

Self-Suppression in the Age of Cultural Appropriation

by Matthew Stewart



The self-evident absurdities of cultural appropriation have not deterred its progress through the ranks of our cultural gatekeepers. Publishers, museum directors, and other decision-makers in the art-world continue to furnish forth evidence that: (a) they think the term is morally valid and thus are on board with it, or (b) they go in fear of having it flung at them.

Equally troubling, the worker class of cultural production—writers, artists, actors, dancers—are increasingly caving in to demands that they steer clear of imaginative representations of cultures and sub-cultures to which they do not belong. In the latest iterations of this misguided fad, artists are self-censoring and even volunteering to quash their own finished work. Such voluntary suppression seems to be the desideratum of Social Justice Warriors.

Take the recent case of Alexandra Duncan, award winning author of Young Adult fiction, who chose to withdraw her novel "Ember Days" prior to publication by HarperCollins imprint Greenwillow. Sections of the novel were told from the point of view of a Gullah Geechee narrator, an African-American whose cultural heritage and linguistic patterns are unique to the low country islands of South Carolina and Georgia. Duncan, however, is white, and that fact opened her to charges of cultural appropriation.

Unsurprisingly, social media plays a key role in the story, as prepublication publicity raised complaints that Duncan's adoption of this particular African-American perspective was problematic. In effect the callouts assume that Duncan has no right to exercise her artistic imagination in certain proscribed realms. In a sign of the times, other authors in the Young Adult (YA) genre were amongst those who complained. The case is all too typical in its particulars, including the internecine cultural policing, the ensuing abject apology, and decision to acquiesce to complaints to the point of suppressing one's own work.

Let us be perfectly clear: Duncan has every right to people her pages with whatever characters she wishes to imagine and to tell stories from whatever perspective she chooses. Whether she does so intelligently or stupidly, interestingly or dully, fully or flatly, is open to debate for one and all—or would be if its author allowed her readers to read her work. No writer is immune to judgments about merit; every writer should be immune to arbitrary taboos.

Duncan apologized online for thinking that she had the imaginative freedom and rights of expression (along with the concomitant risks) belonging to every artist. Her apology reads like a scripted show trial or a forced POW "confession," a pre-fabbed text so as to ensure that all admissions of guilt are formulated just as the party would have them be.

"The Gullah Geechee culture has been systematically repressed and erased," writes Duncan, "and in my misguided attempt to write a book that was inclusive of the cultures of Charleston and the Lowcountry, where the book is set, I participated in this ongoing erasure." Within the space of a single sentence Duncan seems unable to keep straight whether the culture has already been "erased" or whether the erasure is "ongoing." How writing about a group of people—and thus presumably bringing them to the attention of a wider public—erases them is not explained by the author. But then this word is plucked straight from the SJW grab bag of jargon, as are other peculiar locutions yet to come.

"My own limited worldview as a white person," Duncan continues, "led me to think I could responsibly depict a character from this culture. Clearly, the fact that I did not see the signs of the problem with my book's premise . . . is evidence that I was not the right person to try to tell this story. I am deeply ashamed to have made a mistake of this magnitude."

First, one notes the hyperbole. One would think Duncan had been hauled up short of committing a heinous crime rather than publishing a sympathetic work of fiction. But thanks to Twitter callouts from her moral betters in the YA community she managed to stop herself just in time. The crime has been averted, but even so, there is room to feel guilt-stricken. Duncan later refers to feeling sick at the "harm" she has done to "the" Gullah Geechee community.

Here the hyperbolic distortion of the word "harm"—another cliché of cancel-culture callouts—actually reveals an inflated sense of importance. What are the odds that large numbers of people in "the" Gullah Geechee community" wake up worrying if and how this author will depict them in a novel? As Orwell observed in "The Prevention of Literature": "the direct, conscious attack on intellectual decency comes from the intellectuals themselves," not from ordinary people.

Here too is the already tired trope of “as a _____ person,” wherein the blank invariably refers to one of the favored sociological categories with which proponents of identity politics insist upon defining human beings. Self-appointed Social Justice Warriors demand rigid adherence to what seem to be essentialist definitions of human beings.

I was blind, but now I see, Duncan declares. How could I have been so blind? Then follows a sort of circular logic in which she declares that her supposed blindness constitutes prima facie evidence that someone else’s rules of conduct are correct and their set of taboos are sacred. The author’s shame is made explicit; implicit is her thanks to her cultural supervisors for enlightening her. Here is a quintessential cultural kowtow of our times.

It is hard to decide which is sadder to contemplate. Did Duncan truly come to believe that she sinned, or did she foresee the intense cancel-culture abuse that would be thrown at her if she did not withdraw her book? Did she simply decide that the book’s publication was not worth that punishment? She may have thought her career was at stake. The various possibilities are not mutually exclusive, of course.

Duncan’s own web site indicates that her books—most are sci-fi/fantasy, but some are set in the modern South—make sure to engage with progressive themes and hot topics. One blurb by “bestselling author” Stephanie Perkins declares that Duncan has written “kick-ass, brilliant, feminist science fiction.” Having developed her progressive bona fides, Duncan could well be sizing up the cost of running past the YA political watchdogs.

Such professional worries are, unfortunately, entirely reasonable, for publishers have not been particularly brave in the face of SJW twitterstorms. Voila: *Publishers Weekly* posted an article covering Duncan’s decision, only to withdraw it shortly afterwards. Here is an instance of erasure. The reason

for it? One of those who complained about “Ember Days” was named in the reportage (basic stuff of a news report, one would think) and subsequently received pushback on social media.

Goose and gander, then? Apparently not. *Publishers Weekly* decided that Duncan’s critic, being a person of color, needed protection from the rough and tumble world of social media “debate,” and therefore took down its story reporting on central developments in the world of YA fiction publishing.

Indeed, YA fiction is a hot spot for accusations of cultural appropriation. Instances seem legion. For example, in 2019 Amélie Wen Zhao, author of a YA fantasy novel *Blood Heir* asked Delacorte Press not to publish it (though it was eventually published). Ironically the author had come to publishers’ attention via a Twitter event whose purpose was to elicit work from “marginalized voices.” Her request for withdrawal came about in response to Twitterized complaints that the author’s depictions of slavery in the novel’s fantasy world setting were offensive to African-Americans. In short, because she was not black, she had no right to write about slavery.

In another instance, Kosoko Jackson, a proponent of books published under the progressive #ownvoices imprimatur, ran into trouble with his own book “A Place for Wolves.” The author’s website at the time stated that Jackson is “a vocal champion of diversity in YA literature, the author of YA novels featuring African American queer protagonists, and a sensitivity reader for Big Five Publishers.” These impressive progressive credentials did him no good in seeing “A Place for Wolves” into print, for he made the mistake of using the Kosovo War as a setting. But, the once commonplace thought that writers imagine what they will has been decreed problematic. Not being from Kosovo, the erstwhile identity enforcer bent to the mob and asked his publisher to withdraw the novel.

As for the specific world of YA literary progressivism, it must be lamented that those in a position to shape still-forming minds and souls put so much stock in the sociological sifting of identities and in the worlds of online unreality. To read the back-and-forth social media struggle sessions is to see obsessive thinking at its saddest. Identities are fanatically defined along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual preferences.

As for the malicious effects brought about by charges of cultural appropriation: though the charges are illogical, inconsistent and arbitrary; though the charges bespeak an undesirable and mistaken zero-sum view of culture; though the charges are the products of pinched, ungenerous and fruitlessly divisive views of cultural interchange; though the charges often position friends and allies as enemies, and though the proposed “solutions” are laughably unfeasible, yet the concept remains a growing force in the culture, wearing away at the culture of free speech and open artistic expression that was a long time in the winning, but could be quickly lost.

Matthew Stewart is Associate Professor of Humanities and Rhetoric at Boston University