

How the Writer Tells the Story Should Be the Primary Concern rather than Who Can Write about Whom: The Limits of Cultural Appropriation Vis-à-Vis The Ethics of Narrative Empathy

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Abstract : Cultural appropriation has been theorised as a form of colonialism in which members of a dominant culture reduce cultural elements that are deeply meaningful to a minority culture to the category of the “exotic other” since they do not experience the oppression and discriminations faced by members of the minority culture. Yet, in the particular case of literature, writers such as Lionel Shriver and Bernardine Evaristo have argued that authors from a cultural majority have a right to write in the voice of someone from a cultural minority, hence attacking the idea that this is a form of cultural appropriation. By definition, Shriver and Evaristo claim, writers are supposed to write beyond their own culture, gender, class, and/ or race. In this light, this paper discusses the limits of cultural appropriation vis-à-vis the ethics of narrative empathy by addressing the mixed critical reception of Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* (2009) and Jeanine Cummins’s *American Dirt* (2020). In fact, both novels were acclaimed as global eye-openers regarding the struggles of respectively South American migrants and African American maids. At the same time, both novelists have been accused of cultural appropriation by telling a story that is not theirs to tell, given the fact that they are white women telling these stories in what critics have argued is really an American voice telling a story to American readers. These claims will be investigated within the framework of Edward Said’s foundational examination of Orientalism in the field of postcolonial studies as a Western style for authoritatively restructuring the Orient. This means that Orientalist stereotypes regarding Eastern cultures have implicitly validated colonial and imperial pursuits, in the specific context of literary representations of African American and Mexican cultures by white writers. At the same time, the conflicted reception of *American Dirt* and *The Help* will be examined within the critical framework of narrative empathy as theorised by Suzanne Keen. Hence, there will be a particular focus on the way a reader’s heated perception that the author’s perspective is purely dishonest can result from a friction between an author’s intention and a reader’s experience of narrative empathy, while a shared sense of empathy between authors and readers can be a rousing momentum to move beyond literary response to social action. Finally, in order to assess that “the key question should not be who can write about whom, but how the writer tells the story”, the recent controversy surrounding Dutch author Marieke Lucas Rijneveld’s decision to resign the translation of American poet Amanda Gorman’s work into Dutch will be duly investigated. In fact, Rijneveld stepped out after journalist and activist Janice Deul criticised Dutch publisher Meulenhoff for choosing a translator who was not also Black, despite the fact that 22-year-old Gorman had selected the 29-year-old Rijneveld herself, as a fellow young writer who had likewise come to fame early on in life. In this light, the critical argument that the controversial reception of *The Help* reveals as much about US race relations in the early twenty-first century as about the complex literary transactions between individual readers and the novel itself will also be discussed in the extended context of *American Dirt* and white author Marieke Rijneveld’s withdrawal from the projected translation of Black poet Amanda Gorman.

Keywords : cultural appropriation, cultural stereotypes, narrative empathy, race relations

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