

“I’ve Connected with Them”: Racial Stereotyping and White Appropriation in the Chaos Walking Trilogy

Recent young adult dystopian fiction and film presents alternative futures in which communities, nations, and even entire planets are saved by strong-willed teenagers who persevere despite adversity. These teen rebel/leaders learn—and, subsequently, teach—lessons of equality, pushing back against heteronormative roles of gender and sexuality. However, the vast majority of those novels and series that are granted major media attention and franchise opportunities privilege the white female and/or queer experience over more intersectional identities, particularly those defined by race. One notable example is Patrick Ness’s Chaos Walking series, a successful trilogy that has been optioned for a major motion picture starring big-name white leads.

In Chaos Walking, Ness problematizes the normalized heteropatriarchal family configuration while simultaneously calling out the settler colonial mindset that undergirds this configuration. I will argue, however, that as sympathetic as Ness’s portrayals of his indigenous characters and characters of color are, the series ultimately replicates structures of both settler colonialism and western racism. His portrayals of two major characters of color, Bradley and the Return, whitewash racialized histories of power imbalance, romanticize and stereotype indigenous populations and people of color, and reify the normalized centrality of the white perspective, particular that of the liberal, white middle-class. Thus, Chaos Walking is, at best, an incomplete critique of Western power imbalances and, at worst, an insidious investigation of normativity that privileges discussion of gender and sexuality at the expense of racial discourse.