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The Process of Cultural Appropriation in Literature and How It Can Be Changed

By Wendy Meza

M.A. THESIS

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“Don’t dip your pen in someone else’s blood,” urges Kit de Waal in her article in *The Irish Times*, an essay in which she discusses how writers can avoid being guilty of cultural appropriation in their works by instead finding ways to speak on culture and cultural events from a different perspective. In this thesis, I will review the ways that writers can keep their writing freedom while averting the negative effects that cultural appropriation can have on the cultures and communities they are acknowledging. While the term “appropriation” appears in almost all social and artistic mediums, appropriation in literature has recently been brought back into the spotlight with the publication of Jeanine Cummins’ novel *American Dirt* earlier this year, which was widely accused of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation has its roots deeper in the past. The action of taking authority over something that belongs to another group of people was often referred to as “influence,” according to Kathleen Ashley in “The Cultural Processes of Appropriation,” but influence often seemed to mean what we now define as appropriation. Ashley explores the development of appropriation throughout time and the vast differences between appropriation in past literature and in contemporary literature today. To analyze these differences, I will be looking at not only the contemporary novel by Cummins, but also the seemingly problematic 1965 poem “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath. Both these texts are considered examples of cultural appropriation merely because they both make reference to traumatic events. The vast differences between Plath’s brief confessional poem and Cummins’ blockbuster novel suggest that cultural appropriation may be too loose and formless as a classification. Alongside these two works of literature, I will be considering NoViolet Bulawayo’s novel *We Need New Names*. Despite the criticism that Bulawayo received for her portrayal of Zimbabwe culture along with being accused of heavy presence of “poverty porn” in her novel, she was able to bring to life a text that explores how cultures and the traumatic events their people overcome are not all that these people have to offer

and share. The tremendous diversity of experiences and “voices” in any given culture throws into doubt the possibility of accurate cultural appropriation in literature.

Appropriation most commonly appears in literature as “subject appropriation,” a term explained by James O. Young in “Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation.” According to Young, subject appropriation occurs “when an outsider represents members or aspects of another culture . . . when an outsider makes the cultures or lives of insiders the subject of a painting, story, film or other work of art” (Young 136). This definition fits what Cummins has done in her work, but is glaringly inadequate to what Plath has done in hers. While *American Dirt* revolves around a Mexican woman and her son forced to leave their home due to violence, “Daddy” is a lyric poem in which the speaking persona condemns her father and her former husband. The poem includes a couple of lines in which Plath compares her relationship with her father to the relationship between Jews and their oppressors during the Holocaust. Whereas the novel revolves around traumatic conditions that are faced by many residents of Mexico, the poem makes associations between the speaker’s father’s German heritage and Nazi violence against the Jewish people—associations that are at best fanciful and that join a series of other imaginative associations. For example, the speaker also calls her father a vampire. While the reference to the Nazis in “Daddy” is an allusion and the treatment of traumatic experience in Mexico is the central topic of a long book, both authors are criticized for being outsiders speaking on something they are not part of, therefore doesn’t belong to them. Young states that “the concept of cultural appropriation has no application unless insiders and outsiders, members and nonmembers of a culture, can be distinguished” (Young 136). But who decides who is an “insider” and who is an “outsider”? It is important to first understand the consequences of an outsider writing from the perspective of an insider.

Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy," published posthumously, remains one of her most controversial texts bringing about different opinions from those who read it. Because Plath was not alive to address the valid criticism her poem ensues, critics writing in academic journals now are free to explain the motivation behind her actions without the burden of the author's own opinion on the matter. The references to the Holocaust that exist in this poem are looked at as crass and inconsiderate by many critics and readers alike due to the fact that she is speaking of it as an outsider who didn't directly suffer the atrocities the Jewish community did. Subject appropriation occurs in this poem as she takes a traumatic event that occurred to a group of people and uses it to compare to her own traumatic life events. The poem speaks of the toxic relationship she had with her deceased father, whom the speaker feels had oppressive power over her. There are a total of ten lines that can be considered references to the dictator Adolf Hitler, Nazism or the Holocaust, yet each individual line can have a strong effect or reaction from the reader because it deals with a sensitive topic in a casual manner.

That the poem is written by an American non-Jew who had no direct experience of the Nazi Holocaust but who inserts herself in the conversation about such a delicate period of time was bound to cause trouble. The first mention is in the sixth stanza, where she presumably addresses her father (as she has the rest of the poem) and tells him "I thought every German was you" (Plath 29). Because of the bad relationship with her father, she negatively associates him with every German person she meets. While this statement may appear prejudiced, it sets up her character, who allows things to affect her to the point that she will generalize an entire group of people based on her experience with her German father. Moving along, the seventh stanza stands out among the sixteen, in which she describes the German language as an engine "chuffing [me] off like a Jew/A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen" (Plath 31-33). In these lines, she expands on

the engine metaphor, describing the German language as an engine that is transporting her to a dangerous and terrible place. She names three Nazi concentration camps as the destination. This is an unnecessary addition to describe her dislike for anything German, which we have learned she connects to her father. In the next few lines, she begins to identify with the title of “Jew,” as she states “I began to talk like a Jew/I think I may well be a Jew” (Plath 34-35). Plath is an outsider who attempts to take the title of the insider in order to emphasize that she is being controlled by a powerful and malicious being. While she was entitled to her emotions and had the freedom to make this comparison, there is no denying that this brash declaration—“I may well be a Jew”—is a form of appropriation. Plath was not Jewish. There is a clean distinction between her as an outsider and an insider because she did not live through these events and likely gathered her knowledge on the subject from others. She continues in the ninth stanza, where she admits to her father “I have always been scared of *you*,/With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo./And your neat mustache/And your Aryan eye, bright blue” (Plath 41-44). Once more, Plath uses aspects of the Holocaust—celebrations of Aryan heritage—to describe how she sees her father. She admits that she had always been scared of him and his Luftwaffe, which is the word for air force but also the official name of the Nazi air force in the year 1935. At this moment, she is speaking to Adolf Hitler but has created a connection between her father and Hitler so that they are the “same” person in this poem. She goes on to describe “her father” with his neat mustache, much like Hitler’s. The stanza ends with the characteristics of the “perfect race,” as determined by the dictator. Plath has created a relationship between her own personal fears with the fears that the Jewish community had during the Holocaust. She exploits the event in order to emphasize just how affected she was by the relationship she had with her father. She succeeds at expressing the gravity of her dislike and fear of him. But it is also clear that the speaker is speaking metaphorically. She is not

advancing any serious claim that she is Jewish, nor any serious argument that her father is Hitler. But that is not a sufficient excuse to prevent charges of cultural appropriation. Sons and daughters of Nazi Holocaust victims might well feel that their traumatic history should not be appropriated and exploited in the service of a making a poetic effect. Plath uses literary devices (metaphors, symbolism, simile) to enhance the poem but readers find it difficult to ignore the negative aspects of her imagery.

In “The Boot in the Face: The Problem of the Holocaust in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath,” Al Strangeways hopes that readers of this poem will look at the many facets of the poem and explores both the motives behind her use of these references and the actual appearance of them in the poem. He starts off by claiming that Plath’s literary works are often overshadowed by the negative attention the “problematic” ones receive and aims to dissuade readers from classifying “Daddy” as a work of cultural appropriation by giving plausible reasons for her decision to include the Holocaust and its victims in her poem. In order to understand the possible motives she had when including this in her writing, one must question what exactly the role of an outsider entitles. Did Plath have the responsibility to bring awareness to the gravity of the situation or was awareness just an additional effect of her writing? Did this poem achieve the goal of shedding light on the event or did she simply add the references for shock value? Both her role and her motivations in her writing are connected in this case, and Strangeways identifies both sides of the argument. On the one hand, readers praise her ability to connect her personal experience to something larger than the individual. Plath herself stated in an interview that “personal experience should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things” (Strangeways 381), and this was true of “Daddy.” She creates a relationship between the reader, the author, and the text subject, which as I will later discuss is an important aspect of publishing. However, what Strangeways also points out is the contraction of

her statement, as Plath herself expresses that “the importance of poetry does not lie in its ability to communicate with or influence people” (Strangeways 382). Not all authors take on the responsibility of spreading awareness or keeping readers content by using relevant themes, but rather write for self-fulfillment. It is possible that she wrote this poem with no ill intent, but rather as a way to finally express how she felt about her father and the idea of setting herself free from his influence. This is supported by the last stanza, that reads “There’s a stake in your fat black heart/And the villagers never liked you./Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (Plath 76-80). Hitler and Nazis disappear and the poem ends with Daddy transformed into a Transylvanian vampire with a stake driven through his heart. Just as the negative memories of her father lingered after his death, so have the consequences of the Holocaust. However, with the last line, she admits to having let go of the unpleasantness she associates with him and finally being free from him—all aspects of him, including perhaps her offensive self-projection as “a Jew.” Survivors lack the privilege to simply transform and forget the trauma caused by the Holocaust. For the author to propose a symmetry between her father and Hitler is evidence that she is writing for herself rather than her readers. But even in confessional poetry, this particular subject matter is not a topic that should be dealt with loosely. Rather than taking advantage of its relevance, at the time especially, by using it in her text, she might have shunned taking away the voice of the survivors and instead might have found a different way to express her own pain and trauma. Many believe that her references to the Holocaust cause more harm than good. Perhaps she should have stuck with Daddy-as-Dracula throughout.

One of the biggest critics concerned with her actions, Edward Alexander, explains the harm of using the Holocaust as a metaphor of her personal pain; “stealing the Holocaust...[is the process of] reducing Jews from the status of human beings to that of metaphors for other people’s

sufferings” (Strangeways 376). Plath identifying herself as Jew (“I think I may well be a Jew”) to heighten the severity of her unfavorable and abusive relationship with her father takes away from the severity of genocide. There is a difference between an outsider who claims a figurative identity with the Holocaust and an insider sharing their experience; an outsider cannot fully understand the intricacies and emotions it evokes, therefore writes using secondary information to make a statement while an insider is the primary source of the event. The Holocaust is possibly the most widely recognized example of a horrific political outrage. However, as insiders, Holocaust survivors deserve the choice whether or not they wish to speak on this particular subject. An outsider taking the liberty to speak on something they were not part of takes away the insider’s agency to speak on the subject at all. As I later explore in Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, traumatic events do not define individuals. A big part of understanding cultural appropriation is to see that it often highlights only the negative events of a culture or group of people. Cultural appropriation denies them the voice to speak their own truth. Another way that Plath’s Holocaust references are harmful to the community and survivors is the trivial way she includes these references--the Holocaust is not the subject of the entire poem, therefore awareness cannot be Plath’s motivation behind her actions. The poem does its job at reminding the reader about the atrocity it was by making them uncomfortable at the mention of it. However, “because it is included in the poem to emphasize a personal trauma, the readers’ reactions of unease, discomfort, and outrage are necessarily a response to the surface, the poem itself, rather than to the events the poem uses as metaphors for its subject” (Strangeways 386). Rather than inducing a feeling of negativity towards the event, the poem encourages complacency from simply acknowledging the severity of it. A similar thing happens with *American Dirt*, which brings awareness to the topic of migration and its dangers but doesn’t extend the conversation to include a new perspective. A

variety of opinions that are held by the migrants themselves would for example add much to the project of *American Dirt*. Cummins simply reiterates the same storyline that has been written before. The issue with this is that readers feel complacent with their minimal involvement and the cycle continues. This is something that Bulawayo criticizes in her text by calling out those who make assumptions based on misinformation shared by outsiders, outsiders such as Plath and Cummins.

In Jeanine Cummins's case, her role as an outsider is complicated by the fact that she attempts to position herself in a space where she can comment from an insider perspective. A few months before this book's publication, she made it known that her grandmother is Puerto Rican and implying that, because of this connection, she can better understand the struggles of marginalized communities. This took place after she had identified as a white woman when promoting her first book in the year 2015. In addition to that, she makes sure to mention in the Author's Note at the end of the book that she married a former illegal immigrant. Her revelations were an attempt to dispel the complete white identity that will brand her a cultural appropriator. This conflict is brought up by Erich Hatala Matthes in "Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism," who explains that self-identification occurs when the conversation revolves around cultural appropriation that may portray someone in a negative light. Yet, as Matthes points out, "identifying the source is not always essential to explaining the harm" (Matthes 349). Harm stems from pretending that one knows what one is talking about. Even if the reader is able to look past the author's identity, the book itself is proof that Cummins is an outsider speaking on Mexican culture. The biggest indicator in the novel is the forced vernacular. The language that she uses in *American Dirt* does not flow organically in comparison to the language used in novels written by individuals from Mexico. In just the first few pages of the novel, Cummins uses the titles of

“Mami,” “Abuela,” “Papi,” and “Mijo” to identify a few of the characters in the novel. Translated they mean “mother,” “grandmother,” “father,” and “son,” respectively. The novel is written in an omniscient third person point of view allowing the reader to see from all perspectives, but she relies on the dialogue to expand on the character’s emotions and relationships. The use of these family titles is a way to invite the reader into an important part Mexican culture (family) with sentences that portray the close relationship between a son and his mother in the middle of a traumatic event; “Mami, don’t go.” “Mijo, I will be right back, okay? You stay here” (Cummins 19). After their entire family has been killed only a few feet away, the son clings onto their comforting names for each other because it makes him feel safe and she comforts him back. This would be an effective way to use language to enhance the experience of learning about Mexican culture. However, the flaw that must be pointed out is the lack of continuity in their names. Of course, we later learn the actual names of the protagonists – Luca and his mother Lydia--and it is expected that outside of dialogue between the characters, Luca and Lydia will be addressed as such. However, throughout the entire novel, they are identified through different names. On some pages, Lydia is called “mami” but that is changed to being called “Luca’s mother” later on. Similarly, the unnamed grandmother is referred to by Lucas as his *abuela*, italicized; “What Luca does notice is the walls that line his *abuela’s* street” (Cummins 24). But is followed up by sentences in which she is referred to as his *abuela*, this time not italicized; “Each house here is fronted by a small courtyard like *Abuela’s*” (Cummins 24). There is an inconsistency in the way the characters are addressed, which can be a normal occurrence in real life. However, because this is a novel, the surprise appearances of clichés of kitchen Spanish come off as arbitrary and inconsistent. Because the language is not natural for her, it is all over the place. The utilization of the Spanish language is simply for aesthetic effect, as it does not add much to the actual text. She continues to add words

in Spanish that are the only translated words on the page; “pendejo” (Cummins 18) “carajo” (Cummins 42) and “chingaderas” (Cummins 87), all derogatory terms that individuals use in Spanish speaking countries. To someone that speaks Spanish or is familiar with Mexican jargon, these words are easy to understand yet the inclusion of these words does not make Cummins’ portrayal of Mexico concrete. She relies too heavily on the Spanish language to make up for her lack of knowledge of “real” Mexico, as many authors do when trying to portray foreign cultures. Despite the extensive research she has done (as mentioned in the Author’s Note) in which she “learned as much as [she] could about Mexico and migrants, about people living throughout the borderlands,” (Cummins 735), she is not able to truly capture Mexican dialogue in a natural way because she is an outsider. The original text is written in English, therefore putting emphasis on the words that she did translate to Spanish. In reality, there is no need to translate any of the words to Spanish in her English edition because a Spanish translation of the novel exists. Therefore, why are these derogatory words the words she chooses to highlight in the text? It is likely that her readers will be forced to search for the meaning of these words, which can lead us to believe that she made this conscious decision to add this derogatory language for the sake of shock value. Apart from the language, the Mexican culture that she attempts to describe is made up of stereotypes and details that Western audiences associate with Mexico. Details such as the quinceañeras (“his cousin Yénifer’s quinceañera”), playing soccer (“kicking the balón around with their other primos”) and the use of machetes as weapons (“selecting a machete at the counter in the home goods department”). This is not to say that these things are *not* part of the culture, but instead that it is a superficial view of it. A superficial view of Mexican cultural reinforces and later even leads to stereotypes. The resulting picture is not intentionally reductive. It is not surprising that she cannot capture every detail exactly, taking into account that she is writing from the outsider

perspective. An embarrassing example of ignorance occurs in the novel when she labels a common ingredient in Mexico by the wrong name; “Large prickly pear plants gather in clumps just outside the fence” (Cummins 201) which would be recognized by Mexicans by the name “nopales” instead. Cummins attempts to write Mexican culture to the best of her ability, but there are gaps of authenticity in the text. This brings up the question, who is the intended audience of *American Dirt* and how does this audience contribute to the cultural appropriation of this culture?

One of the largest reasons behind the debacle surrounding *American Dirt* is the praise it received from various famous outlets, especially from Oprah Winfrey and her well known book club. Although it is not the first controversial book to be accused of cultural appropriation or exploitation, it is one of the most recent contemporary novels that revives the ongoing argument. To explain why contemporary literature is under much more scrutiny, we must return to the aforementioned journal article by Kathleen Ashley, “The Cultural Processes of Appropriation,” to understand how the term appropriation was previously defined. Ashley begins by defining appropriation in relation to other texts; “within traditional literary history, the idea of one text appropriating elements from another was referred to as influence” (Ashley 1). However, as she examines appropriation in association with power, she confesses that while the idea of influence sounds as though it might be an acceptable version of “appropriation,” “contrary to the notions of “origin” or “influence,” “appropriation” emphasizes the act of taking” (Ashley 2). There is a power dynamic that exists in which one group of people has the power to take cultural identities and use as their own. Defenders of traditional literature could argue that taking elements from a certain culture or identity could qualify as influence but Ashley quells this argument by highlighting the difference between appropriation as a whole in the past and in contemporary times; “In a colonial situation the imperialist invaders simply take over the territory of the other culture. In a

postcolonial situation the contact zone between cultures becomes a space where languages, discourses, and other cultural expressions mingle conflictual[ly]" (Ashley 9). While this example may appear extreme because it is difficult to comprehend how cultural appropriation can compare to a physical invasion, it emphasizes the impact that power dynamics has in multiple mediums, even in literature. Though the intent may not be to gain power over others, the "borrowing" or "influence" of these cultures and these individuals calls for accountability. Although certain forms of appropriation might have been excused before, as society has progressed so have the expectations and limits of what is deemed acceptable.

However, not everyone takes issue with texts such as *American Dirt*, partly because they believe that these authors are raising awareness on issues that exist but not enough people are acknowledging. Oprah Winfrey praises Cummins for changing the way she viewed migrants and by sharing it as the Oprah Book Club pick, it is clear that she wants the same from other readers. Cummins herself states in the Author's Note that she hoped to "present one of those unique personal stories--a work of fiction--as a way to honor the hundreds of thousands of stories we may never get to hear. And in so doing, [I] hope to create a pause where the reader may begin to individuate. When we see migrants on the news, we may remember: these people are people" (Cummins 734-735). From her perspective, she is sharing a different viewpoint to the portrayal of migration by telling the story from the angle of a middle-class woman in Mexico who is forced to leave her home in search of safety. This "new" perspective does not take into account that migration has been happening for years, and it is not new to the group of people who have experienced it. This further proves that Cummins' intended audience is a Western audience; privileged individuals who are able to ignore such issues for such a long time because they live in the place people escape to--the United States. To many, the events that transpire are so distant

from their own world that it takes a huge amount of exploitation of violence and the presence of “poverty porn” to no longer ignore it. Her writing was aimed to reach readers who take pride in acknowledging that there are issues that need to be addressed but are not (yet) activists taking further steps toward the change needed. Despite the declaration from Cummins that she wanted to write this novel to spread information, she was aware that it was not her place to do so. She admits wondering whether she was the right person to speak on it and states that she was “worried that, as a nonmigrant and non-Mexican, [I] had no business writing a book set almost entirely in Mexico, set entirely among migrants. [I] wished someone slightly browner than me would write it. But then, I thought, If you’re a person who has the capacity to be a bridge, why not be a bridge? So I began” (Cummins 735). She claims to be a bridge but also acknowledges that someone else could’ve been the bridge that people needed to learn about the conditions that force individuals to migrate. Why did she write and publish the novel, knowing this information and proving in the text that it was not written for those native to the culture? It is at this point that we enter the conversation about literary prize culture, explained best by James F. English.

In exploring English’s *The Economy of Prestige*, my main purpose is to understand the motivation behind an author’s decision to write about a culture or aspect of a culture that belongs to another group of individuals. While the motives don’t excuse the act of cultural appropriation, identifying the influence outside factors have on these decisions allows us to see the influence it has on its readers as well. One of the leading questions that arises in this conversation is who the intended audience is. As discussed earlier, while evaluating the language in *American Dirt*, authors such as Jeanine Cummins write to appeal to a Western audience, or those who are geographically separated from the text’s setting and whose knowledge on said setting predominantly comes from outside sources. The idea that contemporary authors write novels to reach international and global

audiences is a commonplace; however, it is unclear whether this concept is completely true. In his last chapter “Prizes and the Politics of World Culture,” English explains that prize culture has “taken on a special importance in the context of the increasing globalization of the media and culture industries” (English 297). Although many texts have been written with the intention to share information between cultures and nations, due to the popularity of certain topics and themes that garner awards and prizes, the process of globalization through literature has been altered. Texts are now being written to receive awards or prizes, even if it means exploiting others’ experiences. He discusses contemporary world literature and states that it is not “merely a culturally and geographically expanded version of a familiar object” (English 306). In fact, English critiques it by stating that it is now an “essentially false and touristic product, [e]specially, if not always consciously, made for Euro-American consumption, masquerading as a representative form of indigenous cultural expression” (English 307). Rather than educating its audience by representing those whose voices have been silenced before, it is written to appeal to readers who want to appear socially conscious though they might not take any further actions to help change the situation that has led to the issues at hand. Because they are removed from the situation, they read the text as an outsider and because it is written by an outsider with that specific audience in mind, it is easier to establish a connection to stories that culture appropriate despite its being a foreign topic to them. Because of this connection, it is easier to understand why books written by “outsiders” about the experiences of “insiders,” though controversial, do so well in the publishing industry. While this relationship between the author and the reader helps drive the text’s popularity, it excludes the “insider” from the conversation, once more taking their voice away while exploiting the most traumatic parts of their lives. In an article about the backlash *American Dirt* was receiving, one woman mentions “reading the book in Parque Revolución in Guadalajara,

[I'd] look up and see real Mexico. [I'd] look down back at the book and see fake Mexico” (Contreras, AP News 2020). Despite its being her home that was being described in the novel, she was erased from the picture because Cummins wrote about a Mexico that fulfilled an outsider’s perspective of it.

The book publishing industry and literary prize culture go hand in hand, each affecting the other. English begins the discussion by stating that prize culture has “expanded more rapidly since the turn of the twentieth century, and it presents itself to us today as perhaps the most ubiquitous feature of cultural life” (English 2). The practice of awarding prizes for a certain criteria is inevitable in a time when money plays a role in the world of art and literature, and when the objective is to sell as many copies of a text as possible. English identifies this as a “consumer society run rampant” (English 3). Because it is impossible to escape the expectations of literary prize culture, authors must write about the themes and topics that are in demand. Their artistic freedom is compromised in order to appease susceptible readers and those awarding literary prizes. And while prize culture is generally criticized and seen as a restriction for artists everywhere, the concept continues to grow. The more awards and prizes that are issued, the more awards and prizes are created to combat the exclusivity of the former. In fact, the more problematic a prize or award is considered, the more attention the text receives. And the more negative attention a text receives, the more the prize and award are deliberated by critics. Such is the effect of prize culture that a problematic novel such as *American Dirt* received twice as much attention once it was accused of cultural appropriation. Oprah Winfrey picked this novel for her book club to bring awareness to the topic of immigration and to shine the light on the stories of immigrants, yet much of the attention the novel received was negative and accused Cummins of exploitation, appropriation and a misconstrued stereotypical portrayal of Mexican culture. But this cycle of scandal and publicity

in the media reminds one of the old saying that “there’s no such thing as bad publicity.” That is a fact of marketing, but it comes to point that the spotlight is on the author and the criticism the novel receives, rather than the information the novel was attempting to display to a larger audience. Similarly, Plath’s poem “Daddy” might be one of her most discussed poems and one that is always recognized by those who peruse through her extensive catalog of literature. Many readers may even form an opinion of Plath simply from the controversy her “problematic” literature creates. While her intentions may have been benign and she may have wanted to express the effects of the Holocaust on an individual, the focus shifts to the controversy and her personal experience instead.

There are several other reasons why an author might appropriate a culture or an individual’s experience--from the most “righteous” (to spread awareness) to the most harmful (to generate money and exploit others for gain). Another way to look at this decision is to understand how genre is involved. When Cummins received harsh criticisms for this novel, many fiction writers voiced their opinion and defended using other culture’s events, individuals and their stories for the sake of fiction. Articles were published emphasizing the limitations that the new “politically correct” culture has created for their writing, claiming that “if writers were barred from creating characters with attributes that we do not “own” (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on), fiction would be impossible” (Kunzru, *The Guardian* 2020). The term censorship emerges in the conversation about the literary liberties that authors have and the ones that the “politically correct” culture has taken away. To several authors, not having the freedom to write fiction from the perspective, position, and setting that they imagine for their text means that they are being censored. In reality, this sentiment stems from a sense of privilege. The privilege to ignore the consequences of cultural appropriation, along with the culture misinterpretation that usually follows, is one that both readers and fiction authors share when speaking on texts that bring about

controversy. Literature can be interpreted in a myriad of ways, but the damage that it can cause those whose identities are involved is irrefutable. What must be understood by these writers, along with those against this “censorship,” is that writing from the perspective of an insider is possible without completely silencing that voice. There must be a compromise that dissolves the exploitation of these individuals and rather gives them the platform to speak their own truth. In addition, there must be more opportunities for these insiders not only to write about their own traumatic experiences, but to have the liberty to simply write about whatever theme or topic they may choose. Identity and culture can be explored without the negative aspects of cultural appropriation that too often authors are guilty of in their writing, something that I will return to when discussing Bulawayo’s novel.

Circling back to the relationship between the book publishing industry and literary prize culture, it is crucial to note which writers are notoriously getting published and which must work harder to be granted the same opportunities. Several people have acknowledged that there is a diversity problem in the book publishing industry, but it wasn’t until information was gathered that it became a concrete accusation. According to a study done by the independent book publisher Lee & Low Books, in both 2015 and 2019, “diversity has not meaningfully improved within the industry: 79 percent of respondents considered themselves white in 2015, compared to 76 percent in 2019” (Rowe, Forbes 2020). This is only the beginning of the lack of diversity in the industry, as the data also shows that the industry is also made up of mostly heterosexual and cis women. If the staff who chooses, edits and publishes new books is predominantly white, is it any surprise that the majority of authors who achieve this accomplishment are also predominantly white? While stories that are being published are becoming more diverse, the authors are not. This is further evidence that these white authors are using these diverse themes and topics to gain access to these

opportunities, which leads them to write for the predominately white industry in order to be recognized. Even books that are published by non-white authors do not receive the same attention that would surely elevate their status on the booksellers lists. In “Where Things Stand,” Roxane Gay scrutinizes every book review published in the *New York Times* in the year 2011; “We looked at 742 books reviewed, across all genres. Of those 742, 655 were written by Caucasian authors.” (Gay, *The Rumpus* 2012) Though this information is a few years old, if it follows—as seems likely—the pattern of lack of diversity that the publishing industry has followed, then not much has changed.

While some authors can use the negative attention they receive from doing things such as culture appropriation to achieve, as English puts in, “immortality” in the literary sphere, other authors do not even get the attention that could possibly help them advance in their writing careers. But what exactly does this have to do with the process of cultural appropriation? Unfortunately, we still live in a society that prioritizes white voices, and the success that a novel such as *American Dirt* had despite the criticism only further proves that point. This is not to say that these other voices should be silenced, because they have their own stories or in the case of fiction, they create their own stories. Yet they are encouraged by both the book publishing industry and literary prize culture to write the stories of others because those will be successful publications. Rather than being held accountable, they are praised and given opportunities.

From the publishing perspective, what drives sales at this moment are novels riddled with “poverty porn,” in which poverty conditions or less than desired conditions are exploited for entertainment or shock value. There has been an increase in novels written about important topics that should be discussed, and in this case the focus is on migration and immigration. Individuals have been leaving their homes and migrating to other locations for centuries, so in fact this is not

something that should just be a *new* topic of discussion, but these stories have unfortunately been sidelined for too long. However, with the help of technological advances, more people are learning that these situations exist in other parts of the world. Readers search for ways to learn more about these topics and use fiction as a way to create a connection with the characters going through it. From one perspective, it is a great idea that society wants to be more socially conscious because that is the first step towards change. In fact, some critics argue that the mainstream authors writing characters with these stories is beneficial because it spreads information and criticize the limitations that are imposed on them because of the ‘politically correct’ climate in the United States. This is because they believe that if these mainstream authors don’t get the word out there, then diverse stories will cease to be shared. This does not take into account that there are already individuals that can speak about their own experiences, if given the chance. Only those living through these situations can explain exactly what is necessary to change the circumstances, if there are any. Comments like this also don’t take into account that mainstream authors are usually white, therefore further emphasizing the lack of diversity in published authors. Unfortunately, the popularization of topics of migration and immigration in contemporary literature has led to the exploitation of it and this happens for several reasons; First, it can be because the wrong individual is sharing the story. By “wrong” individual I mean someone outside of the experience who cannot get all the details correct. This can lead to misinterpretation, which later harms the movement. Second, the way the outsider shares this information - stereotypes, poverty porn, imitation vernacular - is inauthentic and caters to a certain audience, as discussed previously. Third, it takes away the insider’s agency, forcing them to only speak on their trauma or the negative parts of their culture because that is what gets attention. It would be ideal if what the book publishing industry and literary prize culture were looking for was the truth about their culture, not only the negative

aspects of it. Yet, the issue continues in that these other stories are not getting published. There is a lack of diversity in the stories that are being shared as well. In order for the process of cultural appropriation to be altered, we must be willing to listen, read and support the stories of those who are not the mainstream white, cis and heterosexual individuals.

Despite the many criticisms, these mainstream contemporary authors are able to successfully publish “problematic” novels and have readers defend these novels because they know what kind of narrative the readers like. Narrative interest is something Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck speak on in “Narrative Interest as Cultural Negotiation.” While some literary critics (for example Marie-Laure Ryan) locate narrative interest in the plot, theme and literary textual elements, others (Meir Sternberg) argue that a reader is only interested in the narrative if they can create a connection with the text, in other words how they process the text. Herman and Vervaeck “do not believe that a text on its own can force a reader to consider it interesting” (Herman Vervaeck 112) but rather that “narrative texts can induce narrative interest thanks to the network in which they circulate and in which the reader takes part (Herman Vervaeck 112). From this statement, what is concluded is that readers are looking for a tellable story to garner their interest, but one that enables the reader to understand the characters through relatable experience. Therefore, the topic or plot of the story must include a conflict that creates a response, forcing the reader to critically think of their own reaction to said conflict. This relationship between the narrative and the reader is important, and it is a device that Cummins takes advantage of in her novel. The conflict that causes the protagonist of *American Dirt* to escape her home is the violence brought on by the local drug cartels, a violence that according to Cummins is common in this setting. Her descriptions of the violence both by the cartel in the opening scene and during Lydia and Luca’s journey to the United States have the characteristics of “poverty porn.” The only

survivors of the massacre that Los Jardineros have committed, Lydia and her son, must confront the graphic image of their family members dead in the other room; the mother and son are forced to see “the brilliant splatters of color on Yénifer’s white dress, to see Adrián’s eyes, open to the sky, to see Abuela’s gray hair, matted with stuff that should never exist outside the neat encasement of a skull” (Cummins 22). This gut-wrenching description is a strong beginning to the conflict this novel will deal with. In order to set this novel in a Mexico that she is imagining, she adds other descriptions of past graphic murders that were done by drug cartels, to bring focus on how violent the situation is that forces the protagonist to leave her home. Lydia describes the “nightmarish scenes”; “bodies that are no longer bodies but only parts of bodies, mutilados. When the cartel murders, it does so to set an example, for exaggerated, grotesque illustration” (Cummins 32). Images of teenagers hung from their father’s store, decapitated body parts left behind, and murdered journalists with notes attached to their death scenes warning the community of what shouldn’t be written about. Lydia’s family is indeed murdered because her journalist husband was writing the truth about Los Jardineros. Cummins creates an image of a Mexico that is constantly in fear, where these drug cartels are “the modern bogeymen of urban Mexico. Because even parents who take care not to discuss the violence in front of them, to change the radio station when there’s news of another shooting, to conceal the worst of their own fears, cannot prevent their children from talking to other children” (Cummins 18). The violence is something no one can escape in this portrayal of Mexico, which helps the reader understand why individuals are forced to leave. The inclusion of the graphic descriptions creates a relationship between the reader and the text because they can imagine themselves in that situation, and therefore the connection they make with the text is that of empathy. This happens with Plath’s poem as well, and as Strangeways states, the reaction of discomfort and outrage at the situation being described in texts such as these causes the focus

to be on that feeling rather than the subject itself. Despite the empathy they may feel, their empathy is not what will bring change to the conditions that force individuals to migrate. In addition, the portrayal that Cummins shares is not authentic, because the violence is not a part of Mexican culture, but rather something that occurs in Mexico, as could occur anywhere else in the world. Violence is global because it inheres in the lucrative global trade in drugs.

Herman and Vervaeck also speak on the effect genre has on narrative interest. In genres, such as non-fiction, what readers expect is the complete truth. However, when it comes to fiction, there is more liberty to push a perspective on the reader. But the success of the text depends on the reader and how they react and interact with the text. In continuing with using empathy in order to make the readers understand the severity of the situation, Cummins includes scenes of the journey to the United States. The horrendous and difficult journey that many immigrants have to endure to escape their homes and seek safety in another country is one that is very personal. There are different journeys that these individuals take, each dangerous in its own way. Cummins did her research, speaking to individuals about their experiences (as she states in the Author's Note) and ultimately had her characters encounter La Bestia, also known to many as the *death train*. Immigrants risk death on these freight trains that travel to the North, as they attempt to board the moving train, when passing by tunnels or by being at risk of falling off the top of the train. In addition to that, there is always the possibility that they are caught by law enforcement (la migra), as Lydia and Luca are at one point. The fear and violence that this journey entails is described in great detail, to the best of her abilities; the physical pain, the blisters, the fatigue, the sweat, the sickness. And it has its desired impact due to the fact that one of the characters is an 8-year-old child, who views the world with innocence and the other protagonist is his mother, who is forced to put her only son in danger to reach safety. She is traumatized watching Luca jump onto the

death train, La Bestia; “Luca jumps. And every molecule in Lydia’s body jumps with him...She sees all of him in the moment when his body leaves the safety of the overpass and flies...Lydia watches him drop, her eyes so big with fear they’ve almost left her body” (Cummins 248-249). The emotions expressed by this worried mother in a traumatizing moment are engrossing but indulge in the “poverty porn” literary trope that is common among these types of novels. Cummins claims that she wanted to publish this novel to overturn the traditional stereotypes that are usually associated with migrants and the topic of migration, but by writing from a Mexican perspective in such a detached way she only ends up depicting Mexico and its culture as one dimensional. Despite her ‘good’ intentions, she manages to ignore that books about the migrant experiences have been written before, though they may not have received as much attention. Her place of privilege is reflected on the character of Lydia herself, who lives as a middle-class citizen in Mexico, is a business owner, and who has available to her more opportunities than other citizens she briefly speaks of in the novel. There is a moment in the novel where she is confronted by this and must admit to herself that she has become the migrant she never pictured herself being due to her own privilege; “All her life she’s pitied those poor people. She’s donated money. She’s wondered with the sort of detached fascination of the comfortable elite how dire the conditions of their lives must be wherever they come from, that this is the better option. That these people would leave their homes, their cultures, their families, even their languages, and venture into tremendous peril, risking their very lives, all for the chance to get to the dream of some faraway country that doesn’t even want them.” (Cummins 170-171) This monologue could be a moment of reflection for Cummins, but more importantly the readers where they acknowledge their place in the conversation revolving around migration. A place in which they can only empathize, but never fully understand the first-hand experience of other individuals. Here is where *American Dirt* being

a work of fiction benefits Cummins, as she is able to write the migrant experience from a “new” perspective, one that she has never lived through but which allows her to write as an outsider for other outsiders. Unfortunately, she does still make the mistake of writing the same stereotypical story that has been written by many other outsiders. Taking this into consideration, we will now look at the ways authors can write about culture without appropriation, misinterpretation and without only focusing on the trauma the individuals of said culture endure.

Too often, according to Young, “offensive acts of cultural appropriation may be defended on the grounds that they have redeeming social value” (Young 139). The evidence of this is in the success of novels that speak on important issues, but that are not written by an original source. In this circumstance, the social value is the awareness of a certain issue that is spread by these authors. Unfortunately, it takes a mainstream white voice to be listened to and for the issue to be acknowledged, ignoring the previous cries for attention from the marginalized communities. If Cummins’s actual goal was to help these communities, she should have figured out a way to share the platform she gained from her previous publications and allowed the individuals themselves to voice their own concerns. This is something that Luis Alberto Urrea is able to do in *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border*, an autobiographical book sharing his experience meeting the individuals living on the Mexican side of the border and speaking on the different worlds that are Mexico and the United States, despite only being miles apart. His account of the day-to-day lives of these individuals over years is enough for the reader to recognize why many are forced to leave their homes and migrate to the other side of the border. He is able to achieve this reaction from his readers without having to resort to sharing “poverty porn” to make a statement. His straightforward approach is one that allows for a myriad of stories to be shared, but he emphasizes that these are only a few of the many stories out there. Of course, one can argue

that because this is not fiction, it is easier to portray the message without having to resort to what Cummins is being criticized for. If we look at other fiction books, however, we can observe that it is still possible to portray the conditions that force individuals to migrate without exploiting their trauma. In addition, it is also possible to speak about other cultures without making the trauma the focus of the story. Some examples of contemporary texts that succeed in doing so are *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid and *Signs Preceding the End of the World* by Yuri Herrera. The former has his characters migrate through “magic” doors to avoid highlighting the perilous journey. Instead he focuses on the growth of the characters as individuals after each trip. The latter, though short, deals with a woman sent to the United States on a family errand but is able to explore the intricacies of her own mind. I will be focusing, however, on NoViolet Bulawayo’s 2013 novel *We Need New Names*, because she is able to write a wonderful novel that accomplishes both.

The novel is written from the first-person point of view of 10-year-old Darling, who lives in Zimbabwe. The book is essentially divided into two parts - her life in Zimbabwe and her life after she has migrated to the United States. In the first couple of chapters, Darling shares her experience being a child in her shantytown village, ironically named Paradise, that doesn’t have as many resources as the neighboring community where the wealthy people live. Because Bulawayo makes the decision to narrate from the perspective of a child, it is up to the readers to understand the terrible conditions that she is living through and how it affects the community, though they may not be explicitly described. Darling shares her day-to-day life, that in her eyes is normal because she has been living it. This doesn’t mean she doesn’t understand that other communities have it better than her because she acknowledges that she struggles in Paradise; she struggles with hunger, with limited possessions, without money. When visiting the nearby neighborhood, she states that “this place is not like Paradise, it’s like being in a different country

altogether. A nice country where people who are not like us live” (Bulawayo 6). Yet, these problems do not stop her from hanging out all day and playing games with her friends, as children often do. This is an important difference from the approach Cummins takes in *American Dirt*, where rather than sharing a bloody graphic murder scene that pushes the protagonists to leave, the approach is a more subtle one where the reader has to be the one to extract their own message from what Bulawayo is writing. She wants the reader to understand the inequalities that individuals face that drive them to seek better opportunities elsewhere. Darling is fortunate that her aunt Fostalina had previously escaped to the United States because it gives her the chance to do the same, though because she is a child she doesn’t completely understand the effects that migration will have on her. Readers, as “outsiders” looking in, must look at pivotal moments in the text that evoke the same thoughts and emotions that the “poverty porn” Cummins uses in her text. She does this by giving us scenes of explicit material through the eyes of Darling, who cannot express all the thoughts an adult would have. There is a scene where Darling and her friends attempt to “get rid of Chipo’s stomach once and for all” (Bulawayo 80). Darling’s friend Chipo is also a young girl living in this community, who was raped and impregnated by her grandfather. Because they are young girls they do not understand that what the grandfather did was wrong, thinking only that it makes them uncomfortable to speak on. They are also not aware of the dangers of attempting an abortion with a hanger, only that they want to get rid of her stomach. To them it is simply another game, where Darling, Chipo and their other friends, Sbho and Forgiveness, follow what they have seen done on the television show ER. The reader is then transported to this imagined scene that Darling has created, where the “patient” (Chipo) must trust “Dr. Cutter” (Forgiveness) and “Dr. Bullet” (Sbho) to perform the extraction. The image is only shattered when MotherLove discovers them, and when told what they were attempting to do, she bursts into tears and has “this look of

pain, this look that adults have when somebody dies. There are tears in the eyes and she is clutching her chest like there's a fire inside it" (Bulawayo 90). This reaction from the only adult in the scene expresses what most readers are probably feeling after what almost occurred, yet at no point does Darling show this emotion. This characteristic of lack of emotion from her was something that Bulawayo is criticized for but something that helped stray away from the "poverty porn" trope, which interestingly enough she was also criticized for.

Darling's strong character empowers Yogita Goyal's proposition that Bulawayo writes characters who "however disempowered, speak with an immediacy that removes them from a static or sentimentalized role of the victim" (Goyal 649). In "We Need New Diasporas," Goyal discusses improved ways to read and write contemporary literature, such as *We Need New Names*, that encourages readers to view the characters as individuals. These are individuals who despite their circumstances have their own identities outside of the role of victim, a role unfortunately many novels place on their characters. Reading the narrative this way helps create a different connection between the text and reader, one that allows us to look at how the individual is affected by the world around them, not just a traumatic or negative event in their life. The children play games to deal with the issues that the adults understand, such as "Find Bin Laden" and the "Country-Game," in which they fight to be the powerful countries such as "the U.S.A and Britain and Canada," while neglecting the "rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this one we live in - who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart" (Bulawayo 51). This commentary is a criticism from Bulawayo of how the world views countries such as Darling's and how it affects the individuals who live there. Therefore, later placing her in the United States, the reader can acknowledge the inequalities she must face in her new home and the hypocrisy of this sentiment. In addition, she expands the

conversation to discuss how the negative portrayal is a lingering effect of colonization done by those same “powerful” countries that the children try to claim during their game. According to Goyal, by having the children play these games, especially the one re-enacting the murder of the activist Bornfree who was killed for attempting to vote for change, Bulawayo alludes to “how African leaders have continued the exploitation after decolonization” (Goyal 650). These criticisms are intertwined with the criticism that she portrays Zimbabwe in a negative light, which is something that Cummins is accused of doing in her novel with Mexico. The accusations against Bulawayo don’t account for the fact that she is in fact from Zimbabwe. However, even though she would be considered an insider, her writing could be harmful if it misinformed or created stereotypes about the culture. She avoids doing this by not explicitly sharing only the negative aspects of the culture, as she allows Darling’s childhood to shine in the text, but by also instead criticizing those who do just that. The importance of Darling living half the novel in Zimbabwe and half in the United States is that it helps the reader see both sides of the migration, and how there are both negative and positive aspects in both locations. But most importantly, putting Darling in the United States allows her character to realize how she is viewed by the outsiders.

The second half of the novel begins with Darling already in Detroit, Michigan. Bulawayo makes the decision to skip the journey of migration from Zimbabwe to the United States. It is interesting to see how it does not affect the message of the novel and how it is different from *American Dirt*, which heavily relies on the journey to have an effect on its audience. In fact, to many readers of that novel, the dangers of that journey become the focus of the novel, sidelining the issues that caused the migration in the first place. On the other hand, in *We Need New Names*, by skipping the journey Bulawayo keeps the focus on Darling and her experiences. Once in the United States, Darling is confronted by the reality of how she is perceived. She encounters a

woman at a family wedding who makes assumptions about Africa based on what she has seen on television; “Africa is beautiful, she says. But isn’t it terrible what’s happening in the Congo?...I can’t even process it. And all those poor women and children. I was watching CNN last night and there was this little girl who was just- just too cute, she says. Her eyes start to mist” (Bulawayo 177-178). Darling’s lack of response as she watches the women’s performance of “awareness” and “sympathy” is a moment of realization for her. As the woman shares that her niece had traveled to Khayelitsha in South Africa to teach and took pictures of the children she had helped, Darling sees herself in those children and becomes aware of how the cameras had portrayed her; “I can see from it how the children’s faces must have looked. They were smiling like she is smiling now. Then I’m seeing myself in this woman’s face, back there when we were in Paradise when the NGO people were taking our pictures” (Bulawayo 178-179). Back home, when her friends and her were getting pictures taken of them, she did not know that they were being exploited to create an image of her country and others like it. She recalls feeling uncomfortable as they take pictures of them, especially of her pregnant friend Chipso; “They don’t care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing, that we would prefer they didn’t do it; they just take the pictures anyway, take and take” (Bulawayo 54). Yet, they allowed it because they would receive gifts afterwards. This interaction is Bulawayo’s way of criticizing how the media and “outsiders” portray other countries and their culture, and ultimately take away their agency to be their own individuals. This is something that cultural appropriation is also guilty of, and something that Cummins should be held accountable for.

Despite not knowing Darling, the woman makes assumptions about her from what she has learned to be true. It is in this moment that the concept of identity is introduced, though not in the same way as it has before in novels about migration. Bulawayo does not dive too deep into Darling

feeling her identity is split into two identities because she has migrated, but rather how her identity is perceived by the “Other”, or the “outsider.” This is something Stuart Hall explores in “Old and New Identities,” where he discusses how identities undergo changes and transformations but are never concrete. What does change is how individuals are perceived by others, which grows from stereotypes that can be emphasized by misinterpretation. Labeling individuals causes them to be grouped into different brackets, not only limiting them but also excluding them if they do not fit the standard. This form of identity politics can be harmful, and it is only encouraged by the texts the book publishing industry accepts and the literary prize culture rewards. Hall comments that there is no example of “any group or category of the people of the margins, of the locals, who have been able to mobilize themselves, socially, culturally, economically, politically in the last twenty or twenty-five years who have not gone through some such series of moments in order to resist their exclusion, their marginalization” (Hall 53). This is true with migrants as well, whose stories are exploited to spread a message but whose title will never simply have one definition. Thomas Nail also speaks on the figure of the migrant and explains that society views the migrant as “the political figure of movement” (Nail 11), in the sense that it places them as the cause and/or effect of the movement that occurs in society. To Nail, migration should not always be considered by its negative aspects, just as migrants should not only be considered victims. One way he addresses this is by stating that rather than viewing migration and movement as an unfortunate phenomenon, it should be viewed as a “structural necessity of the historical conditions of social reproduction” (Nail 12). On the one hand, it is difficult to view it this way when we read stories like Lydia and Luca’s. The graphic images and violence in both Mexico and the journey to the United States poses the story as one where the characters had to leave and would only be safe once in the United States. However, this is not always the case, and this is not something that the readers of *American Dirt*

are able to see because only the last chapter of the novel takes place in the United States. In this last chapter, Cummins portrays the United States as the solution to the problem, when in reality it has its own issues. On the other hand, Nail's point of view should be considered when looking at contemporary literature. As Nail puts it, "the figure of the migrant is like a social persona that bears many masks depending on the relative social conditions of expulsion" (Nail 18). Stories about migration should take into consideration that the migrant has many definitions and simultaneously, stories about cultures should progress past sharing only the negative aspects of culture. The added obstacle of the "Other" placing an identity on the characters both reflects what society does to people and shows that what marginalized communities face is only part of a system that has always worked against them, and which cultural appropriation is part of keeping it in place. Because of this fact, the criticism that novels that culture appropriate receive are valid and just another reason why the individuals of other cultures should be allotted the space to speak their own stories. Otherwise people will be misguided by what they are shown. Bulawayo emphasizes this point in one of the later interactions between Darling and her friend Chipo back home. Just as the woman from the wedding did, Darling assumes the situation in Zimbabwe from what she has watched in the news. In a phone conversation, the following scene develops:

"I know it's bad, Chipo, I'm so sorry. It pains me to think about"

"What is so bad? Why are you feeling pain?"

"Well, everywhere where people live, there is suffering"

"I know. But last week I saw on BBC-"

"But you are not the one suffering. You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? It's us who stayed here feeling the real suffering." (Bulawayo 287)

This is a moment of realization for Darling and another call out by Bulawayo, emphasizing that it is wrong to assume information or the circumstances of an individual, a culture or location based on how others portray it. The fact that Darling no longer lives in Zimbabwe and she falls victim to the influence of the media does not mean that she is now an “outsider” like the other woman. However, it does bring into question how she was influenced by her new environment that led her to make these assumptions about a community she was already a part of. This is the negative effect of placing an identity on someone, stereotyping a culture and the harm that comes from outsiders speaking for others.

Although both novels discussed are based upon individuals migrating, Bulawayo’s novel puts the focus on the individual’s situation rather than the main event. Darling does migrate, yet this fact doesn’t change her situation as much as she thought it would. According to Goyal, “the novel refuses to celebrate migration, centering poverty and economic vulnerability as key facets of the characters’ lives” (Goyal 651). She is able to do this by showing Darling’s expectations ruined by the reality of living in Detroit. When writing back home, she hides that “the house [we] lived in wasn’t even like the ones we’d seen on TV when we were little . . . didn’t tell them how in the summer nights there sometimes was the bang-bang-bang of gunshots in the neighborhood and I had to stay indoors, afraid to go out . . . how there were poor people who lived on the streets . . . I left out these things because they embarrassed me, because they made America not feel like My America, the one I had always dreamed of back in Paradise” (Bulawayo 189-190). The poverty and economic vulnerability are part of both her life in Paradise and her life in Detroit, and the reason for this is the effect of external factors and circumstances that she cannot control.

In order to write about a “new diaspora,” there are some key differences that must exist in contemporary literature that did not exist before in texts about migration; “it is largely voluntary,

rather than coerced; it is connected to globalization; and it results from the failure of the postcolonial state” (Goyal 642). *We Need New Names* is able to meet each of these “requirements” through Darling’s experience in both Paradise and Detroit. In addition to accomplishing this in her novel, Bulawayo is able to write the novel as a coming of age story, where Darling has to deal with the same things that other teenagers do; the friends who point out each other’s flaws, exploring her sexuality through watching porn, and the turmoil of losing touch with her friends back home. She grows as an individual, despite the pressure that might come from having to fit into either a Zimbabwean or American identity. The fact that the novel is narrated from the first-person perspective also further helps create the new narrative that surrounds a single individual. To emphasize that fact, Bulawayo includes only three isolated chapters that are written from an omniscient group point of view--“How They Appeared,” “How They Left,” and “How They Lived.” These chapters are inserted in the novel to speak in more broad terms, giving voice to the many different circumstances that individuals live through in the progress of migration. For example, “How They Left” is the chapter right before Darling is in America. Instead of a chapter describing her journey to America, this chapter describes the reasons why many others travel to America; “Those with nothing are crossing borders. Those with ambitions are crossing borders. Those with hope are crossing borders . . . They flee their own wretched land so their hunger may be pacified in foreign lands” (Bulawayo 148). An omniscient narration shows how universal the reasons are for people to migrate to another country, whether it be to escape life threatening conditions or in hopes of becoming successful somewhere else. The decision to include these three short chapters has a lasting effect on the novel because it gives readers the perspective of adults who have more awareness of life and who can accurately express the difficulties of migrating that the young girl’s perspective cannot give in such detail. The chapters revolving around Darling

emphasize her age and innocence, along with her individuality, whereas the broader chapters contrast that narration by being more analytical of the issue the novel explores.

At a time when the literary world wants to continue to publish books about migration that generalize and take away the individual's agency, texts such as *We Need New Names* are important. There have to be more novels that are written by people from marginalized communities that don't want to share their trauma as well. There have to be more novels about cultures that are open to sharing the various voices in these communities, not what the Western audience wants to read because each identity is unique and made up of individual circumstances and events. Goyal supports reframing stories about cultures by ignoring the question of "what does the Western audience want?" and instead "study[ing] the more complex ways of imagining the past, present, and future. To do so, we need to move away from the temptation to slot these fictions into preexisting plots and recognize the need for new forms" (Goyal 659). These new forms of narrative are a way to alter the process of cultural appropriation in literature and can help to stop encouraging the systems that oppress and marginalize others. Going back to Matthes's journal article "Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?", it is just "one way in which underlying social inequalities can evince themselves through acts of expression and representation" (Matthes 353). The issue of privilege comes up again because many authors do not receive the opportunity to publish these "new narratives." Unfortunately, the book publishing industry and literary prize culture are at play, continuously giving the power to individuals who exploit cultures and individuals for success without any accountability. While many of these novels have their desired effect of exposing their audience to societal issues, it is important to hear other stories that haven't been told before. Value in society should not depend on sharing the negative parts of one's culture or circumstances. As news of individuals appropriating culture to get ahead in the academic setting

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keep surfacing, it is important to look at how all aspects of our society, including literature, must be altered to prevent this.

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