

Whose spirit?

Literature, appropriation, and the responsibilities of artists

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Abstract The essay considers the question of whether fiction can be read as a sociological or historical source in light of contemporary fiction-writers' debates about appropriation. It raises questions about writers' and readers' responsibilities by juxtaposing ideas of Emile Zola, José Ortega y Gasset, and Junot Díaz.

Wessen Geist?

Literatur, Aneignung und die Verantwortung der Künstler*innen

Zusammenfassung Mit Blick auf Debatten zum Thema »Aneignung« (*appropriation*), die unter zeitgenössischen Autor*innen geführt werden, geht der Beitrag der Frage nach, inwiefern fiktionale Texte als Quellen soziologischer bzw. historischer Erkenntnisse gelesen werden können. Fragen, welche die moralische Verantwortung von Schriftsteller*innen und Leser*innen betreffen, stehen im Mittelpunkt einer Diskussion, die sich auf Stellungnahmen u.a. von Emile Zola, José Ortega y Gasset und Junot Díaz bezieht.

»A writer of fiction is also an accidental sociologist – whose method is creative writing.« Kelly Palmer

When I teach a novel by Emile Zola, I start by paraphrasing his thoughts: »I am going to make literature an experimental realm just as Claude Bernard made medicine a laboratory science. To study how heredity and environments affect people, I am going to create a family of characters descended from a common ancestor with a hereditary taint. I am going to put them in environments all over France, and then I am going to watch what happens.« I ask the students if any of them see a problem with this logic. They hesitate, since the fallacy seems so obvi-

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ous. How do you scientifically study the behavior of characters you have created in your own mind?

In the 21st century, Zola's dream of studying humanity by writing novels may sound insane:

[...] The novelist is made of an observer and an experimenter. The observer in him provides the facts as he has observed them, sets a point of departure, establishes the solid ground on which the characters will walk and develops the phenomena. Then, the experimenter appears and carries out the experiment, by which I mean that he makes the characters move through a particular story in order to show that the succession of facts will be what is demanded by the determinism of the phenomena being studied.¹

Zola hoped that readers, as well as novelists, would learn from the experiments that fiction-writers conducted. As sensitive observers of people and places, novelists seemed well qualified to study humanity through literature.

For many literary scholars, the word »through« raises red flags. The idea that one can learn about heredity, history, or, God help us, the *Geist* of a people through fiction seems to sideline literature's artistry. In *The Dehumanization of Art*, José Ortega y Gasset offered an optical analogy, comparing fiction-reading to gazing through a window at a garden outside. Ortega argued that:

To see the garden and to see the glass of the window are two incompatible operations. The one excludes the other, and they require different ocular accommodations. In the same manner, a person who seeks in a work of art to be moved by the destinies of Juan and María or Tristan and Isolde and accommodates his spiritual perception to them will not see the work of art.²

A critical, aesthetically inclined reader should analyze the quality of the glass and the nature of the frame that make it possible to see the garden at all. Regarding a novel as a mere aperture to the outside world keeps one from appreciating it as a work of art.

If »through« raises concerns in *Literaturwissenschaftler*, »in« can provoke even stronger responses. In one of my first job interviews, a Germanist asked me, »So do you look at Thomas Mann's works as a warehouse for your organic memory idea, or do you also consider his narrative techniques?« It bothered him that I was using Mann's novels as containers for organic memory, the notion that someone can inherit memories of his or her ancestors' experiences. I seemed to be studying a past psychological theory *through* literature as though I were fishing in a pond. In three decades of studying science, literature, and fiction-writing, I have learned how literary scholars' resistance to »in« and »through« can make the relationship between *Geisteswissenschaft* and *Literaturwissenschaft* fraught.

Approaching literature as a source of knowledge about *anything* offends many scholars of literature. But if the recent appropriation debates are any indication,

¹ Emile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, ed. Francois-Marie Mourad, Paris 2006, 52, my translation.

² José Ortega y Gasset, *La deshumanización del arte: Ideas sobre la novela*, ed. Gloria Rey Faraldos, Madrid 2009, 76, my translation.

writers of contemporary fiction see things differently. Appropriation refers to the representation of someone else's experiences – usually those of someone less powerful and privileged – in a fictional work. Appropriation can mean telling someone's story without obtaining his or her permission, without doing sufficient research, and/or without having the necessary life experiences – especially if the writer profits from publishing the story. Implicit in the concept of appropriation is the idea that fiction-writing involves more than invention. Representing someone else's life in a fictional work entails responsibility, as would research in history or the social sciences. According to some writers, not everyone has the knowledge or the right to create fiction about people who until recently have been largely excluded from or misrepresented in published works.

Junot Díaz, who wrote *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, describes studying Fiction in the early 1990s in an MFA program with no faculty and almost no students of color. »I was a person of color in a workshop whose theory of reality did not include my most fundamental experiences as a person of color,« he recalls, »that did not in other words include *me*.«³ The faculty and students refused to talk about race, and if Díaz's discussions with young writers of color are any indication, MFA programs did not improve much in the twenty years after Díaz earned his degree. One student told him of a white peer who crossed out all the »big« words in his story because »that's not the way ›Spanish‹ people talk.«⁴ Another student said that in two years of workshops, she had seen characters of color in her white peers' stories only if the stories involved crime or drugs.⁵ Díaz's essay, »MFA vs. POC,« makes a powerful case not just that writing programs should admit and listen to writers of color but that privileged writers have a lot to learn about representing lives different from theirs.

Writers who challenge the concept of appropriation often do so through appeals to artistic freedom. Who has the right to say what any story-teller can write about? In an interview with Marina Lewis, Díaz answered this counter argument through an economic analogy:

There's such a huge trend, that artists are free to take anything they want, anywhere. [...] This sounds exactly how free market capitalists talk. [...] Even though, in certain ways, we always take from those around us, I actively think about that relationship. Part of it is because my mother raised me really well. People have a right to their own stuff. [...] And other people will contest, and roll their eyes. And you know what? I think they should know, or should at least accept, that they would find great, wonderful company in the boards of all these transnational corporations.⁶

³ Junot Díaz, »MFA vs. POC,« *The New Yorker*, 30 April 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mfa-vs-poc> (27.7.2022), original italics.

⁴ Díaz (note 3).

⁵ Díaz (note 3).

⁶ Junot Díaz and Marina Lewis, »Interview with Junot Díaz,« *Other Voices* 36 (2002), https://www.webdelsof.com/Other_Voices/DiazInt.htm (27.7.2022).



If writing involves »taking,« as Díaz describes, then ethically, it can't be done without considering the person from whom one takes. Lives and experiences belong to people, and they should be narrated by the people who live them, not by plunderers who take them without asking and will probably write them up badly.

These arguments by Díaz and other writers have created concern in contemporary authors about whether they have the knowledge or the right to tell certain stories. Kelly Palmer, an Australian fiction-writer and literary scholar, introduces another dimension of appropriation when she brings up readers' responses. Many people read to learn, and the impressions of people and places they develop by reading fiction may be incorporated into their working knowledge. This awareness that one's representations will shape readers' thinking might give any writer pause.

Palmer grew up in Southeast Queensland, a region culturally associated with poverty. Although she has the life experiences to qualify her as a Queensland storyteller, she worries that her fiction might be read as »poverty tourism.«⁷ Thinking not just of the poorest Queenslanders of European descent (who are stereotyped as »rednecks«) but of the indigenous people in her home state, Palmer reflects that »[...] others are implicated culturally by how I represent the home we unequally share.«⁸ Palmer compares her situation to that of Indian author Arundhati Roy, whose novel *The God of Small Things* received severe criticism for »misrepresenting« life in Kerala, where Roy grew up.⁹ Palmer disagrees with the critics who attacked Roy, since the main source of their outrage seems to be Roy's challenges to social laws about caste and gender, and these critics also »deny Roy's authority to represent« her home region.¹⁰ What strikes Palmer is that Roy's harshest critics read her novel as »autoethnography.«¹¹

As a social science, ethnography involves strict codes of ethics to prevent researchers from exploiting or misrepresenting the people they study. These codes include working to recognize their own biases and to avoid projecting their own views onto others, so that they can represent their participants from the participants' own perspective, not through the lens of a dominant culture. A narrative that perpetuates stereotypes undermines knowledge rather than strengthening it. From the sound of things, that is just the sort of narrative that Díaz's and the young writers' workshop peers were trying to enforce.

To conduct a study with live human subjects, social scientists in the U. S. must prepare a research plan detailing how their participants will be recruited, how informed consent will be obtained, what they will be asking their participants, and whether the research could harm their participants in any way. Their studies can be conducted only if Institutional Review Boards approve them with the participants' well-being in mind. Should fiction-writers also have to learn and adhere to ethical

⁷ Kelly Palmer, »How to Write Home: (Un)Mapping the Politics of Place and Authorial Responsibility with Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*,« *Transnational Literature*, 9/2 (2017), 5.

⁸ Palmer (note 7), 1.

⁹ Palmer (note 7), 1.

¹⁰ Palmer (note 7), 1.

¹¹ Palmer (note 7), 1.



codes, since their work may shape many readers' views of unfamiliar cultures, too? Palmer asks:

What [...] is the extent of a fiction writer's responsibility in representing a place when it is bloodied, contested, and unequally shared among those who call place *home*? [...] Even fictional representations of place project directly at a real landscape, which then (re)shape place in the cultural imagination.¹²

Palmer concludes that fiction-writers *do* have a responsibility to represent people and places as accurately as they can, since their stories will influence readers' understandings of the cultures they read about. She credits sociologists with the idea that lived experiences can't easily be distinguished from imagined ones.¹³ Fiction's creative metaphors and original use of language make it a »material artifact« that can enhance social scientists' understanding of a place because »[...] a writer of fiction is also an accidental sociologist – whose method is creative writing.«¹⁴ Sociologists and novelists observe, conduct research, and create narratives that influence understandings of how people live, think, and feel.

Palmer's idea about how literature might serve social science varies greatly from Emile Zola's. If fiction-writers are observant, open-minded, and sensitive to the perspectives of everyone living in the places they depict, she argues, their stories could have sociological value. Experiments, determinism, and grand-scale laws play no role in her understanding of writing. Still, Palmer's view might win approval from Zola, who loved research and filled notebooks with his observations of smells, sounds, and conflicts in the places he wrote about. Zola saw not just observation but active investigation as his duty and took hundreds of pages of notes before starting to write a new novel.¹⁵

Arundhati Roy finds the notion of a novelist's responsibility more troubling, writing that, »When it comes to writers and writing, I use words like ›onerous‹ and ›responsibility‹ with a heavy heart and not a small degree of sadness.«¹⁶ Reflecting on the social role of a writer, she defends the right to make choices necessary to create good art, such as focusing on »an old aunt's descent into madness« during a violent military coup, if that is where the writer discovers truth and beauty.¹⁷ At the same time, Roy admits that »there is an intricate web of morality, rigor, and responsibility that art, that writing itself, imposes on a writer.«¹⁸ Creating good art may mean facing, investigating, and struggling to represent a society's greatest problems. In considering a writer's responsibility, Roy thinks not so much about appropriation as about daring to represent social troubles at all. Fiction can suffer artistically if writers refuse to engage the social conflicts around them. Many readers,

¹² Palmer (note 7), 2.

¹³ Palmer (note 7), 11.

¹⁴ Palmer (note 7), 10, 9.

¹⁵ Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life*, Baltimore 1995, 244–245.

¹⁶ Arundhati Roy, *Power Politics*, Cambridge, MA 2001, 4, quoted in Palmer (note 7), 1.

¹⁷ Roy (note 16), 6–7.

¹⁸ Roy (note 16), 5.



in the present and in the future, will be seeking representations of these conflicts and may read one's story as sociology.

In the interest of honesty, I should say that on the spectrum that appropriation debates imply, I stand close to the »artistic freedom« end. Restricting authors from writing about things beyond their experience censors artists and discourages them from exercising their imaginations. Besides creating a culture of fear, bans against depicting people different from oneself deny a writer's ability to learn. Don't the work and the joy of fiction-writing depend on imagining lives different from one's own? As long as a writer is trying to learn and to create good art, who should have the right to say what he or she can write about?

But whether writing stories of unfamiliar lives is exploitive or mind-opening is here beside the point. The fact that there *are* appropriation debates, and that Díaz, Palmer, and Roy are encouraging thoughts about writers' (and MFA programs') responsibilities, indicates that literature may indeed contain, involve, or reflect something more than the writer's idiosyncratic mind. Regardless of what academic literary scholars think, novels are often read as capsules containing a culture. Novels emerge from lifetimes of research – if not documented and systematic, like Zola's, then conducted through observations of fellow human beings and everything with which they interact. Some fiction-writers seem less perturbed than literary scholars by the notion that fiction conveys culture and might serve as a source of knowledge.

At the same time, 21st-century writers' warnings against appropriation challenge the idea that literature can incorporate any culture's *Geist*. Only the slimmest fraction of people in any culture publish fiction, and these have not tended to be poor, female, or racially or ethnically marginalized individuals. Even within the realm of published fiction, as Franco Moretti has shown, literary scholars have focused their energy on a tiny portion of published works. Until recently, with digital humanities scholarship and Moretti's practice of »distant reading,« scholars have been analyzing less than one percent of 19th-century British novels.¹⁹ The scholars who reject claims that fiction contains or reveals culture may be motivated by reasons close to Díaz's. If literature can convey *Geist*, whose *Geist* does it convey?

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¹⁹ Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, London 2005, 3–4.

