Who Gave You the Right to Tell That Story?

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A few years ago, a writer named Ashima Saigal from Grand Rapids, Michigan, witnessed an incident on a bus in which a group of black kids were mistreated by the police. She was disturbed, and soon after, she wrote about it. Later, reading over what she'd written, she realized the story wasn't working. She'd tried to write from one of the kid's perspectives, but Saigal, who is Indian-American, wasn't sure that she had the skill or knowledge to write from the point of view of a black child. She decided to sign up for an online creative writing course called "Writing the Other."

The course was founded by the speculative-fiction writers Nisi Shawl, who is black, and Cynthia Ward, who is white, nearly twenty years ago. They'd met a decade or so earlier, at a fantasy and science-fiction workshop, and were inspired to design their own writing class after a conversation with another classmate, a white friend who'd declared that she'd never write a character who didn't share her background or identity because she'd be sure to get it wrong. "My immediate thought was, 'well that's taking the easy way out!'" recalled Shawl. While imagining the lives of people who are different from you is virtually a prerequisite of most successful fiction writing, the consequences of doing it poorly have grown more serious since the pre-Twitter, pre-woke '90s, as the conversation about who gets to tell whose stories has moved from the fringes of publishing into the mainstream. J.K. Rowling, Lionel Shriver, and Kathryn Stockett have all caught heat for botching the job. In the young-adult fiction world, a number of books have been pulled in advance of their releases for clichéd and problematic portrayals of minorities. The conversation is often depicted in the media as a binary: On one side are those who argue that only writers from marginalized backgrounds should tell stories about people who share their cultural histories — a course correction for an industry that is overwhelmingly white — while on the other are those who say this wish amounts to censorship.

For those following closely, it can feel as though the debate has gotten stuck in a rut, unable to move beyond the basic question of whether a writer has the right to tell a given story. One of the goals of the course is to shift the conversation from "whether" to "how." The class is predicated on the idea that "writing the other" is a skill that can be taught and learned, like any aspect of the craft. Shawl and K. Tempest Bradford, a speculative fiction writer who co-teaches the class, urge their students to get comfortable describing a character as black or Asian or white. They warn of common pitfalls — like comparing skin tones to chocolate and coffee and other kinds of food, which carry colonial associations

and can make people sound like commodities, intended to be consumed. Students learn to analyze their identities and the unconscious biases that shape their work. They consider why some identities are more challenging to render than others. They practice taking risks.

After taking the course, Saigal decided to set the story she'd been working on aside. "There was something about being in that class that helped me recognize I don't have enough skill yet to do that," she explained.

This conversation is, of course, something all established writers are reckoning with today. I spoke to ten authors about how and why they decide to write outside their identities. Some found their interior lives uninteresting; others were compelled to represent the diverse worlds they inhabited. "There is no exact formula," says Laila Lalami, author of the National Book Award finalist *The Other Americans*. "It's not as if you can give a prescription to a writer: Take two teaspoons of empathy, a drop of research." They each approached the work in different ways, and none were immune to the fear that they might get the other wrong. "It's scary to be bold," says the horror novelist Victor LaValle, whose seventh book will be his first with an all-female cast of protagonists. "But that's what makes the work exciting."

The Sensitivity Read

Photo: Andrea Cipriani

Jennifer Weiner,*In Her Shoes*

In my 2004 book, Little Earthquakes, one of the characters was a woman of color. I wrote that character partly to subvert expectations. She was African-American, but she was extremely wealthy: She'd been raised in Paris and had gone to fancy boarding schools and was sophisticated. I wanted to have a character who wasn't anybody's stereotypical version of a black woman. But looking back, I'm sure there were ways I could have written her differently — more accurately, more nuanced, more grounded, more specific. What I probably did is I imagined a privileged white woman and poured this black woman inside of her.

My last book was the first I've worked on with a sensitivity reader. Harold, an African-American character in *Mrs. Everything*, is one of my women's happy endings, and so I wanted him to be a good guy, but not so ridiculously perfect that no one would ever believe him. I found an oral history of black soldiers in Vietnam, and that was really helpful in terms of what it felt like to be black in America at that moment in our country's history. I'd look at blogs and social media and talk to black friends. The sensitivity reader I worked with pushed me on the specifics: When my character's in bed with him, what is his body like? What is his hair like? Because that's going to be different than it is with a white guy. We'd talk about Harold's family, and she'd tell me, "You use food and ritual to talk about your Jewish characters, and that tells us who they are, and you need to do the same thing

with your African-American characters: What are they eating for Thanksgiving? What are they doing when everyone comes home for the holiday?" Who is this person, really? That's the central question for any novelist. You have to put who you are aside and imagine as best you can every detail of that person's experience.

Scouring Tumblr

Photo: Laura Hanifin
N. K. Jemisin, *The Broken Earth Trilogy*

It's all the same craft. What changes is our willingness about what to prioritize. Fifty years ago in science fiction, if you got the math or physics wrong, your name was mud. Nobody gave a damn about race or gender or any of these other identities. Everyone was a white guy, and if you wrote a woman, she was a white guy with tits. Now it's a writerly virtue to get people right. I've learned to not fear obviousness when I'm describing race or topics related to oppression. With an American audience, you have to be as in your face about it as possible because our society encourages delicate euphemism. I'd rather be accused of being obvious than allow people to get away with thinking all of my characters are white people. The truth is, when you walk into a room and you see a bunch of strangers, the first thing you notice is their appearance, their race and gender. When I first describe a character, I sometimes hang a lampshade on race. My narrator will immediately think: 'She might be Latino, oh maybe not, she might be Indian.' I render that mental process.

You're not going to be perfect. In *The Broken Kingdoms,* my protagonist was a blind woman, and she had a superpower associated with her blindness. As I now know, disability as a superpower is a trope. I didn't read enough literature featuring blind people to really understand it's a thing that gets done over and over again. Ehiru, a character from *The Killing Moon*, is asexual, and I don't think I explored that well. If I were writing it now, I would have made him more clearly ace. I figured this out by reading Tumblr. I am on Tumblr quietly — I have a pseudonym, and nobody knows who I am. Because lots of young people hang out there and talk about identity and the way our society works, it's basically a media-criticism lab. It's an interesting place to talk about identity, and I did not understand until I saw these conversations that asexuality was an identity. I thought about it as a broken sexuality. My story reflected my lack of understanding of how that worked.

My Metafictional Device

Photo: Elena Seibert
Nell Freudenberger, *The Newlyweds*

In order to write about America honestly, I have to trick myself by stepping outside myself. If I try to write a character who is a middle-aged female novelist who lives in Brooklyn, it doesn't work. Maybe because I can't help trying to protect myself. If I'm writing as

somebody different, I can tell the truth a little better. *The Newlyweds* is about a woman from Bangladesh who moves to Rochester. The book was inspired by this woman, Farah, I met on a plane who was moving to the U.S. She'd met her husband on a site designed to connect Western men with Eastern women. We exchanged information, and she spent a bunch of time emailing with me. At first I was really hesitant to ask her whether I could tell her story because she didn't speak English well enough. I tried to write the story from my grandmother's perspective — an old white lady from the South, and what would she think about a woman like Farah moving in next door to her. But there was a limit to how much my grandmother was going to get to know her — she wasn't going to be transformed at age 90. After I wrote that, Farah and I were still emailing each other, and her English got better at lighting speed. Her observations became more nuanced, her relationship with her new husband's family became more complex, and she became more lukewarm about her adopted home.

After we'd been corresponding for many months, we had a deeper friendship and I felt like I could ask her. I showed her some of what I'd written so far, and she really liked the idea. I immersed myself in fiction and nonfiction related to Bangladesh, but I was also constantly interviewing her, over email and phone. I've never done a book this way before, and I worried about it constantly. There's one thing I might do differently if I were writing today. In the book, I gave the character I based on Farah (whom I named Amina) a cousin, Kim. She writes something for her for an essay contest, as if she were Amina — Kim is using her more capable English in order to help her friend win scholarship money. That was the metafictional device I used to signal to the reader that this is me writing Farah — it's never going to be her. The essay contest was a way for me to talk about that in fiction — that however many more advantages I had, I wanted to share them with her. I would still write the book from her perspective today, because my relationship with her is genuine. But I didn't go far enough to find a way in the novel to justify what I was doing. I would almost like the essay-writing plot to be a framing structure for the book.

Scarier Than Writing White

Photo: Courtesy of the Subjects

Kaitlyn Greenidge, *We Love You, Charlie Freeman*

My feelings have changed since I wrote my first book, which is partly in the voice of a racist Yankee heiress. Her section is written as an apology to all black people everywhere, and originally, the impulse was to parody that style of non-apology we often see after a white celebrity has done something racist, the 'sorry if I've offended somebody.' The first time I wrote the section, I was told by my readers, by my editor and my agent, that the letter wasn't working, and at first I was like, 'They just don't get what the letter is supposed to be

doing.' But eventually, I realized they were right, because it didn't read like an actual human wrote it. There wasn't an emotional truth there. So in rewrites I had to go back. I wrote 40 or 50 pages of this woman's backstory that never made it into the book.

When I wrote the first draft, in between 2008 and 2013, we were in a national conversation about race that was all about how we were post-racial, that Obama had healed all wounds. I was writing about a black family, but I wanted to have a way to talk about what they were up against, that certain strain of racism that people are more familiar with now — the type of person who can say all the correct things about race and reconciliation, but fundamentally wants you to know that they're superior in every possible way. If I were to write this novel now, I don't know if I'd include that section of the book. I'm not sure I want to keep exploring blackness in relief with whiteness. I'm still interested in writing the other, though. The project I'm working on now is about black Americans and Haitians, and that's scarier than writing white. The thing about whiteness is, of course, if you're not white, you know whiteness and the rules of whiteness better than white people do, because you have to to survive. In this project, I'm looking at identity in a different context from any I've lived in — it's set in the 1870s. I'm very worried about getting it wrong, especially knowing I'm writing about a country that's often written about through a very biased lens. Even doing research on it, it's difficult to find emotional and historical truths. That's why I'm doing it — because it's a challenge.

250 Pounds

Photo: Teddy Wolff
Victor LaValle, *The Changeling*

Up until my fourth book, *The Devil in Silver,* I'd only written protagonists who were black dudes. In that book, my protagonist was a white guy. I worried I was going to *say* he was a white guy, but everyone would read it and think he sounded just like all my other protagonists. I started by imagining a different body. The main character, Pepper, he's six-four, 250 pounds — and I'm not that. I do have a best friend who's six-four, and at the beginning, when I thought about Pepper, I was thinking about my buddy and what it's like when he's walking through a door, having to lower his head a little bit. I thought about the space Pepper would take up when he enters a room — how much that body communicates before he gets a chance to say anything — and that turned out to be my way into writing many different others. I can't imagine how anyone's interior life is not formed by the body they got born into.

The book I'm finishing now is about a diverse group of women homesteaders in Montana in the early 20th century. I read a lot of history books about these women, and journals they kept. One of the characters is based on a black woman who had the greatest moonshine in Montana and ran a little saloon out of her home. I took the broad outlines of this woman's story, but her actual personality is stolen from one of my friends. (There are

those of us who say we always do that, and then there are those who lie.) The more I read about these women, I noticed this undercurrent I really connected to. They needed to get away from society — partly because they were ambitious, but also because there was a version of themselves they could only be out there, that they couldn't be wherever they were from. I really identified with that. I wanted to write about these women because I wanted to write a story about those feelings in myself, but *through* these women — I didn't want to write about a black guy from Queens moving out to Montana. That seemed less bold and audacious than what these women were doing, maybe because I'd already written a bunch of books about young black guys trying to make their way in the world and escape the legacy of family and maybe become better versions of themselves — or not. I wouldn't have tried to write characters so different from myself a couple of books ago, because I don't think I would have trusted in my abilities yet to get outside of myself. Even though I'm writing people who are not like me, on some level, all of the women in the story are asking themselves the same question: How much do we owe ourselves; how much do we owe others? How do we draw that line? That's a thing I'll wrestle with until I'm dead. What's fun is that not everyone wrestles with it in the same way.

Inhabiting a Racist

Photo: Courtesy of the Subjects

Laila Lalami, *The Other Americans*

I don't find myself a very interesting person. I'm interested in the world around me. Having said that, I really believe that in each of these characters there's some connection to me. Research *is* essential, but there comes a moment when you have to let go of that research and start writing. In *The Other Americans*, I have one character who's an out-and-out racist. What's the way to enter a character like that? It wasn't a question of two or three drafts. It took much longer. This book took nine drafts and four and a half years.

I knew that anyone who ends up where this character ends up must have had certain things happen in his life — family alienation, exposure to a certain set of ideas, and whether through a failure of a family or a failure of the education system, finding those ideas acceptable. This guy has a troubled relationship with his father, and he's very close to his mother who raises dogs and shows them in American Kennel Club competitions, so he starts getting these ideas about the purity of lines in dogs. When he's a teenager, he meets this older guy, a racist man, who becomes a surrogate father. When I tell you this is his background, it sounds like I sat down and wrote it down in one day, but of course I didn't. It happens draft by draft, and with each draft I have to ask myself: Does this guy seem real to me? People make choices based on emotions, and if you are too focused on the research, you risk focusing too much on the logic.

Cross-Racial Longing

Photo: Sarah Shatz
Jess Row, *Your Face in Mine*

In grad school, the curriculum I was taught was virtually all white. Very few people, if any, were talking about writing cross-racially — the necessity of it, the dangers of it. It took me a long time to even admit to myself that that's what I wanted to do. It wasn't until I'd struggled with a novel that I tried to write for six or seven years, that was a complete disaster, that I had this idea which became my 2014 novel, *Your Face in Mine*. It's about a white American who undergoes racial-reassignment surgery and becomes a black person. I did a lot of research. There's a whole American literature on the subject — books like *Passing*. But the other thing I had to do was really search my own background. As a white kid growing up in Baltimore in the early '90s, just totally obsessed with hip-hop, saturated in the golden era of Public Enemy and De La Soul — how did that affect my identity as a young person? And how did it shape me later, when I went to college, where I was effectively told that I had to forget that side of myself?

My editor and I had a lot of questions about why exactly my protagonist chooses to do this. Does he authentically feel like he's a white person in a black body, or does he do it as a kind of fraud? When the novel came out, critics dove into those questions in interesting ways — is it possible for someone to actually want to be black? Why? Is there really such a thing as a transracial person who actually believes that they are black? My answer to those questions was yes. I do think there's a relationship between longing to be black, and the decision, as a white writer, to write outside one's own identity. I've always experienced cross-racial longing, and that translates into my fiction. My profound skepticism about my own whiteness drives me to write the kind of fiction and nonfiction that I write. When I went out on the road with *Your Face in Mine*, a student asked me a version of that question: 'How can you be comfortable writing from a nonwhite perspective?' I said to the student, 'That assumes I'm comfortable writing from a white perspective, and I'm not.' I've never been comfortable with normative representations of white American characters. I'm always looking to undermine and deconstruct and take apart those representations. That's the material I'm drawn to, and it's also the material of my life.

The Inevitable Failure

Photo: Haruka Sakaguchi
Monique Truong, *The Sweetest Fruits*

In my historical novel, *The Sweetest Fruits*, I write about three women of color from different places and times and backgrounds, all different from my own. They're all connected by a white writer named Lafcadio Hearn. I was drawn to Hearn because he was a traveler, and he took the reverse journey I did as a Vietnamese refugee. This book took me eight years to research and write. When I began reading about him, I noticed there was

something horribly deficient in the way the women in his life had been written. There were these gaps in their lives, and for historical-fiction writers like myself, we work within the gaps. I had questions about Hearn and his women.

The one who concerned me most was Alethea Foley, an African-American woman and former slave who moved to Cincinnati and was married to Hearn. She concerned me most for good reason. What does it mean for an Asian-American woman to write in the voice of a formerly enslaved woman? And how can you not be confronted with that question every single day? The way I think about it is I honestly believe stories belong to all of us. At the same time, the glory of publishing — who gets to tell the stories — does not belong to all of us. So how do you resolve these two things? You have to work with both. The first step in writing the other is, I try to shed as much of my own language as possible. I like to write in the first-person voice because it forces me to let go of my own language and think about the context of my characters — their era, their education, their lack of facility with the written language. I had to take into account that Alethea was prohibited from learning to read and write because of her enslavement, and how that would shape her voice. And that tells me as much about her as it does about me. How I'm dependent on certain tropes, where my humor lies, where my assumptions lie. There is an inevitable failure in my trying to write these women. We have that desire, and the tension is: Why do we do it? Do we do it for ourselves? Does it make us feel better? Are we rescuing a bird or something? I think a lot of it is for ourselves. If you acknowledge that there is a failure in the project, in an odd way it frees you.

The Inevitable Critique

Photo: Drew Stephens
Sarah Schulman, *The Cosmopolitans*

I've always written characters who were different than I was because I came of age in a multiracial lesbian community. I had an experience of interracial life that straight white people of my generation often didn't. Take Meg Wolitzer — because she was straight, she was in an all-white literary world. Another significant factor: I did not go to an MFA program, and those were very whitening until like, yesterday. My writing training came from working in the underground feminist and gay newspapers of the late '70s and early '80s. I learned by writing about the people who were reading those newspapers. It was a very interactive readership — if they didn't like what I wrote, they would tell me. My first characters with AIDS showed up in *People in Trouble*. I was surrounded by mass death, and the people around me were dying very quickly, and there was no record of the things they said about their own lives. What I was writing was witness fiction: I listened to people with AIDS and wrote down what they said.

In my first book, which came out in 1984, there were two characters of color — one worked, one didn't. The one I think worked was an Asian lesbian rocker named Melanie

Chang. She was kind of based on someone I knew. And then there was a kind of fake black best-friend character who didn't work. She wasn't based on anyone I knew. The characters who were based on people I knew were better characters at first. I've been told I got it wrong. Jacqueline Woodson told me I was wrong to have one of the protagonists in *Shimmer* be concerned by a biographical detail — that her black grandfather was once married to a white woman. She said a black person wouldn't be hung up on this. I thought, *Okay, I didn't have the awareness to be accurate.* It motivated me to work harder. Although, her statement has since been contradicted by other people. That's the other thing. There is no monolithic black opinion. Still, I would have finessed this character differently. *The Cosmopolitans*,which came out almost 20 years later, has a black protagonist and a white protagonist. I asked Tayari Jones to read that manuscript and she said, 'Yep, they're black.' It's about being in conversation with people. But that only goes so far. I can never be in a room where there are only black people because as soon as I walk in, that's ruined.

A Supernatural Experience

Photo: Nicola Goode

Ben H. Winters, *Golden State*

The choice to write a protagonist of color in *Underground Airlines* was dictated by the idea for the novel: to interrogate contemporary racism by using speculative fiction. The idea that anti-black violence is a 'black issue' lets white people off the hook. Like, *I hope they figure that out, I'm going to write my memoir of being a 40-year-old Jewish guy*. I could have done the story in a lot of different ways, but the character I felt who could tell the story in the most emotionally moving way was a former enslaved person who has essentially been forced to work for the government enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act. Creating a character is this weird combination of craft and a supernatural experience. At a certain point, your consciousness starts doing things. But I tried — especially because I was writing a character so different from my lived experience — to inform him with my own knowledge of, not just slave narratives, but fiction by black authors: *Beloved*, *The Invisible Man*. Octavia Butler. I did more research for *Underground Airlines* than any other book I did. As I revised, lines of dialogue rang false. We're all too inclined to let our writing be informed by other books and other kinds of entertainment. I tried to make them more specific — not just, *This is how a black person talks and thinks* , but this specific man, how does *he* talk and think?

I feel nervous even now, talking about this. I worked as hard as I could to bring this character to life with all the depth of humanity he deserved. Nevertheless, I was constantly aware not only that he is different from me, but also about the very ugly history of black characters being portrayed in fiction in gross ways. I tried to make sure my book was not of that tradition.

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**An earlier version of this piece quoted Nell Freudenberger as saying "metaphysical device." In fact, she said, "metafictional device."*

Read the following article, written by a current student at Hamilton College in *The Spectator*, which is Hamilton College's independent, student-run weekly newspaper, about the upcoming performance of *West Side Story*.

West Side Story at Hamilton: identity, erasure, and racism
by Shelby Castillo '19

West Side Story is a play that I watched and loved when I was younger. It has a fantastic musical score, intense and artistic choreography, and Rita Moreno, a trailblazing Puerto Rican actress. To its credit, the production tackles racial issues and is progressive in some ways such as depicting an interracial relationship and the white gang, the "Jets," as Polish immigrants. It is understandable why any ambitious director would want to direct it, but putting it on at Hamilton is more than simply bad taste: it's racist.

West Side Story is a "Romeo and Juliet" story in which Tony (Romeo) — a former member of an all-white gang called the "Jets" — and Maria (Juliet) — an Afro or Indigenous Puerto Rican with a brother who is in a gang called the "Sharks" — fall in love. Their relationship is tested through an all-out war between the gangs until it eventually ends like the classic Shakespearean tale.

West Side Story was created by Arthur Laurents and Jerome Robbins and consequently represents their conception of Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rican culture from a white male perspective.

In 1957, the original Broadway production cast Carol Lawrence, a white woman, as Maria. This pattern was echoed when the play was reproduced elsewhere with white actresses playing Maria. The play became so popular that they made a movie and — keeping with tradition — cast the white Natalie Wood as Maria in theoretical "brown face" with an inaccurate Puerto Rican accent. The only Puerto Rican in the movie, Rita Moreno, was put in literal brown face as well as every major "Puerto Rican" character. Brown face, in this instance, is either the attempt to place white individuals in the roles of Puerto Ricans or to darken the skin tone of performers to make them appear "more" Puerto Rican. The practice is directly related to black minstrel shows, where characters in blackface acted out black stereotypes on stage for the entertainment of white individuals.

Not to confuse race with ethnicity: white Puerto Ricans exist, but if the authors of the play put the main actors in "brown face," it is clear they meant to portray Afro or Indigenous Latinx people. Knowing this, it is impossible to recreate the production with white characters playing white Puerto Ricans because the intention surrounds Afro-Latinx identity. To recreate the production with white "Puerto Ricans" would further erase Afro and Indigenous Latinidad.

The attempt to create a contemporary version of *West Side Story*, as the Hamilton version does, proves even more problematic. By moving the production into the contemporary era with the Bronx as its backdrop, the Theater Department is attempting to construct a musical that begs for an Afro-Latinx cast. Without it, we will see Puerto Rican culture and identity be botched on stage by people who are not Puerto Rican. They will be acting out an identity I can readily speak to as an Afro-Puerto Rican woman

from the Bronx who has spent much of her college years trying to understand colonialism and the effects of Hurricane Maria.

What the Hamilton College Theatre Department is attempting to perform is my very being, along with the things and people that are closest to me. Take a moment to imagine me acting out your race or ethnicity on stage. If you're okay with it, you are either Afro-Puerto Rican or in a position of power and should keep reading. If you're not, think deeply about why.

It is no coincidence that this play had the most zealous recruitment process for actors of color on campus than for any other theater production in recent history. I am told by the assistant directors of Hamilton's version of *West Side Story* that this play has garnered the most people of color in an on-campus production to date. But, far from exonerating the Theater Department, this only speaks volumes about the kinds of roles it thinks people of color on campus can or should play and when they believe we are necessary to make their productions "right."

On Monday, Jan. 28, I met with *West Side Story* director and chair of the Theater Department Mark Cryer to express to him my concerns. I articulated the reasons why the play was not one that Hamilton College could successfully perform and that to do so would be inauthentic, inaccurate, and wrong. His response, to simplify a half hour conversation, was that "the risk is worth the reward," and that we can't shy away from racism and sexism in plays. With his latter point I had to agree — plays that put racism and sexism on stage are especially interesting to me because they allow directors to spotlight and problematize aspects of reality.

However, I am not trying to stop a play from tackling issues on racism and sexism; I am trying to stop a play that attempts to depict Afro-Puerto Rican individuals as characters that anyone can play — especially on a campus where there are so few of us. Furthermore, it is easy for someone who is not part of the Puerto Rican community to speak of its worthwhile rewards, as they are not at risk. At its very best, a Hamilton production of this play can only fail in its attempt to portray an authentic and accurate Afro-Puerto Rican community. Either white individuals play in theoretical brown face or other black and brown people play Puerto Ricans and thereby promote the idea that people of color are "all the same" and easily interchangeable.

West Side Story, at its conception, is a whitewashed play created by white individuals who didn't really consider Puerto Rican culture. There is a more accurate way to portray a "Romeo and Juliet" love story that involves white and Puerto Rican individuals. If, in the genesis of the playwriting process, you consult Afro-Puerto Ricans who are well informed of their heritage and racial identity and seek out Afro-Puerto Ricans to perform in the play, then it can happen. By then, however, it also won't be the original and problematic *West Side Story* many know and love. Hamilton College, however, has very few Puerto Ricans enrolled and would not be able to achieve such an ambitious project.

In many of the plays at Hamilton, the casting of white leads is unproblematic because this is both a predominately white institution and many people of color on campus are not theater majors or involved in the Department. Modifying this play is not difficult. Hamilton can change it to more accurately fit the individuals who are going to be in it. For example, the play could be about two feuding groups, still dealing with topics of racism and sexism, while not attempting — and failing — to produce accurate Puerto Rican representations.

Acting as another race or ethnicity is not only racist but also a travesty. There is no way to do this play justice at Hamilton College because there simply aren't many Afro-Puerto Ricans to act in it — I certainly don't want to act in the play, nor do I have the time. Professor Cryer offered me the position of dramaturge, but I also don't want to help anyone try to more accurately portray my identity. I find it insulting to request that I strip away all of who I am for others to papier-mâché onto their bodies like a costume. I doubt the majority of people at Hamilton College have ever met an Afro-Puerto Rican and actually sought to learn about their culture and identity until it became something they could use in preparation for a role. No matter the intention, this cannot adequately capture the pain, identity, and suffering of Afro-Puerto Rican people.

On Friday, Feb. 22, Professor Cryer agreed to meet with me again. I wanted to know if he had made any changes to the play since we last spoke. I had several meetings with other professors and faculty in hopes that he might have changed his mind. Professor Cryer told me that he could not change any of the lyrics to the songs and that he could not change the text but that he could change the meaning. He reimagined the "Sharks" as immigrants because — as he expressed — in the Trump era, many people view the immigrant as "bad."

In Hamilton's production, two of the immigrants are from the Dominican Republic, one is Vietnamese, another is Chinese, and they had planned to have one Moroccan character. When I asked if these individuals were the race or ethnicity they intended to play, he responded that he didn't know if they were.

After speaking again with assistant directors, I learned that Afro-Puerto Ricans are still going to be inaccurately portrayed in the play as the main characters. Fortunately, Professor Cryer isn't asking the other "Sharks" in the play to act as another race. An easy fix to one problem? Make all actors represent their own race in the play. I agree that theatre is about playing a part, acting out a role, being something you may not actually be, but playing "a preacher, or even a violent drug dealer on Gotham" — as Professor Cryer told me he did — is not the same as playing another race or ethnicity on stage.

No matter how accurate an actor tries to be, they will always fail in my eyes, as their comfort stepping into the role of another complex, marginalized identity is plagued by implicit stereotypes about the race or ethnicity they are wearing as a costume. This will be revealed no matter if they are white or another person of color — and no matter how good they "pass" at playing me.

What can you do? Buy a ticket to the show or donate directly to the Maria Fund — where half the proceeds of your $4 student ticket will be redirected — but don't go to the production. You'll be helping people of color without hurting us, and you'll miss out on consuming inaccurate, racist, and overall hurtful representations of us.

Why 'West Side Story' can never be authentic, Spielberg or not

latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2021-12-12/west-side-story-puerto-rico-cultural-authenticity

Ashley Lee December 12, 2021

When Rita Moreno was filming the 1961 movie "West Side Story," her skin color — as well as that of the numerous white actors playing Puerto Rican characters — was darkened with makeup. Moreno, who is Puerto Rican, questioned the makeup artist on set about the practice.

"We are many colors," she recalled in a 2019 interview with the Associated Press. That makeup artist then accused her of being racist. "I was so stunned that I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. That's really also how little people know about Puerto Ricans."

Thankfully, no actor is in brownface in the new version of the movie musical, now playing in theaters. Twenty members of its cast are Puerto Rican or of Puerto Rican descent; eight of these actors were found at casting calls in San Juan. A notable portion of dialogue is in Spanish, delivered without subtitles appearing on-screen. And a newly added moment sees the Sharks singing the original version of "La Borinqueña," which became the official anthem of the U.S. territory after it was rewritten with less confrontational lyrics.

Remaking “West Side Story” in the 21st century required such changes, said filmmaker Steven Spielberg. “It’s important that representation be authentic to return the piece to the integrity that I think it deserves,” he said in a “20/20” special. “I really felt — we felt, all of us, together — that we needed this to be a Latinx production.”

But is it possible to transform a text like that of “West Side Story,” as profoundly flawed as it is groundbreaking and beloved, with such surface-level fixes? No matter how many Nuyorican actors are cast, how many lines are recited in Spanish, how many Puerto Rican consultants are hired and how many panels with historical experts are held, the collective effort does not correct the problematic appropriation on which the musical was built.

Dec. 10, 2021
“West Side Story” was conceived by director and choreographer Jerome Robbins, who approached book writer Arthur Laurents and composer Leonard Bernstein in 1949 about a contemporary musical adaptation of William Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet.” He suggested the star-crossed lovers hail from an Irish Catholic family and a Jewish family as they feuded in Manhattan’s Lower East Side during the Easter-Passover season. However, the concept felt too similar to Anne Nichols’ popular 1920s play “Abie’s Irish Rose,” and the trio shelved the project, then titled “East Side Story.”

Six years later, The Times published an article about a fight that broke out between Latino gangs in San Bernardino: Two young men fought outside a dance at Johnson Community Hall, one died. It sparked the idea to inject the tragic love story with some topical racial conflict.

“We decided to make the show about teenage gangs, to make it more timely,” Laurents told The Times in 2009. Noted “Leonard Bernstein: West Side Story” author Nigel Simeone, “If they hadn’t seen that newspaper story, I’m not even sure [the musical] would have gotten finished. It was more than a turning point. This was a mess that hadn’t been worked on in six years. It’s a seemingly insignificant moment that had a colossal impact.”

Because of the article, “Lennie wanted to set the action in Los Angeles, but I suggested New York,” Laurents recalled to The Times in 2009. “We had Puerto Rican gangs there, and the story would work well.”

According to Craig Zadan’s book “Sondheim & Co,” Stephen Sondheim, then a rookie lyricist, was hesitant to sign on for the project because “I’ve never been that poor and I’ve never even known a Puerto Rican!” But his agent “told him not to think in those terms. They are star-crossed lovers. They are underprivileged and the haves and have-nots have more to do with their psyches than their economics.”

Though the 1957 Broadway production and its 1961 film adaptation remain groundbreaking for Robbins’ trailblazing choreography, Bernstein’s complex compositions and Sondheim’s formative writing experience, it also remains a classic case of cultural appropriation. Said

Laurents himself in a 2008 interview with AARP: “Because of our own bias and the cultural conventions of 1957, it was almost impossible for the characters in ‘West Side Story’ to have authenticity.”

The creators said they did some research on the Nuyorican community: Robbins visited youth dances in Harlem to incorporate moves into choreography, and Bernstein added pan-Latin rhythms to the score. But ultimately, “West Side Story” borrowed the aesthetics from what these four Jewish men perceived to be a Puerto Rican identity — thick accents, dark skin, motivations for violent interactions — to tell a highly theatrical Shakespeare tale, not the other way around.

Of course, “West Side Story” was written in the 1950s, when cultural authenticity was not a prime concern. For example, Sondheim famously balked at complaints about an original “America” lyric that inaccurately characterized Puerto Rico as an “island of tropic diseases.” As he wrote in his book “Finishing the Hat”: “I’m sure his outrage was justified, but I wasn’t about to sacrifice the line that sets the tone for the whole lyric.” (The line was eventually changed for the 1961 movie.)

The stage show was a critical and commercial hit — The Times’ Albert Goldberg described it in 1957 as “the most serious and uncompromising musical yet to achieve success on the Broadway stage” — and the subsequent film adaptation collected 10 Oscars and is considered one the greatest movie musicals of all time. It has been revived on Broadway multiple times and is often staged in high schools, aided by its ability to accommodate large teenage casts.

Decades later, the cultural inauthenticity of the popular title continues to have real-life ramifications for the Puerto Rican community. “The movie was the first major — and still the most widely seen and exported — U.S. cultural product to recognize Puerto Ricans as a distinct Latino group in the United States with specific physical characteristics (brown, dark-haired, svelte) and personality traits (loud, sexy, colorful),” Frances Negrón-Muntaner, founding director of the Media and Idea Lab at Columbia University, wrote on the Women’s Media Center website.

“Drawing on centuries-old stereotypes about Latinos, the women are virginal and childlike or sexual and fiery; the men are violent and clannish. [It] widely popularized racist and sexist stereotypes that continue to shape how the world sees Puerto Ricans and how they see themselves.”

"It's important that representation be authentic to return the piece to the integrity that I think it deserves," Spielberg said of casting Puerto Rican actors to play Puerto Rican characters in "West Side Story."

The entertainment industry would be better off investing in homegrown Nuyorican theater rather than trying over and over again to fix this particular problematic piece. Still, like the makers of many previous "West Side Story" versions onstage, Spielberg and his collaborators have said they worked hard to try to repair the damage caused by the original productions.

"I think it's absolutely, as all art is, a product of its time," the new movie's screenwriter, Tony Kushner, told Time of the original. "There were certain kinds of articulations unavailable to the four gay Jews that wrote the thing originally. And there are mistakes that they made, absolutely."

In creating the remake, which received strong reviews and is considered an Oscar contender despite its disappointing box office opening, the filmmakers did consult multiple Puerto Rican experts on its historical accuracy, translations, dialects and period-specific slang. "The reason we've hired so many Puerto Rican singers and dancers and actors is so they can help guide us to represent Puerto Rico in a way that will make all of you and all of us proud," Spielberg told a group of University of Puerto Rico faculty members and students during an unannounced visit to San Juan in 2018.

Additionally, casting Latino actors as Latino characters “goes hand-in-hand with my reasoning for not subtitling the Spanish,” Spielberg told IGN. “If I subtitled the Spanish I’d simply be doubling down on the English and giving English the power over the Spanish. This was not going to happen in this film, I needed to respect the language enough not to subtitle it.” (The 2009 Broadway revival similarly featured Spanish-language lyrics translated by Lin-Manuel Miranda — a majority of which were reverted to English five months into its run.)

The tweaks were no doubt made with serious intent. But beyond providing a showcase for Spielberg’s visually stunning craft, they still serve as coverups of the cultural appropriation of the original text, to which this version remains all too faithful. Although no movie can ever encompass the lived experience of a community, this “West Side Story” was remade by a filmmaker, screenwriter and key department heads who are not of Puerto Rican descent, with the guidance of many Puerto Rican experts.

“It continues the original’s tradition of advancing a dangerous narrative even as it offers Latinx people some important opportunities,” Latino Rebels film critic Cristina Escobar writes of the new movie. “In the end, it’s a film by and for white guys, and I’d rather watch something else.”

Although its characters are cast authentically and not wearing brownface — the bare minimum of moviemaking in 2021 — these performers, like Moreno in the original film, are inevitably put in the position of cultural watchdogs for the Puerto Rican diaspora as well as being skilled singers, dancers and actors in a big-budget release. For example, the set’s many dark blue Puerto Rican flags were swapped for the original light blue ones after dancer David Avilés wore a shirt to set with the original flag and shared his knowledge of its history. Avilés said he then became part of a committee Kushner formed with other Puerto Rican cast members who shared information about the Puerto Rican experience with him.

And regardless of the copious pages of nuanced, heavily researched backstory newly written by Kushner, these Puerto Rican actors are still playing the same reductive Puerto Rican characters. “These continuous revivals reinforce America’s colonizing power to determine who Puerto Ricans get to be,” critic Carina del Valle Schorske wrote in the New York Times last year.

Rita Moreno plays a new character, Valentina, in Spielberg's "West Side Story."

The new version does have transportive renditions of Bernstein's legendary score, conducted by the L.A. Philharmonic's Gustavo Dudamel; gorgeously gritty sets by production designer Adam Stockhausen; and standout performances by Ariana DeBose, Rachel Zegler, Mike Faist and Iris Menas. It even finally solved the problem of "I Feel Pretty," a song that always bothered Sondheim. Like any other piece of artistic expression, this "West Side Story" is multifaceted, with dimensions of varying quality and legitimacy.

Ultimately, its headline-making attempts at cultural authenticity parallel a scene in the current movie that involves Valentina, a new Puerto Rican character played by Moreno. Hours after meeting María, Tony (Ansel Elgort) asks Valentina to translate the phrases "I'm happy to see you again" and "I want to be with you forever" into Spanish for him. He then recites them quite badly to María on their date; when she laughs it off as an endearing effort, he tells her to stop laughing and begins to tell her what the phrase means — as if she didn't understand what he had just said.

But uttering *"quiero estar contigo para siempre"* in broken Spanish, after a brief consultation with Valentina, doesn't mean that Tony can suddenly in any way speak María's language. As he has no real comprehension of its linguistic complexities or the lived experience of the people who speak it, his words have no weight. It's the definition of an empty gesture; it's literally lip service.

What if Instead of Calling People Out, We Called Them In?

Prof. Loretta J. Ross is combating cancel culture with a popular class at Smith College.

By Jessica Bennett
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Nyla Conaway, 19, remembers being “called out” for changing her profile picture on Instagram in solidarity for … something. She can’t quite remember what for, only that an older student she didn’t know told her it was a scam. “It just made me feel really embarrassed, like a ton of people had seen it and now I just looked really stupid,” she said.

Katie Wehrman, 18, still feels guilty for calling out a boy in her high school for something he said about a local politician and L.G.B.T.Q. rights — schooling him in an all-class Snapchat group.

Sophia Hanna, 18, has never been called out herself, but has spent more time than she’d like to admit during this pandemic watching two beauty bloggers call each other out.

“It just fires something emotionally,” she said, noting that she doesn’t even like makeup tutorials. “There’s like a dopamine trigger that makes me keep scrolling.”

The women are students in a class taught by Loretta J. Ross, a visiting professor at Smith College who is challenging them to identify the characteristics, and limits, of call-out culture: the act of publicly shaming another person for behavior deemed unacceptable. Calling out may be described as a sister to dragging, cousin to problematic, and one of the many things that can add up to cancellation.

“I am challenging the call-out culture,” Professor Ross said from her home in Atlanta, where she was lecturing on Zoom to students on a recent evening, in a blue muumuu from Ghana. “I think you can understand how calling out is toxic. It really does alienate people, and makes them fearful of speaking up.”

‘Uncomfortable Conversations’

That perspective has made Professor Ross, 67, an unlikely figure in the culture wars. A radical Black feminist who has been doing human rights work for four decades, she was one of the signatories of a widely denounced letter in *Harper’s Magazine*, for which she herself was called out. “There’s such an irony for being called out for calling out the calling-out culture,” she said. “It really was amusing.”

At Smith College, Professor Ross teaches courses called White Supremacy in the Age of Trump, of which the “calling in” module is part, and Reproductive Justice. Yet she tells students when they enroll: “If you need a trigger warning or a safe space, I urge you to drop this class.”

“I think we overuse that word ‘trigger’ when really we mean discomfort,” she said. “And we

should be able to have uncomfortable conversations."

She doesn't believe people should be publicly shamed for accidentally misgendering a classmate, which she once did, leading to a Title IX complaint that was later dismissed; for sending a stupid tweet they now regret; or for, say, admitting they once liked a piece of pop culture now viewed in a different light, such as "The Cosby Show."

"If it were on TV right now, I'd watch the reruns," she said.

"What I'm really impatient with is calling people out for something they said when they were a teenager when they're now 55. I mean, we all at some point did some unbelievably stupid stuff as teenagers, right?"

Professor Ross thinks call-out culture has taken conversations that could have once been learning opportunities and turned them into mud wrestling on message boards, YouTube comments, Twitter and at colleges like Smith, where proving one's commitment to social justice has become something of a varsity sport.

"I think this is also related to something I just discovered called doom scrolling," Professor Ross told the students. "I think we actually sabotage our own happiness with this unrestrained anger. And I have to honestly ask: Why are you making choices to make the world crueler than it needs to be and calling that being 'woke'?"

The antidote to that outrage cycle, Professor Ross believes, is "calling in." Calling in is like calling out, but done privately and with respect. "It's a call out done with love," she said. That may mean simply sending someone a private message, or even ringing them on the telephone (!) to discuss the matter, or simply taking a breath before commenting, screen-shotting or demanding one "do better" without explaining how.

Calling out assumes the worst. Calling in involves conversation, compassion and context. It doesn't mean a person should ignore harm, slight or damage, but nor should she, he or they exaggerate it. "Every time somebody disagrees with me it's not 'verbal violence.'" Professor Ross said. "I'm not getting 're-raped.' Overstatement of harm is not helpful when you're trying to create a culture of compassion."

There was call-out culture when Professor Ross was young. "We called it 'trashing,'" she said, referring to a term used by Jo Freeman, in an essay in Ms., to describe infighting within the women's movement.

"It used to be you'd be calling someone out to a duel. This is how Alexander Hamilton got shot!" Professor Ross said. "What's new is the virality and the speed and the anonymity."

Civil conversation between parties who disagree has also been part of activism, including her own, for quite some time.

As executive director of the D.C. Rape Crisis Center from 1979 to 1982, she used her own story of sexual assault to facilitate a conversation with incarcerated rapists, teaching them Black feminist theory.

She worked to improve the participation of women of color as a program director at the National Organization for Women and is credited, along with 11 others, as having coined the term "reproductive justice" — a combination of "reproductive rights" and "social justice" in response to what they believed was missing from Bill Clinton's 1994 health care reform plan.

Later, as the program and research director for the Center for Democratic Renewal, which monitored hate groups, she found herself on a mountaintop in rural Tennessee, teaching antiracism to women whose families were members of the Ku Klux Klan.

She thought of what her organization's founder, the Rev. C.T. Vivian — who had been Martin Luther King's field general — told her when she started her job: "When you ask people to give up hate, you have to be there for them

when they do.”

And so she was.

In the early 1990s, Professor Ross accompanied Floyd Cochran, once the national spokesman for the Aryan Nations, on a national atonement tour.

“Here’s a guy who had never done anything but be a Nazi since he was 14 years old, and now he was 35 with no job, no education, no hope. And we helped people like them,” she said. After The Los Angeles Times wrote an article about their unlikely friendship, in 1997, Professor Ross and Mr. Cochran were each paid $10,000 for a Hollywood adaptation option of their story. But when the script came back, there was a fatal flaw: It ended with the two falling in love.

“Floyd was married, and I don’t fall in love with Nazis,” Professor Ross said.

Sometime in those years, Professor Ross found herself on a street corner in Janesville, Wis., in the dead of winter, watching as Ken Peterson — a defector from the K.K.K. — filmed an interview with “The Geraldo Rivera Show.” Mr. Peterson and his wife, Carol, had to flee their home quickly, and Ms. Peterson was shivering in the cold.

“I stood there for the first half-hour watching her, and at some point I made the decision to share my coat with her,” Professor Ross said. “I just couldn’t maintain that anger, I couldn’t maintain that posture.”

The idea of “calling in” occurred to Professor Ross at a speech she was organizing at Smith in 2015 to honor Gloria Steinem. What was up with all the nastiness she saw on Twitter, she asked a young woman.

“Oh, you mean ‘calling out’?’’ the woman said.

“You-all named it?’” Professor Ross said in surprise.

She soon assembled a group of students to practice the techniques of “calling in” and took the message on the road. During quarantine this summer, she began offering an online course called Calling In the Calling Out Culture, and is working on a book of the same name.

Professor Ross, pictured at her home in Atlanta, believes calling out has become a kind of “woke competition” in some circles. Peyton Fulford for The New York Times

She has also been hired by nonprofits and women’s organizations to help them grapple with their own reckonings around race and gender. “I wouldn’t call myself a mediator,” she said. “I’m like a one-time consultant, rearranging relationships. ‘We’re on Indian land,’ ‘we’ve got trans students,’ ‘we’ve got buildings named after slave owners.’” The hardest part, she said, is “to convince them that they aren’t each other’s enemies.”

‘Should I Be Concerned?’

Not that Professor Ross is conflict averse. “I have no problem calling out politicians who aren’t living up to the

oaths that they swore to," she said. She cited Colin Kaepernick, someone who quite effectively called out a powerful organization, the N.F.L. "The thing I am sharply critical of is punching down, calling out people who have less power than you simply because you can get away with it. But there is a very strategic use of punching up."

Indeed, after the #MeToo movement and global protests of police violence in response to the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, employees have called out bosses, consumers have called out corporations, students have called out peers, and victims have called out abusers.

"Folks have figured out that social media shaming and attention makes things happen," said Meredith Clark, an assistant professor of media studies at the University of Virginia who recently published a study of call-out culture called "Drag Them." "It evokes apology from things and places that wouldn't normally enter into that sort of dialogue, and it allows people who otherwise would have no recourse to influence their own experiences."

More troublesome, Professor Ross and others agree, is when small infractions become big infractions; when context gets lost and facts are distorted, or it becomes difficult to discern between the two.

"These algorithms can't distinguish between outrage and shaming that is proportionate and outrage and shaming that is disproportionate to the original transgression," said Molly Crockett, an assistant professor of psychology at Yale University who studies moral outrage online.

Back on her Zoom call, Professor Ross pulled up another slide, this one with a photo of Natalie Wynn, a popular YouTuber who has put together a kind of taxonomy of call-out culture after being "canceled" multiple times.

Its characteristics include presumption of guilt (without facts or nuance getting in the way); essentialism (when criticism of bad behavior becomes criticism of a bad person); pseudo-intellectualism (proclaiming one's moral high ground); unforgivability (no apology is good enough); and, of course, contamination, or guilt by association.

"This happened to me with the *Harper's* letter," Professor Ross said, referring to the last point. "Just the fact that my name appeared on the same letter with J.K. Rowling. I mean, give me a break. I wish I knew her and I wish she knew me, but that's not the truth."

As it turns out, all of that shaming may be counterproductive. Multiple studies, Ms. Crockett said, have found that shaming can make people more resistant to change.

And, as anyone who has partaken in a game of casual doom scrolling knows, it can also be bad for health — physical and mental.

When Professor Ross's students were asked to describe how thinking about a call out made them feel, they used descriptions like "pit in stomach," "nauseous" and "sweating through all my clothes."

Some said later that the prospect of call outs had made them hesitant to speak up or ask questions in classes, or endlessly planning for the arguments that might ensue.

"I had this weird moment recently where I was, like, 'Oh man, J.K. Rowling is saying some real bad stuff. It's too bad that I once supported Harry Potter,'" said Ms. Hanna, a first-year student from Nebraska, referring to comments about transgender people made by the author. "And then I took five seconds to be, like, 'I am concerned about someone finding out that I, until quite recently a child, liked a children's series?' Should I be concerned about this? This feels like it's no great thing to be concerned about."

Katherine Albert-Aranovich, a sophomore from Los Angeles, said she has deleted all of her social profiles, to try to be "removed from that negativity."

Rebecca Alvara, of Phoenix, described the mental gymnastics of trying to buy herself a hoodie with the image of a band she liked. "I was, like, 'but what if they've done something terrible? And I just don't know about it yet?

Should I not buy this?' And so I panicked and I was, like, 'No, it's fine. I don't need it anyway.'"

The students are eager to practice calling in, or least trying. But they have questions.

Is interjecting calling in? What's the difference between calling in and a regular confrontation? What if calling out in fact is the most effective way to seek progress — as with, say, in the case of a public figure? And when is politely trying to "call in" simply no longer effective?

"You can't be responsible for someone else's inability to grow," Professor Ross said. "So take comfort in the fact that you offered a new perspective of information and you did so with love and respect, and then you walk away. "We have a saying in the movement: Some people you can work with and some people you can work around. But the thing that I want to emphasize is that the calling-in practice means you always keep a seat at the table for them if they come back."