Handout 5
Native Americans in Fantasy Fiction

J.K. Rowling's "History of Magic in North America" (2016).

Alison Flood's "JK Rowling under fire for writing about 'Native American wizards.'" *The Guardian*, 9 March 2016.

JK Rowling has been accused of appropriating the "living tradition of a marginalised people" by writing about the Navajo legend of the skinwalker in a new story.

The Harry Potter author posted the first part of a four-part series, the History of Magic in North America on her website Pottermore, on Tuesday. Subsequent episodes are being published each day at 2pm until Friday. Tying in to the release in November of the film Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, the short piece of writing deals with the magical New World in the 14th to 17th centuries.

Although the new insights into the universe of Harry Potter were welcomed by many, the author was strongly criticised online by a number of voices from Native American communities, particularly over her writing about skinwalkers, which in Navajo legend are said to be evil witches or wizards who can take on the form of animals.

Rowling writes that the myth "has its basis in fact … A legend grew up around the Native American Animagi, that they had sacrificed close family members to gain their powers of transformation. In fact, the majority of Animagi assumed animal forms to escape persecution or to hunt for the tribe. Such derogatory rumours often originated with No-Maj medicine men, who were sometimes faking magical powers themselves, and fearful of exposure."

Responding to a question on Twitter, Rowling said that "in my wizarding world, there were no skinwalkers", with the legend created by those without magic "to demonise wizards".

But campaigner Dr Adrienne Keene told Rowling on Twitter that "it's not 'your' world. It's our (real) Native world. And skinwalker stories have context, roots, and reality … You can't just claim and take a living tradition of a marginalised people. That's straight up colonialism/appropriation."

The academic also took issue with Rowling's use of the phrase "the Native American community", saying that "one of the largest fights in the world of representations is to recognise Native peoples and communities and cultures are diverse, complex, and vastly different from one another."

This is clearly not legwork @jk_rowling did with this writing. Native communities use reciprocity, respect, and relationships as benchmarks.
— Dr. Adrienne Keene (@NativeApprops) March 8, 2016

"There is no such thing as one 'Native American' anything. Even in a fictional wizarding world," wrote Keene on her blog, Native Appropriations. She continued: "Native spirituality and religions are not fantasy on the same level as wizards. These beliefs are alive, practised, and protected … we fight so hard every single day as Native peoples to be seen as contemporary, real, full, and complete human beings and to push away from the stereotypes that restrict us in stock categories of mystical-connected-to-nature-shamans or violent-savage-warriors"

Navajo writer Brian Young wrote on Twitter that he was "broken hearted" about the new piece of writing. "JK Rowling, my beliefs are not fantasy. If ever there was a need for diversity in YA lit it is bullsh!t like this," said Young. "My ancestors didn't survive colonisation so you could use our culture as a convenient prop."

Johnnie Jae, founder of A Tribe Called Geek, described herself as a Potterhead who had "often thought of what it would be like if Natives were represented in this world", but that the reality was "so disrespectfully done".

Jae wrote: "This isn't us saying that Native people can't be wizards or magical beings, but that @jk_rowling's attempt is unacceptable & disrespectful because @jk_rowling has based her 'native wizards' off the same racist stereotypes & miseducation that JM Barrie used in Peter Pan."

After she spoke out on Twitter, Keene said that she had been deluged with responses, "with the typical accusations of my oversensitivity and asking if I understand that Harry Potter is fictional, and more directed hate telling me my doctorate is being misused and I'm an idiot.

"Also worthy of note is that Rowling is known for responding directly to fan questions on Twitter, and overall being accessible to her fanbase. Despite thousands of tweets directed at her about these concerns, she has not addressed it at all. The silence is noted, and it's deafening," wrote Keene.

Rowling's representatives have yet to respond to a request for comment.

Becky Little's "Native Americans to J.K. Rowling: We're Not Magical." *National Geographic*, 11 March 2016.

In *Peter Pan*, Tiger Lilly and her tribe are part of the magical landscape of Neverland. In *Twilight*, some Quileute people are born with the ability to turn into wolves (just ask anyone on "Team Jacob"). Now, in J.K. Rowling's new digital story collection, *History of Magic in North America*, Navajo traditions are placed in the same fictional world as Harry Potter.

Rowling's new collection equates "skin walkers"—a Navajo term for people who turn into animals—with Animagi, the type of witches and wizards who morph into animals in her *Harry Potter* series. These details were first revealed when Rowling released a promotional trailer this week; the entire story collection is now available online.

Immediately, many scholars and fans responded with criticism, just as people did three years ago when Johnny Depp played Tonto in *The Lone Ranger*, and in past instances when white writers and actors have employed stereotypes of Native Americans in storytelling.

The first issue, says Leanne Howe, a Choctaw Nation citizen and co-editor of *Seeing Red—Hollywood's Pixeled Skins*, is that Rowling attributes the tradition of skin walkers to all Native Americans of the pre-Columbian era, as though they were a monolithic group with one set of beliefs.

The second problem is that Native American traditions are equated with magic. This is part of a long history of white Americans and Europeans trivializing native beliefs. (Rowling's publisher, Pottermore, told National Geographic that it has no comment on the controversy.)

"I would never, never use the term 'magic' in relation to native practices and belief," Howe says. Native people "simply cannot be respected and given respect in the 21st century" when their history and traditions are trivialized.

Fantasy is an important part of children's literature, but problems arise when a race of people is constantly portrayed as magical, and therefore fictional.

"We are … fighting everyday for the protection of our sacred sites from being destroyed," scholar Adrienne Keene writes on her blog Native Appropriations. "If Indigenous spirituality becomes conflated with fantasy 'magic'—how can we expect lawmakers and the public to be allies in the protection of these spaces?"

There is another, more subtle, layer to the depiction of Native Americans as magical, fictional beings—they end up being portrayed as though they don't exist. Howe refers to this as "the trope of the vanishing Indian."

"The vanishing American Indian is in art, it's in stories—we're the so-called *Last of the Mohicans*," she says. "We exist in the minds of mainstream America as dead and forgotten because the white Americans won the American West."

When native traditions are constantly depicted as relics, it gives the impression that those traditions—and the more than 5 million native people in the United States—don't exist anymore. Think of the Native American characters you've encountered in books and movies. How many of them were portrayed as characters from the past, and how many of them were depicted as people in the modern world? (Modern characters that are also magical don't count—I'm still looking at you, *Twilight*.)

On a more basic level, the stereotypes of the "vanishing Indian," the magical medicine man, or even the noble savage dehumanize the people they profess to represent. Children read books to learn, but also to identify with the characters. For native children, this presents a problem if most of the images they see of themselves are otherworldly, long gone, or sports mascots.

"These stereotypes hurt us in terms of our human rights," says Howe. "You cannot have civil rights, you can't really have human rights or be thought of in a significant way, if you are invisible and you're dead. So the trope of the vanishing American Indian is in a way undermining the humanity of native people because the assumption is we're dead, or there's just a few of us left."

Charles de Lint's *The Wind in His Heart* (2017).