

## Colonialism and Appropriation in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1992)

The *Nightmare Before Christmas* is one of the most iconic movies to come out of the 90's. Since, it has garnered a cult following and has become one of the most recognizable pieces of Halloween imagery the recent film industry has given us because of its sweetness and intricate detailing. The story follows Jack, an upstanding but personally dissatisfied citizen of Halloweentown as he stumbles upon a new world and tries to replicate its magic by dominating and replicating it. The plan fails miserably and he ends up reverting back to being satisfied with his role as the Pumpkin King of Halloweentown. If the viewer removes the imagery to look at the skeletal structure of the plot and the roles of the characters, there's a very familiar story. Anyone can recognize the story of an influential man who wants more for himself stumbling upon an 'exotic' land by accident. In the Eurocentric narrative, the discovery inspires him and in his fervent enthusiasm, he creates situations of power that colonize and damage the native population. Eventually, this successful man takes over the 'discovered land' and builds a nation on top of it at the cost of the original population – this is the story of the discovery of the Americas and most of the world. The politically correct and factually devoid angle is that the colonizer and the natives make friends with each other and the takeover is consensual and bloodless, and sometimes with the inclusion of a sexual trade off – like in *Pocahontas* and *Avatar*, the colonizer dates/marries a native woman, as if in demonstration of how mutual the deal was.<sup>1</sup> Many popular stories utilize this to minimize guilt by invoking positive images of colonialism, which *The Nightmare Before Christmas* does—to an extent. The first part of this essay will look into specific plot points and their similarities to Columbus narratives, and the

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<sup>1</sup> While I haven't included any accounts of this happening throughout history, one can trace this union through pop culture in recent years; e.g. stories like *Avatar* and *Pocahontas*. This trade is part of the concept of 'columbusing' as it is appropriating the native body as another part of the culture to be claimed.

latter half will concern itself with discussing how the end of the movie makes us rethink colonialism and appropriation and the plot's other deviations from these norms. This piece will not speculate about the intricacies of McDowell/Burton's politics but will instead suggest that this apologetic restructuring of the narrative was separated from the creator's personal opinions and does not claim to represent any of their views.<sup>2</sup>

Concepts of white saviorism and colonialism are common knowledge to most scholars of the women and gender studies field, but may not be fluid language to those outside the study. The Atlantic has a thought piece by Teju Cole that describes white saviorism for us by saying what it doesn't do right. "But I disagree [with] the White Savior Industrial Complex in general, because there is much more to doing good work than "making a difference." There is the principle of first do no harm. There is the idea that those who are being helped ought to be consulted over the matters that concern them." (Cole 1). In these terms, the white savior complex is remarkable by the footprint it leaves and the harm it does – it is, in essence, the bolstering of a white voice over the voice of people of color, even if the two are essentially saying the same thing. White saviorism works off frameworks of racism and oppression to pretend that it is doing good by silencing people of color under the guise of "help"; throughout the scope of this essay, we see Jack embody this concept in his treatment of Christmas. The idea of Columbusing works in tandem and is a newer term to define an old problem. According to the online Macmillan dictionary, Columbusing is "the act of discovering something that is new to another group, especially a minority group, and behaving as if it is new to everyone."<sup>3</sup> It includes the taking

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<sup>2</sup> I've included this disclaimer to separate the creator's opinion and the story's ethics, because it can be easy to slide into character judgement. The writers of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* have never claimed to represent these ideas.

<sup>3</sup> "Columbusing American English Definition and Synonyms | Macmillan Dictionary." *Columbusing American English Definition and Synonyms | Macmillan Dictionary*. Macmillan, 20 Jan. 2015. Web. 02 Dec. 2015.

over/stealing of property/peoples in order to assert dominance over the “discovered” land, as Columbus is not known only for his discovery but also for his pushes for dominance and ownership of the Americas. This piece will consider these two terms to describe the colonialist maneuvers used both in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and throughout the history of the world.

The movie’s kind, privileged protagonist, Jack, is immediately shown to be adored by the townspeople, although he himself is unsatisfied with his cultural role and wants something more. The movie opens with a scenic tour of Halloweentown: a small, dark, isolated town full of monsters and the surrounding pumpkin patches. Jack is established as a gentleman and a model citizen: the mayor of the town relies upon him, witches swoon to see him, and despite the town’s most important night (Halloween!) at hand during this sequence, Jack’s arrival is the main event. But quickly after we are assured of the town’s confidence and love for Jack, we are treated to his private retreat to a pumpkin patch, where he confides through song that he desires something more: “Yet year after year it’s the same routine and I grow so weary of the sound of screams/and I, Jack, The Pumpkin King, have grown so tired of the same old thing/Somewhere deep inside of these bones and emptiness began to grow/There’s something out there far from my home/A longing that I’ve never known ... But who here could ever understand that the pumpkin king with the skeleton crown would tire of his crown/if they only understood that he’d give it all up if he only could...” This idea of desiring something “far from [my] home” rings true with the narrative. Not only does it summarize Columbus’ initial desire to find India and parts unknown, but it also chimes with ideas such as Manifest Destiny here in more contemporary history. Despite Jack’s success and popularity, he seems to find it unsatisfying on a spiritual level, and wants to discover something fresh (ie, “grown so tired of the same old

thing.) He feels that while his town adores him, they have also trapped him and would never understand his need for expansion. To clear his mind, Jack goes for a long walk and here begins the narrative of first contact: he wanders too far opens a magic door that leads him to Christmastown. The door serves as a symbol for the idea of a border: perhaps an ocean or a mountain range; a physical object that creates a large degree of separation between the two societies, so much so that they would never encounter each other until one strayed too far.

Once Jack falls into Christmastown, he struggles with culture shock that is both alarming and intoxicating and the way the culture is framed has direct relations to the language used in records left by colonizers. The sequence is his nighttime exploration of the town with an appropriately titled song, “What’s This?”, as Jack sees differences between his culture and theirs and engages in exotification. He sings, “There’s white things in the air ... there’s children throwing snowballs/instead of throwing heads/they’re busy building toys/and absolutely no one’s dead ... in here they’ve got a little tree, how queer ... Could it be I got my wish? ... This empty place inside of me is filling up, I simply cannot get enough ... I want it for my own –I’ve got to know, what is this place that I have found?” Something that makes this song notable is the language of first contact that Jack uses. When Christopher Columbus approached the Americas for the first time and was greeted by the indigenous population, who swam out to their boats, the Admiral describes them similarly in his journal. He describes the landscape as being very lush and beautiful, but “It was a marvel to see... but they appeared to me to be a race of people very poor in everything... the people are ingenious, and would be good servants.” (Columbus 39-41.) He also describes wanting to “take several back” (Columbus 41) to the Queen with him, which is similar to what Jack does. Where Columbus is desirous of the gold he thinks the indigenous people have, Jack is desirous of the whole culture; the essence of Christmas.

While his version of othering is very gentle (the roughest word he uses about the citizens of Christmastown is “queer”, which is nothing in comparison to the verbiage used in real history documentation of first contact with Indigenous populations), we still see Jack engaging in that framework. Jyotsna G. Singh critiques the language of colonialism, lots of which is used during “What’s This?” in his review of “Discoveries” of *India In The Language of Colonialism*. There is a pattern that the text works with which recognizes a certain behavioral track in accounts of first contact; thinly veiled racism and dehumanization, othering, brainwashing. He describes the typical Columbus ‘discovery’ with disdain, which we can easily apply to Jack’s situation of “discovering” a town that was already there: “...a discovery that is not a discovery but rather an ideologically interested figuration mobilized to buttress colonial adventures” (Singh 1). In this model the discovered land takes a passive role to bolster the success of discover in the colonizer’s eyes instead of being its own agent. Similarly, *What’s This* uses the language of possession and consumption – Jack “simply cannot get enough” and says that although the experience is satisfying his spiritual need to explore, he still wants more, and not only that; he wants it for his own. In the October 15<sup>th</sup> entry in Columbus’ journal, he states clearly that his desire was “not to pass any island without taking possession”, a hunger that disregards any indigenous desires or concerns and is merely focused on gain (Columbus 43). What Jack does is take things he finds, another common colonizing tactic, to Halloweentown so that he can show the others and prove that this other world exists. He chooses a present and a wall stocking as artifacts to represent the magic of Christmastown. In tune with this, Singh says that “the strange and marvelous are staple elements and can be keyed into alterities that come to figure so prominently in colonial discourse” (Singh 2). The townspeople react with shock, disgust, and confusion at things like stockings and presents. While showing the crowd the concept of a

wrapped present topped with a bow, onlookers butt in: “How ugly! But why?!” Here we see separations of civility and barbarism<sup>4</sup>, one of the main cultural divisions that Columbus and similar colonizers used to dehumanize the indigenous population. Despite Halloweentown’s crude and violent ways, they find Christmastown’s culture to be strange and unpleasant and dismiss it as unrealistic and irrelevant.

Jack comes to his ultimate white savior realization when he retreats to his home to study his ‘extoic’ stolen objects. He uses scientific method to try to demystify what creates cultural difference. The next musical number, Jack’s Obsession, details the fervor with which he studies. During his experiments, he has his “eureka” moment, where he realizes that he doesn’t have to necessarily understand Christmas to steal elements of it and recreate it for himself. The town’s vampires, who have been waiting outside Jack’s house to see him, describe him as being in the house for days – in front of his bay windows, Jack paces and describes his predicament. “Inside these little bric-a-brack are secrets waiting to be cracked ... or perhaps it’s really not as deep as I’ve been led to think ... this Christmas thing is not as tricky as it seems, and why should they have all the fun? It should belong to anyone – not anyone, in fact, but me/why, I can make a Christmas tree and there’s no reason I can find/I couldn’t have a Christmas time/I bet I could improve it, too!” Again, we see similar parallels to notes about specimen that Columbus comes across and documents in his journal: “A thousand different sorts of trees, with their fruit were to be met with, and of a wonderfully delicious odor. It was a great affliction to me to be ignorant of their natures, for I am very certain they are all valuable; I bring home specimens of them and also of the land. I understand the natives but imperfectly.” (Columbus 54.) This realization is the

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<sup>4</sup> Modernity/tradition and civility/barbarism are two big dichotomies that have been used in imperialist language throughout history. These concepts begin to separate traditional/“barbaric” as ‘bad’ (e.g. the indigenous populations) and the modern/civilized as ‘good’ (the colonizing society.) As we see in the *Nightmare Before Christmas* example, what is seen as ‘barbaric’ is often misunderstood or ignorantly handled.

turning point where the rest of the movie becomes about colonizing Christmastown into a Halloweentown mold so that Jack can satisfy his feeling of cultural inferiority and his desire to rule.

Although the movie unfolds along colonialist lines, there are two main points after Jack's disastrous realization where it deviates in a large way from the white savior narrative. Although these deviations do not totally undo the harm of the previously established points, they seem to point to a tongue-in-cheek lesson about righting your wrongs, or perhaps about self-awareness as a colonizer. The end of the movie contains both of these events and both of them have to do with Jack's downfall as newfound Santa. While Jack succeeded in replicating Halloween, even going as far as to kidnap Santa Claus in order to be able to completely steal the event for himself, he didn't do it right. The toys he hands out are blessed with Halloweentown's touch – one pair of children is chased screaming around their house by a cackling Jack-in-the-box; another family has their entire Christmas tree consumed by a massive snake. The authorities are alerted to an imposter threatening Christmas and eventually, Jack's sleigh is shot down from the sky. He lands in a cemetery and laments his mistakes, and eventually comes to the realization that he never should have stolen Christmas and should instead work on his own holiday. "How could I be so blind? ... But I never intended all this madness... I hope there's still time to set things right!" What is interesting about this is Jack's willingness to change direction – in the face of defeat, he admits his wrongs and immediately looks into how to fix his mistakes. This is a huge difference, because the narratives of colonizers are rife with examples of bullheadedness in the face of adversity, which often led to ruin for the native populations. When Jack encounters resistance from the children who want Christmas back, he gives it back immediately – and more. Jack saves Santa Claus from Oogie Boogie (Halloweentown's idea of a criminal mastermind) and gets

reprimanded for trying to take over Christmas. Throughout the exchange, Jack is cordial and apologetic, and states that he's made a mess of things and is sorry for having caused trouble. Once Santa Claus has straightened out Christmas, he flies over Halloweentown to make it snow for everyone, and calls, "Happy Halloween!" Jack responds with an enthusiastic "Merry Christmas!" This exchange is mutual and the residents of Halloweentown get to experience a little bit of Christmas for the first time without colonizing it – with Santa's help, it snows heavily over the whole town. Despite Jack's attempt at taking their culture from them, it is inferred that Christmastown is happy to share a little before they separate completely and go back to being completely isolated holidays. During the final few minutes of the movie, we see Jack declining to take part in the sexual trade-off that colonizers often use to further dominate native populations. In this example, he would've had to marry or "claim" in some way a woman from Christmastown. Movies like *Pocahontas*<sup>5</sup> employ this tradeoff, which uses the native female body as another way to claim property and space. Instead of engaging in this push for dominance Jack professes love for a woman from his own town, effectively showing that he is comfortable with his natural role as the king of Halloween and we end the movie with their kiss atop a hill with all internal conflicts resolved and an attempt at colonization failed.

This twist in narrative is not only refreshing for the viewer because it doesn't follow the same racist and exhausting path that we think it will, but because it shows precisely how easy it is to deviate gently from that path without sacrificing anything. What we get instead is a lesson about ownership, difference, and responsibility. Jack's admittance of his wrongs and his refusal to further perpetuate his white saviorism is inspiring, and it almost feels like an ending too good

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<sup>5</sup> While the movie pulls from the real story of Pocahontas; the real life version is much less pretty. She was taken by conquest, whereas the Disney version tells a gentle story of love between racial lines. "When Will White People Stop Making Movies Like Avatar?" [io9.com/5422666/when-will-white-people-stop-making-movies-like-avatar](http://io9.com/5422666/when-will-white-people-stop-making-movies-like-avatar) speaks conceptually about the appropriation of the othered female body.

to be true for the denizens of Christmastown, who go back to a life untouched by the other holidays. Jack is a white savior embodiment: his generosity, patriotism, and popularity with the other sex make him the guiding light of his town and he enjoys great privilege in his society. In his wish for something more, he ‘discovers’ another town (eg, culture) and begins to steal from it to make his own version for his own benefit, which directly mimics annals of colonial history. While the story is wrapped up in a gorgeous stop-motion world, the narrative shines through, with some refreshing deviations that make the watcher think: maybe there is still time to make things right.

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Killebrew, Zachary. "Colonialism and Race in Selected Stories by HP Lovecraft." ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. 2014. Web. – This thesis, done by a student at a completely different school, gave me a lot of the inspiration I needed to finish this piece. Pop culture analysis is not always the most highly regarded of work and at times, I wasn't sure if I should give up on my concept and change to something a little more serious or if I should trust myself and keep at it. A special thanks to Mr.Killebrew for working on this piece, which was the most similar paper I could find.

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