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The Embodiment of Collective Exclusion: Transcending the Borders of Social Segregation in *Harry Potter*

-Alyssa Hunziker

J.K. Rowling's series, *Harry Potter*, centers on a young wizard who enters into the wizarding world at the age of eleven, unaware of the various social boundaries that divide the magical and non-magical worlds. Ethnically, wizards and non-magical humans (muggles) are shown to have divergent cultural practices, and are further statutorily separated by the Ministry of Magic's Statute of Secrecy, which outlaws any wizard from performing magical acts in the presence of non-magical humans. In addition to this division of the human race into two separate communities, the human characters in the wizarding world are shown to be further divided by issues of blood status and family lineage, and interschool house affiliation. Kate E. Behr describes the relationship between the magical world of Rowling's text and muggle realm for which she writes, stating that in the novels "mundane elements of life—bureaucracy, tradition, becoming independently mobile—are renewed when re-presented via the wizarding world" (Behr 123). With Harry, a magical human, as the reader's entry into the wizarding world, the racial, ethnic, and cultural differences between magical creatures and magical humans can often be forgotten. Rowling uses the issue of blood status and species difference as a means through which she can comfortably discuss race relations, as many of the racial issues present in her novels are removed from real-world contemporary conflict. Through the distinct categories of exclusion set up throughout the series, the text argues that constructed communities can be dangerous if they begin creating artificial borders between societies and are used as tools of oppression—in other words, when these communities go from being inclusive to being exclusive. Because the series features its characters' socio-economic, racial, and ideological differences and, according to Jackie C. Horne, showcases "four types of racial other"—"evil other; dangerous but used other; enslaved other; and separatist other"—Harry's status crosses these boundaries as he is a victim of exclusion (as a result of his status as orphan, his muggle upbringing, muggle-born mother, and his often ridiculed ability to speak parseltongue), and is also an effectively assimilated (or included) member of the hegemonic white wizarding society by virtue of his celebrity (Horne 89). Rather than isolating himself from those surrounding him, Harry chooses to assimilate into the dominant culture by fulfilling the role of "the Chosen One," though he uses this assimilation as a means to revolutionize wizarding society in order to establish a regime of acceptance of all magical and non-magical beings. Ultimately, Rowling's distinctly divided communities serve to complicate the ways in which the wizarding world views difference as each of these divisions spawns further separations within each group.

One of the more obvious ways Rowling discusses issues of race and racial oppression in the series, is through the status of magical creatures in relation to magical humans. Language and autonomy in language are particularly important for species such as house elves, goblins, and trolls, who are the most loathed of all loathed magical creatures in the text. House elves, who function as Horne's "enslaved other" as they are forced to serve a single wizard family for the duration of their lives, are the cast as the most assimilating race and therefore the most explicitly enslaved magical creature in Rowling's world (Horne 89). Despite the fact that they possess magic that is even more powerful than wizards', they do not question the human-run Ministry of Magic's decree that "no non-human creature is permitted to carry or use as wand" (*Goblet of Fire* 132). In addition, the house elves are so

fully entrenched in the dominant culture's rhetoric that they knowingly and compulsively punish themselves for acting outside of their masters' orders without having been told to do so. When discussing the house-elves' representation, Horne references the works of "Farah Mendlesohn, Elaine Ostry, and Brycchan Carey [who] all point out [that]...Rowling's depiction of Dobby and his fellow elves contains uncomfortable echoes of many of the stereotypes held by whites of enslaved African Americans" (Horne 80-81). Thus their subjugation is shown to be even more fully orchestrated than one might imagine, and it is through this caricature of complacency that Rowling asks her reader to question the ways in which institutionalized slavery can affect both the enslaved and the enslaver. While other magical creatures, such as trolls, are culturally misunderstood by wizards who state that "anyone can speak Troll...all you have to do is point and grunt," and goblins are seen as untrustworthy creatures whose language, "Gobbledegook," is implied to be nonsensical because of its dissimilarity to the English language, house-elves are not even identified as having their own language (*Goblet of Fire*). By contrast, house-elves speak broken, accented English, which serves as a symbol of their subjugation by hegemonic society, while continuing to highlight house-elves' stark difference from magical humans. Ironically, it is Dobby who speaks most clearly about house-elf enslavement, and does so without a hint of broken or accented language. He describes house-elves as "the lowly, the enslaved, [the] dregs of the magical world," and therefore points out the ways in which the master race's rhetoric can be used in a subversive way in order to address the inequalities house-elves face. In so doing, Dobby forces both the reader, and Harry, someone who is born into the hegemonic dominant class, to read this moment as one in which the house-elf transcends his usual role as a comedic figure in order to decry the effects of institutionalized slavery.

Despite their closer connection to the human race, half-human species, such as centaurs, half giants, and werewolves, are stigmatized even more than their distinctly nonhuman counterparts. Hagrid's large and "wild" appearance stems mainly from his giantess mother's side of the family, and Hagrid is often described as looking "simply too big to be allowed" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 14). This distinction of "allowance" is particularly interesting in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, when Professor Umbridge tells the centaurs that they "live [in the Forbidden Forest] only because the Ministry of Magic permits [them] certain areas of land" (*Order of the Phoenix* 754-755). The caging of both the centaurs in the forbidden forest and the giants in the mountains is eerily reminiscent of concentration camps, and as centaurs at the very least are shown to be an ancient, well developed people, it seems that the necessity to cage them is the result of some misguided, perceived threat to wizards. Ultimately, the magical creatures in the novels are depicted as subservient to wizards, as they are regulated by the Ministry of Magic's Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, and are therefore segregated from human society. Thus, wizards are depicted as the enforcers of exclusivity as they attempt to dominate and control magical beings. Even so, unlike the house-elves who are supposedly complicit in their subjugation, the centaurs are noticeably contemptuous of other magical creatures, and often claim to possess a higher level of intelligence than both the other creatures who inhabit the Forbidden Forest, and the humans who trap them within the Forest itself. Interestingly, Rowling is unclear about whether the centaurs' self-worth stems from a similarly institutionalized form of exclusion. In the same way that wizards are shown to attack members of their own species, such as muggles and squibs (non-magical humans born to magical parents), the centaurs of the Forbidden Forest attack Firenze for helping Harry and remove him from their pack when he begins interacting with wizards, suggesting that

centaur culture operates with a similar bent towards exclusivity. In this way, Rowling seeks to further complicate the divide between magical creatures and magical humans by demonstrating that exclusionary practices exist both within the community of magical creatures and half-humans, as well as within a unified, insular culture, such as that of the centaurs.

This division of racialized communities is echoed by divisions within the human race. Throughout the series, Rowling's text struggles with the idea of normalcy among its human characters as each side of the human race, both magical and muggle, have different criteria for evaluating what is and is not normal. Despite Horne's claim that "no Muggles speak of their oppression, oblivious as they are of it," Rowling very quickly presents readers with a pair of muggles who are aware of their oppression—Vernon and Petunia Dursley (Horne 93). Through these characters, the text is able to invert the cycle of oppression established later in the series whereby magical humans seek to dominate their non-magical counterparts, as the Dursleys' treatment of their nephew, Harry, is notably abusive. Early in the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry's rigidly, though oft comically, evil aunt and uncle define themselves as being "very normal, thank you very much" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 1). In this way, they instantly set themselves apart from the wizarding community, which they know about even earlier than Harry does through their "[shameful]" familial ties to Harry's mother (*Chamber of Secrets* 4). Wizard "abnormality" is ultimately defined in the ethnic and cultural differences between wizards and muggles, particularly through the former's lack of "normal clothes" and differing terminology (*Chamber of Secrets* 2, *Goblet of Fire* 40). Even this difference in lexicon is so disparate that muggles and wizards seem to speak two separate languages, as one can often not understand the other, signifying that the difference between these two human groups is strained in a similar way to the divides that exist between magical creatures and magical humans.

While Harry does not view the Dursleys as a representation of all muggles, the magical humans in the series are nonetheless portrayed as being as prejudiced as the Dursleys when it comes to the idea of a universal standard of normalcy among all human figures. Behr asserts that "Rowling shows us wizards treating Muggles much as the colonialists treated the natives...[as] intolerance, snobbery and ethnic hatred—all commonplaces of our Muggle world—are reproduced inside the Harry Potter series via wizard-muggle relations along socio-economic lines" (Behr 125). Thus, while the Dursleys may reinforce their own perception of wizards' cultural "abnormality," wizards are shown to be just as discriminatory against their non-magical counterparts. When Dumbledore initially leaves the infant Harry at the Dursleys' doorstep, Minerva McGonagall, a witch, argues that the child should be kept by a wizarding family because "[one] couldn't find two people less like [wizards]" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 13). Even muggle-tolerant wizards are shown to have a complicated relationship to non-magical culture as Arthur Weasley, a character who is often ridiculed in the wizarding world for his interests in non-magical humans, is shown to be fairly unknowledgeable about typical muggle customs. While he expresses a true fascination with the workings of telephones, cars, and electric fireplaces, his engagement with non-magical humans seems to verge on the wizarding world's version of Orientalism. Even worse, perhaps, is Hagrid's assertion that it was Harry's "bad luck [he] grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles [he] ever laid eyes on" (53). Through this statement, Hagrid implies that the unjust, serventile treatment with which Harry grows up is not a result of individual cruelty, but is a result of some shared vindictive spirit possessed by all magicless humans.

This prejudice, it seems, is purposely instilled by the Ministry of Magic's Statute of Secrecy, which seeks to limit all magical and muggle interaction as a precaution to the magical communities. In this respect, the magical community exists in a state of invisibility from muggles so as to avoid the same persecution that their ancestors experienced in Salem. Similarly, despite the fact that non-magical humans are unaware of their exclusion from the magical world, they too have been segregated from wizarding kind, a point which is reinforced by the text's magical children who are often unaware of muggle customs, geography, and government. In essence, Rowling's depiction of exclusivity within the non-magical and magical human communities demonstrates that, despite their distinct differences, these two communities can be united through a shared space of exclusion.

Rowling attempts to further complicate issues of racial difference and racial oppression in her series by reinterpreting racism through dichotomies based on blood-status rather than on skin color. Among Harry's peers, it is not phenotypes that cause the characters to treat one another differently, but blood status—something that cannot be seen and can only be determined by cultural difference. In establishing this internal racial dichotomy, Rowling rarely mentions the marginal characters descended from colonial backgrounds, but instead mentions those of a supposed 'lesser' blood status, who often belong to white hegemonic society. Lee Jordan, for example, is described only as "a boy with dreadlocks," and Dean Thomas is only briefly described as "a black boy even taller than Ron" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 94, 122). Similarly, Padma and Parvati Patil, who are assumedly of South Asian descent, are only described by their hairstyling, their relationship as twins, and their fame for being the "two best-looking girls in the year" (*Goblet of Fire* 411). Rowling's brief, and often nonexistent, descriptions of these marginal characters lie in contrast to the oft-repeated descriptions of white-muggle born characters with the derogatory term "mud-blood" (*Chamber of Secrets* 112). Ultimately, the First and Second Wizarding Wars derive from Lord Voldemort's quest to rid the world of all magical beings who are "unworthy to study magic" (151). The idea held by many, but not all, pureblood characters that muggleborns are "filthy," "dirty...[and] common" is a nonphysical way for Rowling to discuss contemporary race relations within the wizarding world. Ultimately, even the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, "[places] too much importance on the so-called purity of blood" rather than instead "[recognizing] that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be" (706). This message becomes especially salient when considering the differences between Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter, who each inhabit a similar status as excluded figures and operate within their own exclusion in varying ways.

While the Triwizard Tournament highlights the cultural divisions that exist within the overall structure of wizard society, the magical community is also revealed to be domestically divided even within the confines of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Because of his initial contact with Slytherin Draco Malfoy, as well as both Hagrid and Ron's assertion that "there's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't a Slytherin," it comes as no surprise that Harry begs the Sorting Hat to place him in any house other than Slytherin. However, just moments before the sorting, Harry is fearful that he will not be placed in any house at all and wishes "the hat had mentioned a house for people who felt a bit queasy" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 119). In effect, Harry feels that it would ultimately be worse to be placed in Slytherin than it would to belong to no house at all. Throughout the series, inter-house competition goes beyond friendly rivalries and often leads to exclusionary behaviors. While each house's dormitories and common rooms are established to give

students a shared space in which they can interact amongst their peers, the fact that these common rooms are hidden throughout the castle and require the knowledge of constantly changing passwords indicates a problematic system present in Hogwarts' foundational structure. Rather than being inclusionary to the group, these houses become exclusionary to the whole, and encourage students to segregate from and dislike one another purely on the basis of to which house one belongs. Like with the founders of Hogwarts, division amongst students proves to be dangerous to the school's overall well-being, and just as Salazar Slytherin once abandoned the other founders, so too does the house named in his honor in the Second Wizarding War. In this way, Rowling continues to complicate the constructed boundaries that divide various groups in her text while demonstrating the ways in which the institutionalization of exclusionary practices can be detrimental to the success of a unified wizarding world.

Although Harry is a part of the dominant, white wizarding society, his role as a half-blood orphan who was raised by muggles segregates him from the wizarding world. This idea is brought up again and again as Harry's ability to speak Parseltongue causes many to feel that he is untrustworthy, or inherently evil. In this way, wizard society asks Harry to silence his inherited language, and to instead speak only the dominant English. Even this, however, is complicated as Harry is often restricted from speaking in both the muggle and magical worlds. While living with the Dursleys he is told "[not to] ask questions," and to go to his bedroom, "[make] no noise, and pretend [he's] not there" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 20, *Chamber of Secrets* 6). In addition, within the Dursley house, Harry is not called by any name and is instead referred to as "boy" or "him." In this way, Harry's very existence in the muggle world is made to be a nuisance, a point which is then reinforced by Uncle Vernon's restriction of the words "magic," "wand," or "wizard." Thus, the Dursleys censor all words that define Harry himself, thereby rendering him something close to nonexistent and undefinable. In effect, Harry can be seen as an excluded figure in both the wizarding and muggle worlds as he is forced into silence by those who have a higher standing than he does.

Like the house elves, goblins, and trolls, Harry's language is restricted, even from within the wizarding community. While he often questions Hagrid, who is also an excluded figure, and Dumbledore, who is constantly called "not...normal," Harry is still unable to communicate his ideas among his peers and his professors as they are often "deaf to Harry's stammers" (*Goblet of Fire* 161, *Chamber of Secrets* 98). In fact, although Harry is charged with being a frequent rule breaker, he rarely breaks a school rule without the aid of his invisibility cloak. By literally rendering himself invisible to those around him, he is shown to fully assimilate into the culture only by accepting their wish for him to remain mute and disappear into the dominant culture. However, this action also helps to rid him of his physicality, and particularly his scar, which is the defining feature that indicates his celebrity, and thus, allows him to participate in the dominant culture. In using the cloak to literally erase these features, Harry can be said to intentionally identify more fully as other. It is through his assimilation, then, that he can foster change through revolution, or through acts of rule breaking. Ultimately, in the fifth book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry becomes outspoken and often screams in order to be heard and understood by those around him. Rather than simply allowing others to believe falsities, Harry expresses his opinion adamantly, even in the face of punishment. In effect, he breaks away from subjugation in order to incite revolution. Unfortunately, it is at the end of this same book that Harry learns his status as "the Chosen One." Ultimately, it is his choice to accept this role and to use it as

a means to incite revolutionary acceptance of all magical peoples and creatures from inside the system that sets him apart from the other wizards in the story.

In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Lord Voldemort points out the “strange likenesses between [Harry and himself]...Both half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only two Parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since...Slytherin himself” (317). This similarity demonstrates the ways in which both Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort represent figures excluded within the magical community. Although they share this experience, it is the ways in which each character chooses to operate within his exclusion that sets them apart. Unlike Lord Voldemort, who has many followers, but no friends, Harry accepts that his community of friends and supporters are often the ones who get him the farthest in his goals. While Harry is often alone in the face of Voldemort, and thus in the face of death, it is only with the help of his friends and companions that he even gets to face Lord Voldemort at all. Thus, it is through his imposed symbolic status as both “The Boy Who Lived” and “The Chosen One” that Harry represents the importance of having an inclusionary community. In the face of war and the threat of Voldemort’s terrifying domination, it matters not to which house one belongs, under what conditions one is born into, nor what type of magical being one embodies. Voldemort kills without reason or remorse, and thus, it is only through unity within the magical community that Voldemort’s regime can be challenged.

Ultimately, Rowling seeks to complicate the many boundaries dividing the wizarding world, and furthers this complication through Harry’s figure as an excluded orphan child. Because institutions of exclusion operate both within the wizarding world, and between wizards and muggles, Rowling successfully allows her reader to fall deeper and deeper into the increasingly complex distinctions that categorize Harry and his classmates as being intrinsically different. This collective exclusion then, allows the wizarding world to be unified through their shared experience, which, in turn, renders them an inclusionary society by virtue of their shared degrees of exclusion. As a child born outside of the wizarding world, Harry serves as the reader’s guide to these various concentric communities, and it is through his interaction with these supposedly disparate groups that Harry is able to unify the wizarding world against Voldemort’s threat of apocalypse. Thus, Harry’s status as both an excluded figure and as a member of the white wizarding dominant culture renders him a successful leader who chooses to accept his title as “the Chosen One.”

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