to escape or transform them hinges, in no small part, in the pens (or crayons) we choose to wield, and in the aspirations we either reject or uphold.



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