

ESSAY

White People Continue to Colonize Our Stories. Why?



Image Source: History.com

By Jaclyn Gochoco

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In March of 2021 a text message from a well-meaning White friend read, *Are you okay?* I hadn't read the news that day. Her response to my confusion was a single word: *Atlanta*. After learning of the massacre that targeted East Asian women—faces that reminded me of my Lola, my Titas, my own—I became afraid to leave my house. I was living in a Trump-flag-waiving-town that was so White I'd take notice on the rare occasion that I saw another POC. Two nights before the shooting, I'd sped home and called my Filipino father from my driveway and told him about the men who had just called me *Chinavirus* and twisted their faces at me until I left the bar where my writing workshop had met for a few beers. My dad told me they were ignorant, that it was nothing to worry about, but the [150% rise in AAPI hate crimes](#) that year proved him wrong.

This is a common belief shared among Americans, that microaggressions or

light cultural appropriation is nothing to worry about, and while I wish it were true, it's not. The Atlanta shooter claimed he killed these women because of his sex addiction; He targeted Asian women because we have been oversexualized and objectified by America's media for centuries. This is the result of BIPOC people not being able to write their own narratives.

So why do White people, particularly ones claiming to be BIPOC allies, still insist on stealing, white washing, and colonizing our stories? It seems to come from a belief that writers should not be limited in the stories they tell, often claiming that it is a much too slippery slope that ends in censorship. During my MFA program, the question of who has the right to tell what story was a common one. I always clarified: are we talking about writing from the perspective of a Dentist as someone who barely flosses or from the POV of a Black man as a White woman because these are two very different questions.

White people have been stealing from BIPOC for all of history and it continues in our culture today. Just look at popular movies like *La La Land* where Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone save Jazz! Or Miley Cyrus's claim that she invented Twerking! Literature is no different; White writers have been stealing POC stories for centuries: sometimes with good intentions like Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 novel, *Ramona* and Lisa Halliday's 2018 three-part novel, *Asymmetry*, other times with questionable or severely misguided intentions like Jeanine Cummings 2020 novel *American Dirt* or Kathryn Stockett's, *The Help* (where she famously wrote in Black vernacular i.e., "You is smart, you is kind, you is important"). The latter two authors were aware enough to know that they were crossing some sort of line—Cummings is quoted as saying, "I wished someone slightly browner than me would

write it” and Stockett added an afterword saying she feared she “was crossing a terrible line writing in the voice of a black person”—but that didn’t stop them from crossing it.

Here’s the main issue with White writers writing from minority voices—yes, even ones who did their research, had sensitivity readers, took a nuanced approach—nothing lives in isolation, novels included. BIPOC writers have been fighting for years to publish their stories to only be ignored by the White gatekeepers of big publishing. Now, White writers want to write BIPOC stories themselves.

[In 2018](#), White people accounted for 79% of the publishing industry and 95% of literary agents and acquisition editors in the U.S., and 89% of fiction published were written by White authors. White writers need to ask themselves why they believe they are the best ones to write BIPOC stories. They need to weigh the reality that their Whiteness is perceived as better business to publishers and that their novel may cancel out a BIPOC’s novel, negating our ability to reclaim our own story. As members of the dominant culture, they must examine their privilege and ask if they are fetishizing BIPOC characters or using BIPOC stories as trauma porn.

Getting back to good intentions—which many will argue is the difference between say Mickey Rooney playing Mr. Yunioshi and someone like Helen Hunt Jackson writing *Ramona*—works of fiction need to be judged based on their execution and real-world consequences, not the warm and fuzzy thoughts behind them. White savior complex aside, Jackson considered herself a champion for Native Americans who wanted to, “[write a story that would do for the Indian one-hundredth part what Uncle Tom’s Cabin did for the Negro.](#)” She referred to *Ramona* as “the sugar-coating of the pill” also known as whitewashing.

Instead of changing minds, she romanticized a half White Native American woman and wrote a novel riddled with racist slurs, tropes, stereotypes, and inaccurate portrayals of Native American peoples filtered through the voice of a wealthy White woman.

Lisa Halliday, a white, upper-class, Christian woman, takes a similar non-nuanced approach as Helen Hunt Jackson, in her debut novel, *Asymmetry*, where she attempts to write from a Muslim man’s perspective during his time in a detention center at Heathrow Airport. It’s worth mentioning that I could only find one *Assymetry* review that was written by a BIPOC, which could explain why this novel appears to be so celebrated despite 1/3 of the novel being a mess of broad strokes, lackluster, stereotyped accounts that came across as dressed up research vs. lived experiences. The framing of the novel which asks whether a White woman can write from the perspective of “the other”—a term that I find cringey—seemed to be why critiques felt that she pulled this off. However, if you are still referring to us as “the other,” then I think that question answers itself.

White-identifying Jeanine Cummings got away with less during her release of *American Dirt*, but it didn’t stop her from profiting off stolen Latinx stories which she sterilized for White mass consumption. Not only is the writing terrible, but parts are blatantly stolen—i.e., the garbage truck scene—from Latinx writers like Luis Alberto Urrea. As mentioned, Cummings said she “wished someone slightly browner than her” knowing that they already have written it. On top of that, she received a seven-figure advance for these stolen stories. This is unacceptable. It’s the slippery slope that White authors should be concerned about, not censorship of the privileged. It’s time we stop prioritizing good intentions over the consequences these appropriated stories

have in the real world. Stories like *American Dirt*, which vilify and distort, aren't just offensive, but dangerous.

White people have been in control of the narrative for long enough and it has never done BIPOC any good. The next time a White author asks me my opinion on them writing "the other", I'd like to ask how they feel about a white man dressing in traditional Chinese clothing, learning Mandarin, and dying his hair black to play a Chinese man on TV. Does this make them uncomfortable? If so, why would White authors writing from the perspective of a minority be any different?