

Transcript: Agency and Authenticity in Works of Fiction—Panel Discussion in Grand Marais, Minnesota on November 2nd, 2023. Featuring David Mura, Carol Miller, Michael Torres and moderated by Staci Drouillard

- Announcer 0:09
- WTIP presents: Agency and Authenticity in Works of Fiction, a panel discussion that explores the question "who can best tell the story of people of color in works of fiction?" This conversation took place as part of the North Shore Readers and Writers Festival in November of 2023.
- Ruth Pszwaro 0:32
- All right, well, good evening, everybody. Welcome. My name is Ruth Pszwaro. I'm the artistic director here at the Art Colony and it is more than a pleasure to host this event.
- Staci Lola Drouillard is a descendant of the Grand Portage band of Lake Superior Anishinaabe. She lives and works here in Grand Marais, her hometown, her first book "Walking the Old Road," won the Hamlin Garland prize in popular history, and the Northeastern Minnesota Book Award for nonfiction, was also a finalist for a Minnesota Book Award. Her new book "Seven Aunts" combines memoir and cultural history and is the 2023 Minnesota Book Award winner for the memoir category. So she's our moderator. If that says anything, it's gonna be a really good conversation tonight. So again, I just again, thank you so much, Staci for bringing this idea forward.
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- Staci Drouillard 1:27
- Miigwech aapichii Ruth, Library Friends is honored to partner with the Grand Marais Art Colony. And we want to thank also the Lloyd K Johnson Foundation who's supporting the panel work tonight. I want to remind everyone that there are no preconceived outcomes. We don't know what this group of esteemed authors are going to say. And so with that, I want to introduce Carol Miller, distinguished teaching professor emeritus, and former Chair of the program in American Studies and the Department of American Indian Studies at the U of MN. Her teaching and scholarship have been focused on indigenous literature, especially Native American women writers, and images of Native Americans in popular culture. She is an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, my friend and my former teacher. To my right, David Mura, David's latest two books are "The Stories Whiteness tells itself: Racial Myths, and our American Narratives," and "A Stranger's Journey: Race, Identity and Narrative Craft in Writing." He's also written four books of poetry, a novel, two memoirs, including a New York Times notable book, "Turning Japanese Memoirs of a Sensei," and the Emmy award winning documentary, "Armed with Language," about the MIS Japanese American soldiers during World War II. He's also won a Kay Sexton award for contributions to Minnesota literature, from the Minnesota Book Awards and the Friends of the St. Paul libraries. How do you like them apples? And Michael Torres, was born and brought up in Pomona, California, where he spent his adolescence as a graffiti artist. His debut collection of poems, "An Incomplete List of Names" was selected by Raquel Celeste Rivera for the National Poetry series. Currently, he is an associate professor in the MFA program at Minnesota State University Mankato, and a teaching artist with the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop. So a big round of applause.
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- We're going to divide the conversation into three parts. The first part is going to come fast and furious. And thanks to Carol it's titled "The Egregious Past." So, what Carol has prepared and for you to consider is Native identity theft in literature and popular culture. And so Carol's laid out some examples, including "The Education of Little Tree" by Forest Carter, a memoir of growing up with Cherokee grandparents and Appalachia. However, forest Carter is a pseudonym for ASA Earl Carter, a KKK member and white supremacist whose Native heritage was entirely fraudulent. And then we have the matter of Iron Eyes Cody, aka Espara "Oscar" DeCorti. You all probably would recognize him as the crying Indian in the "Keep America Beautiful" campaign of 1970. And the list goes on. There are also sympathetic appropriations in modern stories that you're probably all familiar with. But Carol has said these are still appropriations. For example, Tony Hillerman and William Kent Krueger novels, and then dear old Kevin Costner's white savior, who knows better than the Indians in "Dances with Wolves." And we've also seen many other examples. So, panelists, comments on the egregious past things to add that might trigger the audience into getting at the difference between agency appropriation and authenticity?
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- David Mura 6:26
- Okay, well, I mean, there are really egregious examples that like Miss Saigon." They really took the plot, from Madame Butterfly from Puccini's opera. So it's an Italian making an opera about the Japanese in Japanese culture, where a geisha falls in love with a white sailor and then commits suicide at the end because of pining for him, right. And they take this plot and put it on Vietnam. Because Japanese, Vietnamese, they're all the same, right? But it was so egregious. They even had the Vietnamese in the original doing a prayer, which was gobbledygook. They didn't even bother to translate it to get a Vietnamese actual prayer. So that's it. So, I'm gonna use a less seemingly egregious example--Amistad, which I imagine most of you have seen the movie now. DreamWorks commissioned my friend Alex [Pate] who was paid to write a novelization of that script. So if you remember in the opening scene, you see the Africans in chains in the hold of a slave ship. They're speaking, but there's no subtitles. But you could have subtitles, and you could understand what they're saying. Spielberg chooses not to have subtitles. They break the chains. Their first action is to kill the Spanish sailors and take over the ship. So they are indecipherable. Their first action is an act of violence against the white sailors. You don't know the situation they could be prisoners. And my friend Alex looked at the script and went, "I can't start the script there." Now, if you remember, the way the movie runs, is saw by Matthew McConaughey, this young lawyer trying to recruit John Quincy Adams to defend the Africans, because they tried to get the Spanish sailors to sail them to Africa. Instead the Spanish sailors tricked them and brought them to America, where an American court must decide whether they are free men or slaves. And so it's the goal of it, really, if you look at what the story is, it's Matthew McConaughey. His goal is to enlist John Quincy Adams to defend these Africans. Alex looked at that part of it too and goes, "nope, can't do that." So he starts the novel in Africa. Cinqué is sleeping next to his wife and child in his village. You are immediately in his head. He's not indecipherable. Right? He's not just this nameless prisoner. He has a family. He has a village. He has a culture. He goes walking up. He feels uneasy. And it turns out this lion attacks the village and he kills the lion and saves the village and Alex, as much as possible tries to tell the story through the viewpoint of Cinqué, the leader of the Africans not through Matthew McCauley. And it's the goal . . . another central goal of the novel is Cinqué's quest to

be released and returned to his family. It's a different story. Now, all of that is apparent. But the thing is, when Cinqué is in Africa, he is not Black. Blackness has no meaning. He is outside of the divisions of Black and white, which were created by white people. He doesn't have to go to anybody white and say, "am I a free man or am I a slave?" So what Alex starts the novel outside of what I call in my book, the "ontology of slavery," the ontology of Blackness and whiteness, in a completely different conceptual, political realm, where whiteness has no meaning. And so it's not just that Alex moves from a white savior story to a savior about Cinqué. But it really makes a comment on the difference between living in America where Black and white are categories, which determine how we think about each other, and how we think about Cinqué, and the white people in the novel. It's a completely different culture, completely different history, completely different viewpoint. Now, Spielberg could have done this. I don't believe that Spielberg is, you know, a racist, he's a liberal, he actually adopted black children. But as his partner David Geffen said, you know, it's a white savior story. Alex's novel, had they made a movie of it would have been a Black, African American novel. And he used everything from the script, because he had to do that. Now, the Spielberg people, they accepted it because he used everything from the script, but he said "they weren't smart enough to know what I'd done." Right? "That I'd taken their, their, their script and taking it out of the realm of whiteness. So there, there are depths to this about thinking about this issue."

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- Staci Drouillard 12:30
- Thank you. . . miigwech. Any other examples of the egregious past before we move on to the next question.
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- Carol Miller 12:38
- Let me just make the list. American Indians have been so . . . the authenticity of American Indian identity has been used as a cudgel especially in popular culture and movies. And you know that because you've seen them all, but it's important to remember that among all those representations were those old Indians: Elvis Presley, and Natalie Wood, and Burt Lancaster, and Audrey Hepburn, and Dame Judith Anderson. Those things essentially, make ridiculous Indian identity and take agency entirely away from it. In the example of "Little Tree," that book was amazingly popular when it was first published, it found its way onto the reading lists of almost every secondary classroom in the country. And it was on the New York Times Book, Review the New York Times Bestseller List for at least a couple of weeks before someone finally tracked down who Asa Carter really was. So it's not egregious is barely strong enough a word to talk about the damage done. The damage done to Native identity and Native power and Native authenticity in all of these hijacked examples, what of what is not anything really, but identity theft. And that's what's been going on and what now, Native movie makers and Native writers and Native artists are trying to address and roll back.
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- Michael Torres 14:21
- Both of the things you said reminded me of like, an example of like authenticity and the power of identity going back to like, Indigenous people and a very, like contemporary show of what's called "Reservation Dogs" it's about a group . . . it's centered around a group of Indigenous kids who are teenagers who live on a reservation and there's an episode in this most recent season

and the last season where there's like a, they look back and at some ancestors of theirs, some family members and these these Indigenous kids are put in, in a boarding school like a Christian boarding school, but all the Indigenous kids forcibly putting the boarding school are speaking in their native language, and it's being translated. But whenever a priest or a nun comes into the scene and they speak, you can't understand what the English is saying is it sounds like it sounds like "blehblehblehbleth" to them, to their ears. And then it was such a, such a small simple thing that was so powerful for me to be like, oh, like, the Indigenous people have the power in this story. And I loved that. And it was like such a simple thing. But it made perfect sense like, now it's sort of like they're rolling it back, or they're trying to like fix or redo or just tell their own story, which is sort of in line with what y'all were talking about.

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- Staci Drouillard 15:38
- That's a great lead into the next question. Does the panel feel that there are some cultural realities within the realm of North American history, which are viewed as fair game, while other cultural realities are considered off limits?
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- Carol Miller 15:57
- Well, I think, again, it's very, it's been very difficult for Native people to put up defenses about that kind of stereotyping. And a very limited notion of what Native human beings are. So, so the helper Indian, this the white savior, the, the ecologically grounded Indian, the Indian princess, they're really just a few roles and activities, events, identities that native people are allowed to assume. That's changing. And in part, it's changing, because Native writers and artists are trying to reclaim history because they know that whoever gets to tell the story gets to determine what is truth, and what is lie. What is abuse, and what are the power relationships that result in that abuse. And so telling the story is everything. And that I think, is what is at the base of any discussion of, of authenticity, or authority or agency. One just has to find a way to tell the story to be the one who tells the story,
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- Staci Drouillard
- Comments additions?
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- David Mura 17:18
- One of the premises of my book is, is that when we talk about the racial structure in this society, it goes as deep as the way we evaluate knowledge. So white knowledge is always. . . . For those who heard this earlier, sorry, I'm repeating this. White knowledge is always valid, objective, true and official. White knowledge is valid, objective truth and official knowledge. Black knowledge or knowledge of people of color is always invalid, subjective, false or suspicious, or unofficial, unless white people decree it's official and true. Now, you have the AP course created by African American scholars, the AP high school history course, which you get college credit for, on the African American Studies, created by Black writers and Black scholars. [Florida] Governor DeSantis said, "This course lacks educational value." Now, Governor DeSantis has not written a novel, a poem a play about African Americans. He doesn't have a PhD in history, much less than African American history. But he feels perfectly fine in saying "this course lacks educational value." And this is a demonstration of that principle about how knowledge is evaluated. None of

the expertise that these African American writers and scholars bring to the table is seen as valid by DeSantis, and his administration. And I would just point out when people say, like, "let's not talk about the past," when the Africans came to America and were enslaved, they were forbidden from teaching their language, their culture and their history. What is DeSantis doing but the same thing. He is acting in the tradition of a slave owner. And yet that is not recognized.

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- Carol Miller 19:34
- I think there's a new urgency in this. This the importance of determining who tells the story, because I think David's point is well made that all around us now we see that not only self-representation is under attack. It's not just who tells the stories, but it's whether the story should be told at all. And that is the genuine, most frightening thing about the sort of very hyper divided society we live in now. That just is something I think that writers and artists of all kinds are now facing very directly and trying very strongly to control those representations because they know that if history is really erased, and if it's not, "who tells the story," the stories can't be told, then "never again" becomes almost certain. That's I think what we're all afraid of.
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- David Mura 20:55
- Now, that's like, Moms for Liberty wants to ban the story of Ruby Bridges. Ruby Bridges, was a six year old Black girl who was sent to a desegregated New Orleans school in 1960. And what they say is, "it will hurt our children and make them feel shameful, and guilty." And what I would say is, this is the way that racism in America, white racism makes itself a victim of its own crimes. Like, you know, when Ruby Bridges comes through that crowd of angry white people, it's not Black people that are preventing her from coming into the school. The other thing is what they're actually afraid of--because children read the book. And when children read the book, they don't feel--unless they're taught badly, they don't feel shameful. They go, "Ruby Bridges was a courageous child. I admire her bravery, I admire her fight for social justice," right. And that's what they don't want. They don't want their children to identify with anybody who's not white.
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- Staci Drouillard 22:06
- Our esteemed panelists are part of the modern movement to do creative work inside this system that isn't always supportive of the work--the writings, the history, the art, of people of color. From David's book, I pulled this quote from Toni Morrison, who said, "Until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all American fiction have been positioned as white. The assumption of a white audience requires writers of color to erase differences between our own lived experiences, and the assumed white audience, which is a literary version of cultural assimilation." And so I ask each of our panelists, who do you write for? Michael, do you want to take that one?
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- Michael Torres 23:16
- Sure. Well, in the first book, my only book currently, who I was writing for were sort of imagined versions of my friends growing up in Southern California, and, kind of, how I was thinking about this when you were talking earlier, David is like, I don't think-- where I grew up in Southern California was a very, it was about 80 - 90% Latinx. So when I, when I moved to Minnesota for

grad school, I was in very much aware that where I grew up was not where Minnesota is. And so I and so like, I think I grappled with that in the first book. And I wanted, I was determined to, to write for those friends, by which I also mean speaking, in the ways that they would understand and they would sort of, in my mind, if I read a poem that was working on they could sort of nod and tell me like, “yes, that rings true” or “no, you've been, lying to us,” right? And so that was I write for them. And I think, like, I'm thinking of an example of sort of, what's like the self-assimilation or, what it was what you're talking about. When I've taught with the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop, it always takes the first two weeks for me to get the students to sort of write freely or, or in their own voice, which is really difficult for anyone to do. But the best example I have is a student who, after you know, we had a session of writing he said, “Well, I don't--I can't write poetry. I don't-- I don't sound like a poet.” I go, “What do you mean?” he goes, “I don't have a big vocabulary, I don't talk like ‘thee and thou’,” and I go, “you don't need to.” That's just what he thinks—I was think he needed to sort of erase his own voice and maybe his experiences because he didn't have the topics in the language of what he imagined or had been taught what poetry was and the only the only thing he thought it was. And so, spending time with them the first couple weeks just sort of like—“just write the things down in the way you would say it to someone you know, or someone you trust” is sort of a common kind of—I forgot the question now. [laughter] But that's sort of what I've been thinking of, as we've been talking. As far as like, yeah, who I write for and who I'm thinking about. Also, Natalie Diaz came to my grad school my first year and told me, and I was like, I think the only person in my cohort who was a person of color, she said, “You will have to teach them to understand your voice.” And she meant like the greater white publishing world, which is also saying “stay true to your voice, and they will have to learn it” right. And that really stuck with me, and has been sticking with me as I as I work on the next project too.

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- Staci Drouillard 26:12
- Who do you write for David?
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- David Mura 26:15
- Um, I write for many different audiences. Instead of answering that I would . . . I often ask my students, there's four questions about the narrator, “Who is the narrator? Whom is the narrator telling the story to? When is the narrator telling the story? And why is the narrator telling the story?” Now you can make a choice whom you're going to tell the story to, and this is true, even if the narrator's third person omniscient, right. But in Juneau Diaz's “The Brief Wondrous History of Oscar Wao” he is telling that story to his generation of Dominican immigrants, right? So that's his audience. And he doesn't translate the Spanish, he doesn't explain customs. And it's, it's a specific generation too. So he makes references to hip hop, to pop culture. And it's like, he's talking to his homies, right. And Jhumpa Lahiri, who writes about Bengali, Indian American culture, she writes for a New Yorker audience. Right? And so she'll, she'll explain stuff, right. And also, what she does, is really the issues of race are eliminated from her writing. She will talk about cultural differences, but she won't talk about racial differences. So like in one of her stories that I talked about, it's about a Bengali Indian American family who lives in Boston. And the younger brother has a drinking problem and sort of strays from the path of, of middle class life, and he ends up in a white working class, married to a white working class woman. Well, the

story doesn't follow her there. Because if he was, if you're a middle upper middle class Bengali professional in Boston, you don't run into the racism you run into if you're an Indian American in a small town, working at a bar. But my mother, my very, assimilated Japanese American mother, loved Jhumpa Lahiri, and could not make sense of Juno's novel. But my point is, you can choose to tell your story to anybody. And this is true in fiction, the person can tell the story to their sister, or to their mother or to their son, and then you're not translating, you're not exoticizing, you're just telling it to somebody who intuitively understands your story, and everybody else has to figure it out. But that's no different than when Conrad's Marlow was telling the story to a bunch of upper class Brits on a yacht in the Thames. It's just a different tribe.

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- Carol Miller 29:14
- Well, I'm not really a writer, I'm a teacher. And one of the wonders of being able to teach American Indian literature is that I can say in every class I ever taught, this literature can change your life. These stories can change your lives, it can change the lives of Native American students, and they can change the lives of non-Native students. And this body of work can change the way we think about our place in the world and our relation to each other. So it's just a wonder and a blessing to be able to do that work. And I wish I were a writer [laughs] so that I could disseminate that more successfully than I'm often able to do.
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- Staci Drouillard 30:07
- David, you offered some examples, I think of writing that both explodes, what you call the "universal default," the universal default, which assumes that most characters, and audiences are white. And so if you are reading a book, and the protagonist is a white character, the race of that character is not talked about. Right? It's not mentioned, because it's implied already. However, in a lot of esteemed novels that a lot of people hold dear, characters of color entering the storyline are almost always identified by race, thereby creating a whole bunch of different assumptions about that, that character. So given this universal default, and I believe that we are making progress on this--does the panel believe that it's possible for authors to cross racial boundaries in an authentic way, given the history and presence of this universal default? And if you believe it's possible, what sort of tools of good writing are necessary to break free of that assumption?
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- David Mura 31:35
- If I begin a story: "Bill and Bridget, were sitting in their kitchen on the Upper West Side, and their apartment was off Broadway, they are arguing over their finances," you're gonna assume Bill and Bridget are white. Right? Now, if I'm writing "Tom and Terry were sitting in their kitchen in Las Vegas, looking out the window at the golf course behind there . . ." I cannot leave it just as Tom and Terry. If they're my parents, I have to explain that they're second generation Japanese Americans, they were imprisoned by the United States at ages of 11 and 15. And so I have to somehow introduce not only that their Japanese American, but what generation they were, what historical period that they lived in. Now, when the white author doesn't identify their characters as white, they're assuming that whiteness is the universal default, everything else is an exception. But what they're also assuming, is that Bill and Bridget being white is not important to their identity, or their life experiences. And there's no reader of color, who's going

to read about Bill and Bridget and think, “Oh, this isn't a white couple,” and their being white has something to do with their life experiences. Right? But if you're writing to a white audience, and as Toni Morrison said, and you're not thinking about how an audience of color is going to look at it, you don't think of that question. Now, it wasn't that Toni Morrison didn't want to write for other people. But she says, “I'm writing for a Black audience.” You know, “that's who I'm writing for.” I will just say about successes, we have to understand that there's knowledge that is required to write about anybody different than yourself. Right? And they're cultural things, there are historical things. There's political things. And some of the political things are difficult to get at. Like, there's a book “Telegraph Avenue” by Michael Chabon, where he has a Black character. And in certain ways, he gets all the cultural references right. The guy runs a record store, he gets all the . . . But it doesn't feel real to me because he never gets at the ambiguity and the subtleties of the way people of color feel about white people. Because most of our interactions, when we're dealing with white people, we are speaking in code, we are thinking, “how honest can I actually be right now--about how I actually feel?” And there's a level of anger and grief, and emotions that are lying beneath the surface of race in this country. Which is very hard to understand if you don't spend a lot of time with the people of that community. And I mean, really intimate time with people and many people in that community. So you can get all the surface stuff. But you don't get the heart. You don't get the spirit. And that is much more difficult to achieve than people think.

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- Carol Miller 35:11
- And that's why writers of color ought to have the edge now in controlling their own information and their own histories and their own identities. And that's why [Staci] your example was a good one, when we were talking the other day, if you have the choice, are you going to read William Kent Krueger, who's a very fine writer? Or are you going to read Marcie Rendon, who's going to tell you about what it is to be an Indian woman in a way that William Kent Krueger can't really get at even under the best intentions--which I'm sure he has. For now, it's so important, I think, to empower those voices of color, and to give them the edge because that's how self-representation is preserved. It just has to be preserved. And that's the way to do it, privileged voices who are from inside the experience, that doesn't mean that white people can't write about experiences of people of color, it means that if you have the choice, if you can--read those insider voices.
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- Michael Torres 36:30
- I have so many thoughts. What you were saying David made me think that the white writer misses the subtleties, right? A student told me that they heard this from either another writer or teacher--that a story isn't about characters, it's about character's relationships with each other. And that if you don't, if you're a white writer, and you don't spend a lot of time with, like, let's say Black people, you don't get those subtleties that are within the relationships that how they sort of talk to. . . communicate with each other. You get the cultural surface level references. So I was thinking about that. And then, yeah, also, what [Carol] you were saying about self-representation and, and making sure the one person of color in my cohort that I teach, gets, feels empowered to write those stories, because they do often feel alone moving through the academic program as like, the only writer of color. And then to the other question about like,

can someone white write about someone-- Can they have like an authentic person of color character? As like, I don't write fiction much about I would like to think that that's possible. But also, in this world we live in we can't, we cannot separate like the work from the artist with like, social media. And so I would always wonder like, like, even if it's in fiction, I would always wonder like, "Well, why do you want to do that?" And "How are you implicating yourself?" In like, either the story of the process of this? And I'm always interested in that. Because as a as a writer, as a poet I am, I've been taught not to be judgmental in my poetry. So if I'm going to implicate anyone, or throw someone under the bus, I have to throw myself under the bus. And I would ask the writer that too, "well, where do you fit in all this?" You know, because, on a very sort of surface level, writing is about the art. But it's also about the glory one can get out of it. So I'm like, "Well, what's at stake for you? How are you implicating yourself?" I think about those things, too.

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- David Mura 38:33
- I've taken to doing this now publicly. I'm 71 years old. I have been writing about Japanese Americans for my entire writing life, and I'm still discovering things I don't know. So when a white writer comes to me and says, "Oh, I'm thinking about writing about Japanese Americans, you know, what can I do in, you know, six months or three months to prepare myself to write about Japanese Americans?" I look at them, "you have no idea what you're doing." And I've taught writing about race and I've taught this subject. It requires humility on the part of the writer. And I've had experiences where white writers in classes I've taught write about where, you know, it's much more miss than hit--but where the white writer gets it. But what I've also experienced much more frequently, is when you tell the white writer "no, you don't get it." They argue with you. They argue with you they don't go "Okay, tell me what I don't get." What you have to examine is that inherent arrogance that comes from whiteness. Right, that presumption that even though you've been you know, I've been writing for 45 years about Japanese Americans and I'm still discovering things and then you can come in and then in six months understand my community. That's arrogance. And it's different. Because if I'm writing about white people, I've lived among white people all my life, I've learned everything there is about white culture. I studied to be when I was a kid--I wanted to be a white person. You know, when a white person in high school said to me, I think if they were like, "well, that white person," I'm like, "Great. That's what I wanted to be." I read through the whole white, Anglo American canon in graduate school. Right? So, [laughs] I'm married to a white woman. Okay. That's completely different than if you come to me and go, I want to write about the internment camps. Can I write about the internment camps? Right. And it is, it is about arrogance versus humility.
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- Michael Torres 40:58
- For transparency. I'm also married to a white woman.
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- Staci Drouillard 41:04
- So am I. [laughter]
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- Okay, so I'm going to quote David again. In "A Stranger's Journey: Race, Identity and Narrative Craft in Writing," you say, "when a person comes from a family, or a group that has been

marginalized, when she is one of the sub alterns, the silence of such a person confronts about herself and her experiences within the greater culture is a political condition. In such cases, the very act of writing about herself and her experience has become a political act.” End quote. For each of the authors here, I want to pose the question, where do you see the intersection of politics in your own work? If white authors are writing Indigenous storylines, or Japanese American storylines? Are they taking the same political risk as a BIPOC writer would?

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- David Mura 42:17
- Yeah, it's, it's a completely different case. Because when I started writing, I looked at my bookshelf, and I said, “How many books are there about third generation Japanese American males? And I went, “none.” I mean, they're there came to be some immediately after I began writing and, they're my contemporaries. But my generation was the first fully integrated generation of American writers where you had writers from every single group. So you had to break through familial silence, through community silence, through national silence. Right. But if you're a white writer, and you're writing about your own life, I mean, there are many stories generally, like, you know, within you, and you've seen representations of people, you know, who look like you in movies and books. And what's more, we, as people of color are taught to identify with those people. Right. So the risk today, though, for the white writer, is because of a change in political condition. It's a literary condition, but the literary condition is tied to the political because both are about power. It is who politically holds power. And what is different now is that there are writers of color who can critique white writers. And that has not been the case before. Margaret Mitchell could write about “Gone with the Wind”: “it's a picture of slavery.” And there were no . . . Black writers did not have the cultural power to go “this is a piece of . . . “ Yeah. It is a shift in power. And so this is this is what you know. And that's to me, it's all for the better but it makes things more difficult. Because it is again, what Morrison is saying, up until recently, white writers just wrote in thinking I'm writing to a white audience. Now, Morrison wrote for a Black audience, but she understood to get published to get recognized she was going to be reviewed by white writers. But the white writer who just writes and thinks “I don't have to think about what a Black . . . “ you know, the person writing about Bill and Bridget in the Upper West Side apartment. They're not necessarily thinking “what is a Black person from the Bronx going to think about this story? What is it a Palestinian Arab American going to think about the story?” Right? They're not thinking about that.
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- Carol Miller 45:05
- I think the political stakes for writers of color are much higher. In part because there is a perception that the tone you take determines how credible you are, or how well accepted you can be. And so a person like Toni Morrison, or a person like Leslie Silko, they take incredible political risks when they write as they do. And so do critics . . . and those political risks get more dangerous at times when there is a pushback on the part of the dominators. And that's what we're seeing, I think right now. We're seeing a good deal of pushback. I want to tip my hat before the end of the evening to our colleague, Elizabeth Cook Lynn, from South Dakota, a wonderful critic and writer who died in July at the age of 92. And she was a critic who took-- and a writer-- who took all kinds of political risks, and for her trouble, was often labeled strident, or unreasonable, or argumentative. But she was a tough cookie. And she took all that political fire

and turned it into some of the most interesting theory about how writing is done and how people accept writing that I've ever read before. So I think Elizabeth Cook Lynn is now on her spirit journey, and I hope she has an easy time of it because she deserves it. She took a lot of heat for a lot of people. Her book is the one I brought for Staci to read. It's called "Why I can't read Wallace Stegner," and you have to have asbestos underpants, if you're if you're Wallace Stegner after she gets done with you. [laughter]

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- Michael Torres 47:22
- I think I'll say real quick, regarding the first part of the question about where do politics intersect with my work? Probably in language, vernacular. The first week I was living in Minnesota, I was invited over by a friend I just made and I was talking about back home and I said, "yeah, it was with my homies." And they laughed, and then I looked at them. And they said, "Oh, you're not kidding." And I was like, oh, oh, that's a word that they don't. They think I'm joking. I was like, I'm a caricature and all these things. And then I started taking academic vernacular, and just sort of manipulating it in my work. And using and interjecting it like I was about to say slang, but it's not slang, unless someone tells you it's slang that they don't understand. Right? So it was like the words I use back home and the words that I was having to use in academia, and then sort of mashing them all together, because that was sort of my experience. And I write a lot from my experience. And it just happened to be me coming from a very brown area into a very white area and just grappling with that for the first three years and now 10 years. So that's sort of where politics just comes into play for me.
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- David Mura 48:34
- So I have a question, when you talk about teaching the people in the prison workshop, saying "I want to free you up to use your words." What was the process for you to free yourself up?
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- Michael Torres 48:47
- It was probably at grad school. All my professors were white there at MSU. And so it was probably after grad school going to CantoMundo and then doing VONA [Voices of our Nations Arts Foundation] and hearing about-- I'd read you know writers of color and Latin writers conferences for writers of color. Yeah.
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- David Mura
- CantoMundo is a conference for Latinx poets and VONA is for writers of color.
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- Michael Torres
- And it was hearing about the phrase "the white gaze" that I had never heard like, the white gaze. And it was probably after that thinking, "Okay, well, I can I can talk. I can speak in like how I how I talked with my friends," like, I wasn't doing it like all the way dialed up in grad school. And then I felt sort of, from those professors and mentors at those various conferences, I felt more empowered to do so. And so it started happening for me there and I just like-- it felt very freeing and that there was space for me to do that. And then I had people you know that I met that could see them to as audience members and they would understand what I was saying in the language with the words I use naturally, right?

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- David Mura 50:01
- And so was this a process just sort of naturally about being around people of color? Or did any of the students or teachers telling you and go, "Michael, you're sort of hiding."
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- Michael Torres 50:10
- On a craft level only. I had--there was a story where there was a . . . I did read a short story where some kid kept like a crowbar under a seat of his car, because he wanted to help his friends in case they wanted to fight. And at the end, he decides not to use it. And then someone in the class was like, "Oh, well, maybe [the character] won't use it, because he has like a scholarship at stake." I go, "he's not going to college." [laughs] He isn't. That's not . . . he's going to community college, maybe? Like that experience . . . and I was like, "Oh, he doesn't understand" and then that was like my last semester. And once I got to those conferences, I was like, they would never ask me that question, right. So and I started reading things, I really got into writers of color. And I remember reading "The Labyrinth of Solitude," [Octavio Paz] my first semester, and I looked back, I was like, "Oh, I was so lonely." But I needed those. I was seeking out those writers, because I wasn't getting those voices in that, those sort of talks in the class, as much as I should have. Yeah.
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- Staci Drouillard 51:09
- Okay, I think we're at—we're at time now for Q & A. Audience Q & A. So if you have a burning question . . . Oh, here they come. "How would you feel about a white writer, interviewing you or asking you to be a cultural editor for their book, regarding your culture?" Anyone want to take that?
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- David Mura 51:35
- Well, if you're a car mechanic, and you want to fix my car for free?
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- Michael Torres 51:42
- I was thinking, like, how much are you gonna pay me?
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- David Mura 51:46
- Again, the arrogance of that, the utter arrogance of that, right? You're asking to use my expertise, or my knowledge for free? And why would I do that? When there's so many other writers of color that I want to help? Why would I? Why would I say like, you're this random white writer that I don't know or don't know very well. Why would I do all this work for you? And it is merely in the assumption that I would do that work, that I know you're not ready.
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- Staci Drouillard 52:21
- "One of the most successful filmmakers who works in the quote unquote, "white savior" tradition is Ken Burns, what do we do about him?" I feel like I should have like a fire right there and . . . [laughter]
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- Carol Miller 52:41
- He's been feeling the heat lately. He's been on NPR talking about being the spokesperson for so much of American history. And I think it's time to pass the torch, at least to the degree to give space to others who can have access as insiders. To those materials, even when he writes about, about the American buffaloes, in ways that make you weep. He would still be nice to have an insider voice doing that work.
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- Staci Drouillard 53:18
- All right, wow, they're really thinking out there. Okay. "Can white writers get by reporting on Indigenous/ other races? For example, a white writer who writes about a Native American artist, or a white writer who reports on Native American code talkers in World War II, how would this be perceived differently than if a white writer writes a novel about the other?" So differentiating between reporting on and creating characters?"
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- Michael Torres 53:56
- Well, reporting is just like, the facts about it, right. And there's not--you don't necessarily I mean, I suppose there is still like the heart or the spirit in it, but it's not hinging on that and focused on it the way a novel is, and sort of what we were talking about, is how, is where a white writer might miss it, because they're not catching--they don't get those subtleties. Perhaps when you're reporting that's not the main concern, I suppose.
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- David Mura 54:24
- I do think there's a difference between you know, because whites scholars have done great, excellent work on history of race. Right, they've done research, but that's different from getting inside people's heads. Right. I mean, you know, the documentary that I did about Japanese American military intelligence officers in World War II. When, I'm watching those interviews. I understand who those—those are my uncles. And I understand when they say something like well when one of them says, you know, it just sort of bothers you, you know, like, here you are, you're trusted with the most important secrets of the war. And yet, you have to visit your family in an incarceration camp. Now, what I understand is that that is tremendous anger. But the anger is expressed through Japanese American cultural values. And so there's so many layers to what that man has seen. Right? He's not going to scream his anger. And certainly sees that anger is in a certain area of his psyche, which is both hidden and exposed. Because that whole experience was both a wound that my parents' generation wanted to hide, they didn't talk to their kids about, and yet it was there. And it's expressed through a Japanese cultural value, which is *Shakita ga nai*, it can't be helped. And *gaman*, the patience to endure. Right, so that it is how their anger is expressed. And made both conscious and unconscious. That's a very complicated thing. And it has to do also with their generation of Americans, how they felt about being American, which is completely different than the way I feel about being American. There's so many complications in that. And it's not that somebody outside the community can do that. But it is very easy to underestimate how difficult it is.
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- Staci Drouillard 56:49

- These are all great questions. But I'm going to go with this one. "As a Caucasian male, how can I best represent other cultural and racial plights without appropriating or misrepresenting another's struggles? Struggles I have not had but care strongly about?"
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- Michael Torres 57:15
- I don't know if this will completely answer the question. But I, like I would ask myself, "Where am I in that picture? How do I implicate myself?" And I think only recently, and this is my own ignorance have I been thinking about, you know, growing up Mexican American, and how much we relied on black culture and hip hop culture, but then also how the way like Mexican Americans talked about Black people growing up, because we were so you know, there's racism isn't just like, the white people. It's like, we I experienced it too, right. And I mean, my friends, and I, we, we dealt with that, too. So I I've had to think like, how have we appropriated Black culture and I've, so if I don't, I don't just like want to write about like, I'm trying to implicate myself, like, I don't think I'll ever want to write like about the Black experience are of some fictionalized version of this is what the Black experience is like, because I I don't know. But I would ask myself in in writing, like, I would grapple with like being a Mexican American and how we thought about Black people when I was growing up. Like, that's how I think I would service the work that needs to be done is like by implicating myself.
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- Staci Drouillard 58:19
- All right. Well, thank you so much, Michael, Carrol and David. It's a real honor to be here with you. [applause] Thanks to the art colony, and to all of you for coming out to delve into this very enormous topic with us.
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- David Mura 58:44
- There's a book coming out called "Writing an Identity. Not your Own: A Guide for Creative Writers" by Alex Temblador It'll be out in August and it really is a good book and it goes over a lot of these issues.
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- Announcer 59:09
- This community conversation was recorded and produced by WTIP North Shore Community Radio. With thanks to the Grand Marais Art Colony, M. Baxley audio engineer, and the Lloyd K Johnson Foundation.
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- Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>