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Theft is theft: the ethics of telling other people's stories

Abstract:

My paper discusses the ethical responsibilities of the author: particularly when telling the stories of people categorically different from them. It questions what right I have to be telling the story of a Sri Lankan family, and attempts to provide answers to this question. One answer is personal: I draw on the cultural and ethical complexities of my own history and identity to locate the starting point for my creative work. Moving beyond this reflexive gesture, I offer a definition for ethics as I apply it in my own current creative work. My approach draws on the literature of ethics and responsibility, on insights I have gleaned from the writers I am interviewing as part of my fieldwork, and on my reflections on the data, on the history of ethical practice, and on my own creative practice. Given that there is no generally accepted professional ethical code of conduct for writers, I discuss the need to be aware, always, of our responsibilities to the voices we represent in our fiction: to question the impact of our decisions and actions. The ethics of storytelling is a deeply personal conversation between ourselves and the text, and each one of us must judge if we have done enough to bridge the divide between what is and what ought to be.

Biographical note:

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In 1992, and to subsequent furore, the Writers' Union of Canada defined cultural appropriation as 'the taking – from a culture that is not one's own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge' (Ziff 1997: 1). I never used to think of the way I spend my time as theft. I have always worried about the ethics of my words, the consequences of what I have written. But until the last couple of years, I had not considered my writing, my creating, as thieving from the lives of others. Then, when I began a novel narrated with the voices of a Sri Lankan Australian family as part of the creative component of my PhD, it became obvious that this decision begged an important question: what right do I have to do this? I am not Sri Lankan, the Sinhalese culture is not my own, and yet I have chosen to write a novel about two Sri Lankan Australian sisters whose family advertises them for marriage in the classifieds. It is a story that examines the role of arranged marriages in Sinhalese and Australian culture, and how two young women navigate between the expectations of family and their own ideas of love and partnership.

While this piece may end up being an enjoyable read, have I been ethical in my decisions? Have I, by writing this, silenced someone else, not just stolen hats, a sentence, a situation, a scene from the people around me, but actually appropriated another culture?

I think it is important to add here that my decision to write this piece was not made lightly. *Staple us together* is inspired by my fifteen-year friendship with a Sri Lankan Australian woman and her family. We grew up together in Darwin where there is a large Sri Lankan community, and were twenty years old the first time her mother advertised her for marriage. This ad prompted hours of discussion over an extended period of time, trying to reconcile what that meant in terms of love and what it would look like as a relationship. The second time she was advertised, when we were twenty-four, she was ready and I found it somewhat easier to understand. It was then that I realised there was an important story to be told, one that has not been explored much in Australian fiction. But it took me two years to summon the courage to discuss my ideas – the characters and storyline that wouldn't leave me alone – and seek permission from both her and her family.

Everyone writes from within the context of their personal history and, like everyone else, I approach my fiction from this vantage point. This does not mean my stories are thinly veiled autobiography. But my history has shaped my perspective, the way I see the world and therefore how I craft fictional places and people. To understand how I have come to write *Staple us together,* I must explain my background.

My name does not tell the whole story. *Rose* is a westernised version of the original *de la Rosa*, which is of Spanish-Portuguese origins. A new migrant to America, my great, great grandfather worried *de la Rosa* would be difficult on an English tongue and had it simplified.

My skin does not tell the whole story either. I seem to have only inherited the English and Scottish genes from my mother's family.

So as far as first impressions go – my name and appearance can be deceiving.

I grew up in Darwin, Australia in an English-speaking home – technically.

My sister and I may have spoken English and it might have been both my parents' first language, but they often spoke Bahasa Indonesia: to us, each other and at work. Their business was based in Sulawesi. To make it a little more complicated, my parents' business partner was Japanese. So my sister and I spoke English, Mum and Dad spoke Bahasa Indonesia, and Toshi's parents taught us Japanese on the weekend.

At school, my closest friend was a Sri Lankan Australian. When I spent time at her house she and her family would converse in Sinhalese unless speaking directly to me. I had other friends who were Indonesian, Malay, Filipino, Greek, Aboriginal and Chinese. Darwin may be a capital city of Australia but I have always thought of it as more a part of Asia. I grew up surrounded by languages other than English and cultures other than Anglo Australian. In fact, in my experience, Anglo Australian was a minority culture.

This is the context I write within, but it is not the same as the one from which a reader will read. While I write in one context and a reader reads from another, my creative work operates within the specific framework in which I have placed it, which might be a third context. In fact, a whole range of factors encompasses a piece and determines how it is read and interpreted. It is not just about the style and structure an author chooses, or the attitudes and experiences of the reader. It is more than this: the content comes into play, the geographic and cultural location; so too does the particular time and place where it is published, reviewed and circulated. Altering one of these elements can change it all, and every one of these shapes the way a reader absorbs and converses with the text. Or, as Michel de Certeau has described it, the reader 'poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralises himself in it like the internal rumblings of one's body' (1984: xxi).

This of course can be problematic when an author chooses to make their work public because as Carl Tighe has commented: '[w]riters and their works operate in a context, and whether they wish it or not, someone somewhere will hold them responsible for what they write' (2005: 8). So here I feel that I must ask myself another question: what right do I have not to tell my friend's story? Particularly as her final advice to me was that she thought my writing it was a good idea, and that I would perhaps be able to explore some issues that those within her culture could not.

It is from the very beginning that our individual stories include those of the people around us, and it is impossible to pick the threads apart. As Helen Garner has commented, '[h]ow inextricably we are intertwined! We form each other. We form ourselves in response to each other' (2002: 43). My cultural perspective and even my sense of self have been shaped by the people I grew up with. So I find it difficult to see my Sri Lankan friend as different from me, to conceive of her and her story as other, when for so long her happiness and troubles have been my own. It is from the context of our friendship and the many hours we have spent discussing the various well-worn paths to marriage that I have approached *Staple us together*.

When I initially conceived of writing about sisters whose family arranges their marriages, my worry was not: do I have a right to tell someone else's story and claim it for my own, but will my friend see herself in the story and think I am misrepresenting her? Both are ethical issues. But the question am I appropriating

another culture, was not my first concern although it certainly consumes my thoughts now, particularly because it raises the issue of human rights. Whose story is it? Can I tell it? Who am I silencing in the telling? Where does my right to tell whatever story I want stand when it is placed next to the rights of the people I am writing about and, in this instance, their cultural copyright? Because unfortunately, as Jen Webb notes, human rights can never be distributed equally. There will always be imbalance (2007: 544).

It is here that ethics becomes vital because we can never not appropriate – we are essentially thieves – and it becomes even more necessary when writing across the boundary of (once) coloniser and (once) colonised. Filmmaker Loretta Todd has written:

> Appropriation occurs when someone else speaks for, tells, defines, describes, represents, uses, or recruits the images, stories, experiences, dreams of others for their own. Appropriation also occurs when someone else becomes the expert on your experience (1991: 24).

While this is quite a narrow definition, it is very much a part of the discourse of postcolonial filmmakers, writers and other cultural practitioners. As I am, at the very least, an Anglo, English-speaking Australian writing from a centre of power and appropriating the story of a family from a (once) colonised society, it is important that I confront this issue. However, as Todd's definition suggests, it is almost impossible to tell a story without describing, representing, using, and recruiting the stories, experiences and dreams of others. People provide the content for almost all of our fiction, and writers use aspects of real people to create their fictional ones, and so by that very fact are appropriating. When you view it in this context, you either stop writing, or work out your ethical stance on how you do it: what stories, whose stories, and your approach to telling them.

Certeau has written that ethics 'defines a distance between what is and what ought to be. This distance designates a space where we have something to do' (1886: 199). This is how I have chosen to define ethics: as a distinct space between two points *where we have something to do*; 'something' that will move us closer towards *what ought to be*. In my own practice, this means I am constantly questioning my motives, and my reasons for portraying a character or a scene in a certain manner. In some ways, I need to treat the character's actions and thoughts as if they were my own, because it is through them that I try to judge if I am moving closer to, or further away from, *what ought to be*. This doesn't mean I censor their thoughts and actions. I do scrutinise the context in which they exist – in both their world and ours. But I do not believe we will ever be able to completely close the distance that Certeau has written about. The space 'between what is and what ought to be' is in constant flux and it will always ask for more than we can give.

Art, or in this case, fiction, has always been plagued by considerations of the ethical. We do not only need be concerned about appropriating ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender, age, intellectual or physical ability, but also the experiences of those we care about. So much of what authors write draws inspiration from real events: from instances as small as a bent spoon to large ones like someone

dying. These real events are often borrowed (stolen) from people we know: friends, family and acquaintances. How much we use and the manner it is reproduced depends on the borrower and the effects we think it will have on those we are borrowing (stealing) from. David Attridge states that 'ethics makes impossible demands' (1999: 30). It is a paradoxical notion that spins us around whenever we try to unravel it or find a way to comfortably anchor ourselves alongside. Attridge also notes, 'ethically responsible acts occur every day, not just in spite of this multiple impossibility but also in a sense because of it' (ibid).

It seems that to understand yourself as an ethical being is to be in a constant state of discomfort and worry. It does not allow complacency or familiarity. Or as Simon Critchley says, drawing on Levinas' writing on the subject:

> ethics is entirely my affair, not the affair of some hypothetical, impersonal or universal I running through a sequence of possible imperatives. Ethics is not a spectator sport; rather, it is my experience of a claim or demand that I both cannot fully meet and cannot avoid (1999: 66).

The point is that ethics is a deeply personal matter and although we are all cloaked by the customs, principles and norms of the culture that has shaped us, each of us must make our own ethical decisions about every situation we find ourselves in. Society provides us with moral and legal guidelines, but they are relatively broad and abstract. Our ethical practice is determined by the way we respond, the choices we make in each situation, and our choices can never be perfect because there will always be multiple possible answers. To embrace the idea that ethics 'is my experience of a claim or demand that I both cannot fully meet and cannot avoid' (Critchely 1999: 66) is to make yourself an active participant: a concept I frequently think about when sitting back to reflect on the writing I have just committed to paper. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are constantly making ethical decisions every day, in every interaction we have.

It is not enough to make art for the sake of art and writers should think about the meanings they are creating for their readers, actively consider the stories they are telling and the stories they are by extension silencing, because sensitivity and attention to people and places are part of good fiction. Meme McDonald explains that fiction 'demands attention to questions of ethics that reach well beyond the plot, structure and characterisation' (2006: 182). This is important to remember because readers empathise with, and step into the skins of, the characters we create. We make new realities and because of this, it should be a desirable creative and professional practice to consciously think about, and continuously review, the ethics of how and what we write.

Charlotte Wood recently contemplated the issue of writing about other people's lives, in particular people whom the author knows. She used interviews with five Australian novelists to locate her experiences within a larger context and to find out if she was the only one who worried about ethics or if, with experience, it ever went away. She discovered all five were 'apprehensive about the ethics of using real life in fiction, but that their views on the matter often shifted' (Wood 2009: 72). Towards the end of the article and by use of several examples it becomes clear that it is impossible to predict

how people will respond to fictional portrayals of an aspect of their life, or even which part will cause a reaction. Wood concludes that the questions surrounding the ethical responsibility of the author are not ones she can answer 'with any certainty', and she wonders if the reason authors seldom discuss ethics in public is:

> because we all know that, no matter how much we deny it, or try to minimise the damage we cause, theft from the lives of others (and the potential to cause pain as a result) is at the heart of the novelist's practice. It is a deeply uncomfortable, complex moral problem that has always been with us, and will never disappear (2009: 82-3).

This suggests that whenever an author sits down to write s/he oscillates between the ethical and unethical. Every decision shifts the scales and we would all like to think that, in the end, our work balances on that narrow precipice. But at the same time theft is theft, so can writing ever truly be an ethical act?

While I suspect Wood is right, that borrowing from other people's lives is at the core of the writer's practice and therefore our ethical responsibilities will always be the elephant in the room, I feel there needs to be more public discussion about this among writers in Australia. It is for this reason I have begun interviewing authors of fiction: to gain a sense of how published writers from a variety of backgrounds view their responsibilities as a public voice. However, I also acknowledge that their thoughts on this issue are likely to be in flux, perhaps permanently so.

Carl Tighe, an author and academic, has written about the ethics of storytelling. His book, *Writing and responsibility,* looks at the main issues an author faces, including their social and political responsibilities. In one chapter he addresses the effects of political correctness (PC) and notes: 'PC operates to limit the choice of subject matter, language, treatment and characters available to a writer by limiting imagination and decreeing ownership of experience' (2005: 72). He goes on to give examples of the way this can operate such as 'a hard-line feminist may use PC to object to a male writer using a first person female narrator in a story…' (ibid), or, as in my case, someone may object to an Anglo-Australian writer narrating in the voices of a Sri Lankan Australian family.

But Tighe also acknowledges the conundrum authors face when considering ethical responsibility and what he refers to as political correctness. If it is inappropriate to write 'of, or through, or about, another' (2005: 74) then how are we to explore and understand ourselves and others? After all, one of the functions of art is to cross boundaries, and art is often created in spite of these boundaries (ibid).

Many authors have decided to write their stories using voices not their own. When talking about creating *Mister Pip*, Lloyd Jones explained that he chose to narrate his story about the civil war in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, with the voice of a young islander girl because Charles Dickens used a young boy to narrate *Great expectations*. This famous book is central to the narrative of *Mister Pip* (TVO 2009).

Jones is an older New Zealander male, not a thirteen-year-old female from a village in Bougainville. He is categorically very different from his narrator. However, he explained that, as a journalist, he was interested in the history and politics of the island and spent some time there in early 2000 speaking with the locals and setting up

a place where they could go to record their stories. You might say that this is how he came to know his narrator and, while he is categorically very different from her, it is a typical example of how someone might decide to write a piece of fiction. The *raison d'être* can be tangled and obscure, perhaps only obvious to the author. But the reasons must be strong for someone to invest the time it will take them to write a piece, and in Jones' case, they compelled him to write *Mister Pip* in the manner it has been published. It is perhaps pertinent to comment here that when white westerners only write from their own perspective, they effectively render everyone else invisible. This is part of the ethical challenge authors face: making sure they are not just talking about themselves, while at the same time ensuring that the story is not unwarranted and colonising.

Jen Webb has written that art is 'a national outsider' and 'in its autonomous form … it is a *social* outsider, distanced from the imperatives that delimit the actions of dominant social paradigms' (2007: 550). To me, this suggests that art can and should be able to do what you cannot elsewhere in society. But cultural appropriation is a serious issue and in the last twenty years it has become difficult to believe you can '…speak from the standpoint of the excluded without being excluded … speak from the margins whilst standing at the centre' (Critchley 1999: 129).

Jones' published reasons for writing in a voice very different from his own do not acknowledge the appropriation issue many authors confront. Maya Angelou is one writer who has commented in a 1990 interview for *The Paris review* on how she feels about white authors taking on the voice of African Americans: white authors such as Faulkner and Styron.

> Well, sometimes I am disappointed – more often than not. That's unfair, because I'm not suggesting the writer is lying about what he or she sees. It's my disappointment, really, in that he or she doesn't see more deeply, more carefully… we have studied the white American, where the white American has not been obliged to study us. So often it is as if the writer is looking through a glass darkly. And I'm always a little – not a little – saddened by that poor vision (Gourevitch 2009: 256-7).

As I struggle to write a novel about a Sri Lankan Australian family and, in the process, define how I arrive at my own ethical position, I hope it can never be said that my vision has been poor, and that I have been unable to see the people and culture I am writing about deeply enough. Like Jones and so many others, I write because I want to know something I didn't know before. I only hope that I do not in turn harm or sadden those I am seeking to learn more about.

So in conclusion, while there is no generally accepted professional ethical code of conduct for writers, we should always be aware of our responsibilities to the voices we represent in our fiction: to question the impact of our decisions and actions. The ethics of storytelling is a deeply personal conversation between ourselves and the text, and each one of us must judge if we have done enough to bridge the divide between what is and what ought to be.

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