

LITERARY RACIAL IMPERSONATION

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Literary racial impersonation occurs when a narrative work fails to express the perspective of a minority ethnic or racial group. Interestingly, even when these works express moral themes congenial to promoting empathetic responses towards these groups, they can be met with public outrage if the group's perspective is portrayed inaccurately. My goal in this paper is to vindicate the intuition that failure to express the perspective of a minority group well renders the work defective, both aesthetically and morally. I argue that available frameworks exploring the connections between aesthetic and moral realms of value are inadequate to analyzing this phenomenon and propose a novel connection between aesthetic and moral values. Specifically, I demonstrate that the primary defect of literary racial impersonation is *aesthetic* and contingently constitutes a moral defect in our current social context.

A *AMERICAN Dirt* hit the literary scene with glowing praise, hailed as “*The Grapes of Wrath* for our times” and “the great novel of las Americas” (Olivas 2020). The novel depicts the tumultuous journey of a Mexican woman and her son who migrate to the United States after a drug cartel massacres their family. Its author, Jeanine Cummins, hoped that the novel would open “a back door into a bigger conversation about who we want to be as a country” (Schuessler & Alter 2020). Oprah Winfrey featured the work prominently in her book club, claiming it greatly enhanced her understanding of the migrant experience. Critics lauded the work for its empathetic portrayal of the anguish and desperation of the Latin American migrant experience, especially as it was written during a time when the American government ruthlessly villainized and persecuted undocumented immigrants.

This acclaim was short-lived. *American Dirt* soon found itself at the center of a controversy. Rather than igniting a conversation around immigration, the novel sparked debates around cultural appropriation, the failures of the publishing

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industry, and Latinx discrimination in the literary scene. Many were upset by the fact that the book was written by a white woman and harbored resentment over the way the book was marketed (Bowles 2020a; Olivas 2020; Schuessler & Alter 2020; Wheeler 2020). Notably, the public outcry resulted in the cancellation of *American Dirt*'s book tour and several boycotts directed towards its publisher and bookstores that featured the book.¹

Although the media coverage seemed to suggest that the outcry centered around Cummins's identity, the criticisms and conversations surrounding the novel largely focused on its content.² Specifically, Latinx writers panned the work for its inaccurate portrayal of Mexico and Mexican people: "Cummins bombards with clichés from the get-go" (Gurba 2019); "what thin creations these characters are—and how distorted they are by the stilted prose and characterizations" (Sehgal 2020); "the cultural inaccuracies of *American Dirt* run deep, right down to the language. The author sprinkles in italicized Spanish words and phrases at random, mostly those that would be acquired in a Beginner's Spanish class" (Schmidt 2020). Interestingly, critics located broader moral failings alongside these aesthetic deficiencies, with accusations of the novel's potential to "serve a Trumpian agenda" (Gurba 2019) and voicing concern that "if English-speaking readers assume that this novel accurately depicts the realities of Mexico and migration, it will only further the cause of disinformation and prejudice" (Schmidt 2020).

How could the moral interpretation of a single work vary so wildly? The novel was initially thought to be an important tool to promote empathy and tolerance for migrants, but the negative response suggests the exact opposite. This is especially puzzling given that narrative works generally provoke such outrage when they seem to endorse a problematic stance on certain issues (e.g., the charge against *Lolita* for glorifying hebephilia) or contain offensive portrayals of minority figures (e.g., the racist portrayal of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*); *American Dirt*, by contrast, *prima facie* endorses a progressive, empathetic stance on border issues and the main criticisms of its inaccuracies center around seemingly innocuous features like poor integration of Spanish, overuse of clichés, and missing cultural references. While the overall message of *American Dirt* is something that its critics would endorse in principle, its poor execution appears to render the message unpalatable. Why?

My aim in this paper is to vindicate the intuition that there is something wrong in works like *American Dirt* that purport to represent the experience of a

1. For news coverage of this situation, see Armus (2020) and de León & Alter (2020).

2. Wheeler (2020), quotes John Paul Brammer, who writes, "It's weird to me that the dialogue around *American Dirt* is being reduced to 'brown people mad because white person wrote book' when I see Latinx authors going out of their way to say, yes, anyone can write whatever they want, but there are problems with the content itself."

racialized group but fail in their execution. I argue that its primary failings are *aesthetic* and explain the connection between these aesthetic defects and moral ones. First, I situate the work as a characteristic example of a general phenomenon in literature I call *literary racial impersonation*. Next, I argue that existing frameworks exploring the connections between aesthetic and moral realms of value are inadequate for analyzing critics' moral responses to works like *American Dirt*. Then, I locate the root of such responses in the work's aesthetic defects. Lastly, I demonstrate how such aesthetic defects can be moral defects in some contexts.

1. Literary Racial Impersonation

Some have accused *American Dirt* of being an example of 'literary brownface', a literary equivalent of the practice of white people using makeup to approximate facial characteristics of Brown people to mock, insult, or parody the group(s) they attempt to portray.³ Historically, brownface has reinforced and perpetuated degrading stereotypes of Latin Americans with a profound indifference towards the actual experiences of the people.⁴ Few deny that such a practice is problematic.⁵ Works like *American Dirt*, however, are not *obviously* problematic in this way. In contrast to brownface, *American Dirt* and its ilk aim to capture the marginalized group's experience in earnest.⁶ This is why the negative responses towards such works seem puzzling: If a work explicitly promotes tolerance and understanding of the marginalized group (which is wildly different from the aims of say, brownface), on what basis does it provoke outrage?

3. While literary critics of *American Dirt* have not used the term, the novel has been widely associated with 'brownface' in the public discourse; see Alter (2020) for examples. Many of the sentiments echo critics, who note the white author's fascination with brown skin in the work: especially Gurba (2019) and Sehgal (2020).

4. See Woll (2013) for a historical overview on stereotypical depictions of Latin American people in film. He notes, "official complaints from the Mexican government [. . .] did little to prevent Hollywood from portraying [Mexican people] in an unfavorable light" and that many studios presented their contract actors as Latin Americans using brown-face makeup (Woll 2013: 278). Note that brownface is also used to depict people of Middle Eastern, North African, Maritime Southeast Asian, Polynesian, Indigenous or South Asian descent.

5. See Mag Uidhir (2013) for an argument on the aesthetic and moral defects of practice of blackface and race-mismatching more broadly.

6. Other works that can fall under the 'ilk' of *American Dirt* include Arthur Golden's *Memoir of a Geisha*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Warrior Woman*, Norma Khouri's *Honor Lost: Love and Death in Modern Day Jordan*, and William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. For a historical overview from slave narratives that were designed to perpetuate stereotypes in the service of the abolition movement to current examples of racial impersonators in literature, see Browder (2000). See also, Miller (2018) and Kevin Young (2017) for related discussions.

Characterizing works like *American Dirt* as a literary version of brownface or related phenomena such as blackface or yellowface is useful in pointing out the disparaging effects of inaccurate portrayals, which also tend to rely on stereotypes. However, this approach fails to take the works' intentions into account. Even if we concede that all works that perpetuate harmful stereotypes are morally defective, regardless of their intentions, it is worth distinguishing the different ways this effect is achieved to better understand how good intentions to portray a minority group can still result in adverse effects.

Another approach is to accuse such works of cultural appropriation. Specifically, works could fall under 'subject appropriation', which refers to an outsider's representation of a culture's experiences or practices (Matthes 2016; J. Young 2005; 2008).⁷ Critiques based on such charges predominantly focus on the context surrounding the artist and the work. For example, one might contend that the identity of *American Dirt*'s author is problematic in itself because Jeanine Cummins is an American white woman and not a Mexican migrant.⁸ Additionally, one could point to the systemic injustice that the publishing industry perpetuates by prioritizing white authors over authors of color and argue it is wrong to publish and promote a white person's work about a racialized minority group instead of a work of similar quality on the same subject matter written by someone closer to the experience. Locating the harm in appropriation emphasizes underlying social inequalities.⁹ On such an analysis, we can appeal to the wider social context to explain why works like *American Dirt* prompt outrage and perpetuate harm, despite not containing the explicitly degrading elements of brownface.

Although the overall shape of this analysis is compelling, it fails to address the general puzzle: What prompts moralistic claims against works aiming to provide a moral message that most would find favorable, especially when such reactions are rooted in seemingly banal details like missed references to cultural symbolism, poor integration of a non-English language, unidiomatic translations, and ample references to characters' skin colors? Another potential problem is that this analysis works independently of the content and rests its entire

7. Subject appropriation (also called 'voice appropriation') occurs when the *subject matter or experience* of a culture, opposed to tangible objects or motifs, are appropriated from a culture.

8. It is worth noting that there was a minor controversy over Cummins's race. In a 2015 op-ed, Cummins wrote, "I am white. The grandmother I shared with Julie and Robin was Puerto Rican, and their father is half Lebanese. But in every practical way, my family is mostly white" (Cummins 2015). However, following the controversy of *American Dirt*, Cummins has claimed to identify as Latinx because of her Puerto Rican grandmother. See de Leon (2020) for comments. While the root of my analysis does not hinge on the author's racial identity, I will refer to Cummins as white.

9. In particular, appropriation can amplify the voices of already dominantly situated writers in a context where attention and readers are finite, which entails silencing socially marginalized people. For more on this particular harm, see Matthes (2016) and Todd (1990).

case on the author's identity — this means that in a counterfactual case where an identical version of *American Dirt* was written by a Mexican author, the moralistic response would not apply.

Yet there is precedent for similar moralistic outrage directed towards works by members of a community that fail on similar terms. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, for instance, was widely panned by the Chinese-American community for exoticizing Chinese-American culture. Kingston is Chinese-American. Her book features Chinese-American characters, attempts to emulate nuances of Chinese speech in English prose, and introduces many elements of Chinese culture. Many accused the work of pandering to white audiences, echoing criticisms of *American Dirt*. Critics referenced its failure to use the Chinese language, including a crucial mistranslation of a term (*kuei* or *gwai* for 'ghost' when it means something more like 'demon'), which made its symbolism questionable and devoid of the cultural significance the writer wanted it to have (Chin & Kingston 1990; Kingston 1982; Wong 1999). Notably, like *American Dirt*, the book did not contain an explicitly degrading or immoral message overall about the community it purported to represent but faced a fierce backlash nonetheless.¹⁰ *The Woman Warrior* and *American Dirt* are united in their aims to represent the experiences of racialized groups, their failures to do so, and the moralistic backlash they faced based on features of the work's content.¹¹ An analysis of cultural appropriation could only apply to *American Dirt* and not *The Woman Warrior*, as Kingston is not an 'outsider' to the culture she purports to represent.¹² This makes the backlash regarding her misrepresenting a racialized group all the more puzzling. For this reason, an investigation of the morality of such works should not entirely rely on any claims about

10. Notably, Jeffrey Chan has suggested that *The Woman Warrior's* overall outlook is "shaped by a white culture predisposed to fanciful caricature of Shangri-la four thousand years wise, but feudally binding" and Benjamin R. Tong has accused Kingston of purposefully mistranslating Chinese terms to suit "white tastes", "selling out [...] her own people" and having "the sensibility but no conscious, organic connection with [Cantonese] history and psychology" (Wong 1988: 3).

11. I use the term 'racialized' rather than 'racial' when I describe actual groups to allow for the possibility that races do not exist, but that racialized groups do. See Blum (2010) for a defense of this position. For further discussions around this point and others, see Glasgow, Haslanger, Jeffers, and Spencer (2019).

12. Although, strictly speaking, 'cultural appropriation' requires a context that includes at least two contrasting groups to participate in an appropriative act (i.e., an ingroup and an outgroup). there is an open debate on the moral status of misrepresentation by ingroup members and its relation to cultural appropriation. James Young, for instance, argues that the harm of representation cannot explain the wrongs of cultural appropriation, since misrepresentation coming from an ingroup member could be "just as wrong" (2008: 108). By contrast, Erich Hatala Matthes comments that "it is revealing to note that the ability of cultural insiders to harmfully misrepresent can be traced to the same underlying problem [as cultural appropriation]" (2016: 352). My analysis of literary racial impersonation, while relevant to this topic, does not aim to settle the debate on this relation, as it locates the puzzle solely in the misrepresentative aspects of narratives.

the group identity of the authors. Instead, the analysis should be rooted in the content of the works.¹³

I propose that works like *American Dirt* are instances of *literary racial impersonation* (LRI), which results from a failure to accurately depict an experience of belonging to a minority racial or ethnic group in a literary work.^{14,15} LRI is a general practice that can be perpetrated by both ingroup and outgroup members, and thus does not fall squarely within the domain of cultural appropriation. In cases where an outsider to the culture writes about the culture's experience, it can also constitute an instance of cultural appropriation.¹⁶ For my present purposes, I work with a commonsense notion of accurate versus 'failed' or 'inaccurate' expressions of group experiences—accurate expressions of a group experience are ones that the group depicted overwhelmingly endorses as representative and failed expressions are ones the group depicted overwhelmingly rejects and finds unrepresentative. It is an *impersonation* insofar as it is an imitation of a racialized group's experiences that expresses an outlook that is more characteristic of an outgroup's experience of the racialized group rather than one of the racialized group itself (Morrison 1993; Roelofs 2014; Taylor 2016).¹⁷ While the line between

13. The phenomenon at hand is also distinct from epistemic appropriation, which occurs when epistemic resources are detached from their original communities and misdirected to disproportionately benefit dominant groups (Davis 2018). First, *misrepresentations* of the epistemic resources (including stories and tropes) of a group are not themselves epistemic resources, as they do not perform the same interpretive function within the original community (e.g., it is unclear that interpretive resources that Mexican migrants actually use are present in *American Dirt*). Second, because the actual epistemic resources are not present in inaccurate portrayals of racialized groups, it seems strange to say that the marginalized group's epistemic contributions are being used to benefit dominant groups.

14. My use of 'accuracy' could be considered part of what many might consider 'authenticity' in a racialized narrative. While some might worry whether there are such things as an 'authentic' group experiences, my analysis does not hinge on whether or not 'group experiences' *actually exist* in a robust sense and does not rely on any sort of essentialism that this notion might suggest. For further discussion on the complications associated with authenticity and group experiences, see Chen (2005), Lee (2011; 2014), and Matthes (2016).

15. Some works that are generally taken to be successful and accurate representations of a racialized group's experiences based on these criteria include Gloria Analdúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*, Oscar Cásares's *Where We Come From*, Ronyoung Kim's *Clay Walls*, Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, and Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World*.

16. My analysis of LRI is compatible with the claim that additional harms can come about when it is perpetrated by an outgroup member. Indeed, later in the paper, we will see how my analysis of the moral defects of the practice in §4 is intimately tied to the overarching themes of social harms that the cultural appropriation literature explores.

17. In this paper, I primarily explore the ways in which the inaccuracies that characterize works of LRI perpetuate harms against racialized groups. Of course, there are further considerations that go beyond just these inaccuracies. Morrison (1993), for instance, argues that the problem of relying on a white outlook to study racialized others is that it encourages those who take the outlook to *use* these racialized experiences in order to ultimately contemplate on *whiteness*.

impersonation and accurate representation is often blurred, the *reliance* on an outgroup's preconceptions (most often a dominant group's preconceptions) in depicting the group is one factor that distinguishes LRI from an accurate expression of the group's experience.

Although outgroup members could *in principle* produce narratives that accurately articulate the experiences of racialized groups,¹⁸ they are much more likely to produce 'othering' and inaccurate portrayals out of a reliance on their own preconceptions. For instance, white authors might not have the flexibility to understand or articulate a racialized group's sensibilities, experiences, and expectations of themselves and the world that differ from their own as a result of being privileged in society (Dotson 2011; Hurka 1994; Mills 2007; I. Young 1990). Members of racialized groups are more likely to have the cultural competency required to tell such narratives about their groups as a result of their lived experiences. Gaining the requisite cultural competency from the outside is an extremely difficult undertaking that many white writers refuse to respect.¹⁹ This can lead to basic errors that few members of the racialized group would make. However, despite this likelihood, ingroup members can still fail in the pursuit of expressing an accurate racial narrative, producing LRI instead.²⁰

LRI is distinct from a related literary phenomenon, the *racial satire*, which deliberately uses an outgroup's outlook to subvert the very stereotypes it expresses. Racial satire *plays* with a public's assumptions about a racialized group to "simultaneously pay homage to and challenge authenticity and authority" (Chen 2005: xvii).²¹ We can find a notable example in William Wells Brown's 1858 play, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*. *The Escape* uses racial stereotypes to expose the falsity of narratives of Black people in white American culture: For example, a Black character, Cato, behaves as if he is performing blackface minstrelsy: he dresses in a comic imitation of white fashion and moronically pulls the wrong tooth of a slave with a toothache. However, instead of merely being an object of ridicule without further context (as such a character would

18. For example, Black scholar John A. Williams describes John Clellan Holmes's *The Horn* as by "far and away the best work by a white author on Negroes in contemporary times. I wish I had written it" (Williams 1968: 46). Insofar as works like *The Horn* are considered successful depictions of a racialized experience, they cannot be considered works of LRI. Any analysis of the moral status of cases where writers successfully depict the experiences of racialized out-groups must appeal to non-aesthetic factors to explain their defects.

19. Along these lines, Olivia Bailey (2018) suggests that rather than pursuing an understanding "from the inside" of marginalized people, a better means of promoting such intergroup understanding could be built on testimonial trust.

20. This characterization of LRI reflects the criticism that Kingston received for *The Woman Warrior*, where the main outrage was targeted towards the 'othering outlook' that was expressed in her work rather than an outlook familiar to other Chinese-Americans.

21. Note: Chen uses the term 'impersonation' to describe what I call 'racial satire' and 'imposture' for what I call 'impersonation'.

be in a real minstrel show), the character exposes a complex system of relations built around the institution of slavery. Initially, Cato seems to perpetuate a stereotype of the happy-go-lucky Black house servant who is blissfully unaware of his oppression, but he eventually seizes an opportunity to escape to Canada, revealing that he was aware of his oppressive circumstances all along (Ernest 1998). The satire *relies* on racist stereotypes to produce a parody of Black people and does not aim to accurately portray them (Carpio 2008). It is possible to deliberately use inaccurate portrayals of racialized groups—even ones that exemplify a dominant group’s outlook—to confront the tenacity of racial stereotypes and express what the racialized group’s experience is like to be portrayed in such ways. LRI thus differs from racial satire because it relies on an outgroup’s outlook unintentionally.

2. The Available Frameworks

If there is a tension between the moral and aesthetic values of works like *American Dirt*, the existing scholarship on the interactions between these values is ill-equipped to address it. Again, the puzzle that LRI poses is that there seems to be a moralistic claim made against works that aim to provide a moral message that most would find favorable.

The predominant debate on the interaction between aesthetic and moral values examines the relation in one direction. Typically, the debate’s participants analyze works with overtly immoral contents or themes (i.e., moral defects)—such as *Lolita*’s sympathetic hebephile or *American Psycho*’s gratuitous violence—and argue whether such moral defects can affect the work’s aesthetic value. Moralists claim that they impact the aesthetic value negatively (Booth 1998; Carroll 1996; 1998; Clifton 2013; M. Eaton 2001; Gaut 1998; 2007; Gilmore 2011; Hanson 1998; Mullin 2004; Nussbaum 1998; and Stecker 2008), immoralists claim that they can impact the aesthetic value positively (A. W. Eaton 2012; Kieran 2003), and autonomists claim that there is no interaction between these realms of value (Anderson & Dean 1998; Cooke 2014; Jacobson 2006; Lamarque & Olsen 1994; Posner 1997; 1998). Though these approaches offer different assessments of the relations between moral and aesthetic values, they are united in assessing the impact of a work’s morality on its aesthetic merit.²² Discussions on racial issues within this debate tend to focus on the tension between a work’s blatantly insensitive portrayals (i.e., racist contents) and its aesthetic achievements. An often-cited illustration of such a tension is Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*: the

22. For an overview of these positions, see McGregor (2014); McGregor critiques the debate on the basis of what he takes to be their vague terminology and superficiality.

work is often considered a literary classic but presents a racist depiction of its main Black character.²³

LRI does not fit neatly into this discussion. *Prima facie*, works of LRI feature at least some characters of color that deviate from racist tropes and promote generally unobjectionable moral ideals of tolerance, empathy, and compassion. The outrage surrounding *American Dirt* does not cite a tension between the novel's racist contents and its aesthetic achievements. Rather, its main criticism focuses on what some might regard as banal inaccuracies in its style, such as clichéd cultural references and the poor integration of Spanish words in the prose. These features of the novel are not obviously wrong in the way the racist portrayal of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* is, and defenders of *American Dirt* never cite its aesthetic merits to deflect from these charges. Moreover, works of LRI tend not to produce a strong tension between immoral contents and aesthetic merits. Thus, if we are to diagnose the connection between the moral and aesthetic values of LRI, it is difficult to see how a framework that begins with an examination of explicitly immoral contents can serve us.

There exist some exceptions to the predominant debate on whether morality affects aesthetic value (Bonzon 2003; Harold 2006; Stecker 2005). Notably, James Harold contends that certain literary features can play a role in both moral and aesthetic judgments, for example, narratives that prompt moral reflection both promote an ethical good and achieve an aesthetic aim. Harold emphasizes that great narratives are structured to invite openness, reflection, and moral growth within the audience, distinguishing them from works that only prescribe simplistic responses. For instance, *Jane Eyre* has interesting, complex characters with moral entanglements that invite the reader to reflect on what it means to be a virtuous individual; by contrast, a movie like *Gladiator* portrays flat heroes and villains and prescribes unreflective adulation for the hero.

Harold asks whether a simple prescription for a response that *seems* morally praiseworthy could actually be morally praiseworthy, such as the anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which played a significant role in the abolition movement but was unreflectively didactic. Ultimately, he remains skeptical of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* having the particular kind of moral value he discusses, claiming that "*considered in the context of the artwork, it is not particularly morally praiseworthy*" (Harold 2006: 267, original emphasis). So while it might have contributed to a moral good in a historical context, this contribution was not due to

23. The primary charge against a work like *Huckleberry Finn* is that it presents a flawed picture of reality and human nature. Most famously, Wayne Booth argues that the novel treats the happy-go-lucky Black slave Jim and his feelings as "expendable, as sub-human—a slave to the plot" in contrast to the indispensable value Jim ought to have as a human being. Moreover, Booth criticizes the way Twain portrays Jim as "naturally affectionate toward and uncritical of his white masters" (1988: 465–66).

the work's aesthetic achievements. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shares many features with *American Dirt*—it was written by a white woman, featured characters from a suffering racialized group, aimed to promote sympathy for the featured racialized group, and eventually faced backlash for the portrayal of the group.²⁴ Harold's analysis appeals to one of the work's aesthetic shortcomings, that is, its failure to promote reflection as an unrefined fable on the evils of slavery. Instead, the work is didactic and flatfooted in its delivery, which Harold argues is devoid of aesthetic value; by extension, any moral value that is tied to the aesthetic value of promoting reflection is absent. This analysis of why *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is undeserving of moral praise *in the context of the artwork* is plausible. Such an analysis could potentially apply to *American Dirt* as well, given its arguably overt prescription of sympathy.

However, Harold's analysis falls short of solving the puzzle surrounding the moralistic *outrage* directed towards works of LRI, as it only sets a standard for moral praise. The charges against works of LRI go beyond a mere failure to meet the standards for moral praise—they gesture towards a stronger claim—namely, that such works seem to be morally *defective*, despite purporting to promote a message that its critics endorse. Moreover, literary properties like complexity of characters and the sophistication of the narrative are more obviously related to moral judgments than the seemingly mundane cultural inaccuracies that critics of LRI cite as problematic. The realms of aesthetics and morality clearly interact when the literary feature of character development prompts moral reflection, especially when we are presented with complex characters that question our moral judgments on them (A. W. Eaton 2012; Harold 2006). It is less clear how details such as using an outdated way of spelling a Mexican character's last name can prompt a moral judgment on part of the reader.

Although Harold's analysis draws an illuminating connection between aesthetic and moral properties, it cannot explain how works of LRI prompt moral *outrage*. So I propose we locate the moral defects of such works in a different kind of aesthetic defect than the ability to inspire genuine reflection, namely the *inaccuracies* in the portrayal of racialized minority groups that critics often point to. In what follows, I argue that such inaccuracies constitute aesthetic defects, and that these defects constitute moral defects in certain social contexts.

24. Unlike *American Dirt*, however, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* actually made a significant contribution to changing American history, specifically in mobilizing the American public against slavery. But like *American Dirt*, its aesthetic merit is highly questionable, with some writing that its "*deplorable aesthetic strategies* might be excused for once, since they served a good purpose after all" (Fluck 1992: 319; my emphasis). However, much of this backlash came retrospectively, rather than during its time of publication. Further critiques of the work's failure to produce a genuine racial narrative can be found in Riss (1994) and Zwarg (1989).

3. LRI's Aesthetic Defects

Before determining whether inaccuracies constitute aesthetic defects, we must clarify what inaccuracies are in the context of fiction. Not every departure from reality is an inaccuracy or falsehood in fiction. Fiction, by its very nature, contains propositions that do not hold of the real world but are nonetheless *true* (Friend 2017; Lewis 1978; Walton 1990). For example, we can say it is true that Harry Potter went to Hogwarts, even though neither Harry Potter nor Hogwarts exists in the real world. In addition to this basic feature of fiction that allows departures from reality, there are interactions between what we take to be fact in the real world and true in fiction. Even if we are not told explicitly that Harry Potter's human cousin has ten toes, we can assume this to be the case unless otherwise stated. Authors generally assume that the audience shares a wide range of background beliefs about the world that they can import into the story when needed—this assumption works alongside what Kendall Walton calls the 'Reality Principle', where fictional worlds are "as much like the real one as the core of primary [i.e., explicitly stated] fictional truths permits" (1990: 144). We assume that the world in the fiction is like the real world unless otherwise stated and import our beliefs about the world into the fiction.

Whether or not the Reality Principle applies to a fictional world is contextually determined. For example, genre could modulate its usage—we do not import any geographical knowledge into a fantasy work like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but we do when reading a work set in contemporary Mexico. Relatedly, some genres concern themselves with accurately representing the real world, for example, hard science fiction,²⁵ historical fiction, and realist works. In light of this concern, works within such genres can be assessed for their fidelity to the subject matter portrayed; while there is leeway for constructing characters and scenarios that are purely fictional, there is a general expectation that the base-level facts of the fictional world are physically, historically, and psychologically congruent with the actual world (Bartel 2012). Content that departs from these base-level congruencies in such works can be deemed inaccurate. For example, the original manuscript for Charles Dickens's historical novel *Barnaby Rudge*, which was set in the late 1700s, included a description of a man hanged for passing bad one-pound notes. This was historically inaccurate given that notes under five pounds were not yet issued during this period. Dickens corrected the mistake once a reader caught it (Ricks 1996). Even though the one-pound note appeared in a fiction, it was an inaccurate represen-

25. 'Hard' science fiction, opposed to 'soft' science fiction, is characterized by a concern for scientific accuracy and logic—it aims to build worlds that are physically possible given the laws that govern our actual world. 'Soft' science fiction is less concerned with scientific rigor and can include physically implausible ideas like faster-than-light travel.

tation of the historical period. So some departures from reality can constitute inaccuracies in fiction. Again, this is often modulated by genre—works within the realist genre in particular are expected to be *realistic* and are held to a higher standard in representing the real world accurately.²⁶

Failure to adhere to this standard can constitute an aesthetic defect. Christopher Ricks, a main proponent of this claim, presents several cases to illustrate. He writes about George Eliot's description of a character in *Middlemarch* having "bright, dilated eyes" after taking opium, and how a London surgeon wrote Eliot to correct this description, stating that opium contracts the pupils. Eliot subsequently revised the two instances of dilation to read "with a strange light in his eyes" and "the peculiar light in the eyes" (Ricks 1996: 282). Ricks argues that her revisions indicate that accuracy in medical matters might be distinguishable from aesthetic value but is not completely divorced from it. Eliot's taking this factual correction as relevant for her fiction strongly suggests that she considered the error a blemish. Otherwise, she would not have felt the need to correct it.²⁷

Ricks notes that while Dickens's and Eliot's mistakes were easily fixable, other inaccuracies could require extensive revisions to correct. For instance, a pivotal moment of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* depends on an inaccurate conception of lenses that is intertwined with the novel's characters, symbolism, and theme (Ricks 1996). At the climax, the boys steal Piggy's glasses to start a fire and drop a rock on his head from a distance above, knowing he cannot see it without his glasses, and kill him. Being unable to see the rock implies that Piggy is near-sighted, but lenses used to correct myopia are concave. Concave lenses are useless for fire starting, as they diffuse rather than focus sunlight. If Piggy had worn convex lenses, which can help start a fire, he would have been far-sighted, but this means he would also have been able to see and dodge the fatal rock. Piggy's myopia and the glasses that counter it are not only crucial to

26. However, even works within genres where a high fidelity to reality is not generally required can fail to meet a lower bar for accuracy. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, for example, is a mystery thriller that has been widely panned for its inaccurate portrayal of history, even though it does not purport to be a 'historical novel'.

27. Additionally, M. W. Rowe discusses a similar case where an oceanographer points out an important mistake in Philip Larkin's poem 'Absences', which includes an impossible image of waves ('a wave drops like a wall' 'where there are no ships and no shallows') (1997: 335). Subsequently, Larkin added a note to his poem stating that his confusion had seriously damaged the poem from a technical stance; he also replied to the oceanographer by ending his note, "I hope not many of my readers are oceanographers". Ricks cites the letter Larkin receives from oceanographer, Frank Evans, who writes, "When I first read the poem . . . I thought: he's got his images wrong. Like so many people who walk along the shore and watch the breakers rolling in he thinks that waves in the ocean do the same. But it is only waves coming in to the beach that roll over and drop like a wall; offshore, no matter how big the waves are, when they break the water just spills down the front [. . .]" (Ricks 1996: 334).

the plot, but also to the central irony the novel—Piggy, the least morally shortsighted of the boys, is also the only one who is physically shortsighted. Those who are aware of how myopia is corrected could find this crucial plot point implausible and take the work less seriously as a result.

Golding's error is based on a factual inaccuracy that constitutes a serious aesthetic defect: Such errors are dissonant with the world as we know it and require readers with knowledge of the subject to "make a conscious effort to suppress the knowledge that what they describe is impossible" (Rowe 1997: 335). When we become aware of such inaccuracies, we must suppress them in order to take the work seriously. This is an extra constraint on the reader that does not add to the work's aesthetic value—it detracts from it. *We are asked to ignore what we know to be true of the world for the sake of salvaging the imagery depicted in these works*; this is fundamentally different from being asked to imagine fictional characters or creatures that we know do not exist in the real world. The failure of accuracy in the works of Eliot, Dickens, and Golding constitute aesthetic defects insofar as they fail to contribute to the novel's overall congruency with the actual world when they should, which can cause the reader to attend to these mistakes rather than the other features of the work. If Golding's use of concave lenses had been congruent with the actual world, they would not have detracted from his symbolism, and this aesthetic feature would have been even more powerful.

Notice a pattern here: those who were more familiar with the subject matter were easily able to detect the inaccuracies of the work, and the authors were inclined to correct those mistakes. This suggests that the mistakes were aesthetic defects. Likewise, when it comes to depictions of a particular racialized or cultural experience in a work of literature, those who are more familiar with these experiences are better positioned to detect errors in the depiction (Du Bois 1903/1989; Mills 2007; I. Young 1990), and these errors can constitute aesthetic defects. This is precisely the kind of error that writers and critics familiar with Mexican culture have detected in *American Dirt*.

For instance, Mexican Spanish-speakers have claimed the novel's use of the Spanish language is "wooden" and "odd" (Bowles 2020b): Spanish words are inelegantly sprinkled into the dialogue ("Hola, abuela" or "Hello, Grandma" becomes "Hello, *Abuela*"); a note from a cartel leader reads as though it had been generated by an electronic translator and "smoothed slightly by a line editor" (Bowles 2020b; Schmidt 2020); and the protagonist's last name is also spelt *Quixano* instead of *Quijano*, when the name has not been spelled with an 'x' since medieval Spain (Schmidt 2020).²⁸ Cummins frequently misses opportunities to

28. Schmidt (2020) also notes that Lydia's son's name is 'Luca', when the Spanish version of the name 'Luke' is *Lucas*. He writes, "one wonders if the protagonist Lydia adopted her son 'Luca'

include literary devices to add cultural texture, for example, she uses ‘hoo’ as the onomatopoeia for the sound owls make rather than the Spanish ‘uu’. Her lack of proficiency in the language presents a distorted view of how speakers of the culture she portrays would articulate things; this contributes to the inaccuracy of her depiction and undermines her readers’ trust in her account. In particular, it suggests that if she doesn’t really know the language, she also does not understand the culture she is trying to depict.

Additionally, Cummins’s Mexican characters often miss cultural references that one could reasonably expect most Mexicans to catch, impoverishing Cummins’s use of symbolism. For example, the protagonist, Lydia, is baffled at how a cartel leader could go by the name ‘La Lechuza’ (the screech owl), because she finds the juxtaposition between a silly name and a terrifying person amusing. This juxtaposition does not work within the Mexican context, though, because screech owls in Mexican culture symbolize death and are widely feared (Gurba 2019).²⁹ Most Mexicans would not react with bafflement to this name, so her reaction in the context is inexplicable. Furthermore, Mexican characters are often made to think in terms of Anglo-American cultural references, for example, Lydia’s thoughts as she approaches the route of the freight train: “The freight trains stretch out across the Mexican landscape like a beanstalk migrants must claim” (Cummins 2020). It would be odd for a native Mexican to naturally conjure this image, as *Jack and the Beanstalk* is a foreign tale (Schmidt 2020).

One might argue that Ricks’s argument does not apply to these inaccuracies in *American Dirt*, which seem importantly different from the way pupils dilate or which kind of lenses correct myopia, as there are no factual propositions to dispute. Scientific facts hold cross-culturally, but cultural norms do not apply evenly amongst all members of a culture; some members could plausibly miss certain cultural references or have a shakier grasp of a language.

However, we must not infer from the potential differences in cultural and scientific norms that there cannot be inaccurate descriptions of a culture. People familiar with Mexico have identified multiple errors in Cummins’s depiction of the country. It seems prudent to defer to their abilities to identify inaccuracies in such depictions, much in the same way we have deferred to surgeons to determine which descriptions of pupil dilations or constrictions are incongruent with reality. Moreover, correcting these kinds of inaccuracies would improve

from Italy, Hungary, or Romania. The name sounds extra dissonant to a Spanish-speaking reader, as names ending in *A* are typically female. When even the protagonists’ names are butchered, what can one expect from the rest of the book?”

29. Gurba (2019) also notes that the novel’s stance on death is painfully humorless and fails to “approach death with appropriate curiosity and humility”, in stark contrast to the playfulness with which Mexican culture approaches the subject. She quotes Octavio Paz, who writes, “the Mexican . . . is familiar with death. [He] jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it. It is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love.”

American Dirt's aesthetic value: If Cummins had omitted these inaccuracies by including accurate interpretations of culturally relevant symbols and had hired a better translator to make her Spanish lines more idiomatic to Mexican Spanish, the work would have not imposed unnecessary distractions.

Still, even correcting for these mistakes, there seems to be a more problematic kind of inaccuracy that critics have noted—a failure to depict an accurate outlook. By definition, a work of LRI fails to accurately depict a racialized group's experiences. A crucial part of this depiction is a work's *outlook*, an intuitive understanding of the world that is characteristic of a person or group of people. People with depression, for example, tend to have an outlook on life that tends towards pessimistic interpretations of events and is infused with negative affect. Characterizing a racialized group's outlook is less straightforward, and many group members will likely disagree on what kind of features it must include or not. Fortunately, there is much more of a consensus on what does *not* count as part of the group's outlook, and this is more relevant to analyzing works of LRI.

Let us turn to this failure of outlook in *American Dirt*. First, critics point out that Lydia is constantly surprised by her country's day-to-day realities. This ranges from her shock in finding out that Mexico City has an ice-skating rink, to the discovery that some central Americans migrate to the United States by foot, to the revelation that women are at risk of being raped during migration (Gurba 2019; Schmidt 2020). Since the novel presents Lydia as an educated, middle-class Mexican person from a city, it is strange to present these realities as being *notable* to her. This would be analogous to a novel set in America, where the protagonist, an average American, is surprised to find that Chinese restaurants exist in the country. Why would this be a surprise to someone who lives in America and knows perfectly well that there are Chinese restaurants all over the country? No one familiar with America would be surprised by the fact. Unless there is a *particular* reason for an American character to be surprised by it, such astonishment is unjustified.

Second, *American Dirt* constantly directs its readers' attention to the skin color of its characters, containing countless descriptions of "sun-browned faces", "skinny brown children", "a shade browner than usual", "berry-brown face", being "tan as childhood", etc. While this might be indicative of a non-Brown person's experience in looking at Brown people, it is strange for Mexican characters to continuously notice this feature that ought to be unremarkable in their context. A particularly jarring example is a description of two sisters migrating from Honduras who hug each other, "Rebeca breathes deeply into Soledad's neck, and her tears wet the soft brown curve of her sister's skin". Critic Esmeralda Bermudez (2020) articulates the problem succinctly—"when's the last time you hugged your sister and stopped to contemplate the color of her skin?"³⁰

30. Seghal (2020) makes a similar comment: "In all my years of hugging my own sister, I don't think I've ever thought, 'Here I am, hugging your brown neck.' Am I missing out?"

Representing members of a certain race as constantly noticing the skin color of others who look like them does not give an accurate sense of what it is like to be a member of that race. The point here is not that the portrayals of Latinx people as having brown skin is inaccurate, but that they are portrayed as constantly noticing the skin color of their fellow people. This simply does not reflect the way racialized individuals observe their own people within their own cultural context. The outlook that the text presents makes the character's skin color salient in a way that presupposes a contrast with the skin color one is accustomed to seeing, but its context (where the vast majority of the characters are Brown) does not call for such juxtaposition.³¹ By contrast, one would be hard-pressed to find similar descriptions of white skin in describing all the characters in a book about white people.

Although no individual instance of this kind of surprise or mention of brown skin taints the entire novel, the cumulative effect of these frequently placed details presents an inaccurate portrayal of a racialized group's experience of its own cultural context. The outlook presented is much more indicative of an outsider's, juxtaposing such details with a set of expectations that actual members of the culture do not have. On this point, Mexican-American literary critic Myriam Gurba writes that the protagonist "perceives her own country through the eyes of a pearl-clutching American tourist" (Gurba 2019).³² Importantly, this outlook generates the lower level inaccuracies that come from a lack of cultural competency (e.g., the unidiomatic Spanish and missed opportunities for symbolism).

While it might be relatively easy to set aside factual inaccuracies in *Middlemarch*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *Barnaby Rudge* when assessing the works' overall

31. One caveat to this criticism is that it would not apply to a work that explores the colorism and complicated racial dynamics within Latin America; if used in such a way, the noting of skin color could potentially be used to accurately depict a racialized group's experience. However, *American Dirt* does no such thing, and the constant noting of skin color is one feature of the work that critics constantly point to as an instance of Cummins's lack of ability to break from the outlook of a white person.

In an author's note, Cummins writes, "I'm acutely aware that the people coming to our southern border are not one *faceless brown mass* but singular individuals, with stories and backgrounds and reasons for coming that are unique" (Cummins 2020; emphasis mine). Her note as well as the countless descriptions of her characters' skin color indicate her hyper-awareness of the members of the 'brown mass' as *brown*, indicating an attitude towards the people that always makes salient their skin color first and does not actually respect their individuality. It also strongly suggests that she perceives these people as 'other' and reveals how unaware she is of her privileged outlook, which prevents her from an earnest engagement with the group and its experiences, let alone the ability to express it well.

32. Seghal (2020) also notes, "Cummins has put in the research, as she describes in her afterword, and the scenes on La Bestia are vividly conjured. Still, the book feels conspicuously like the work of an outsider."

aesthetic value,³³ it is much more difficult to overlook the inaccurate portrayals of an outlook characteristic of LRI. An important aesthetic aim of literature is to exercise our capabilities to experience and imagine different perspectives or outlooks.³⁴ We generally do not turn to literature to learn factual propositions about the real world, but it is common to immerse oneself in narratives to gain different experiences about those who are different from oneself. Moreover, there is reason to think that when engaging with fictions, we regularly engage in a process of *exporting* a way of looking at the fictional world into our outlooks in the actual world (Gendler 2000; 2006). When a work's goal is to give readers a chance to immerse themselves in a racialized group's outlook, and the work presents the subject matter through an outlook other than the racialized group's, it fails to meet this aim.³⁵ These inaccuracies of outlook can undermine the perceived authenticity of the representations. If we think of the perceived authenticity as carrying more moral or aesthetic weight than any individual inaccuracy, in light of aiming to depict a racialized group's experiences, we can see why failure to meet these aims can cause moral outrage.³⁶

It is easy for those who lack familiarity with the depicted racialized group to overlook these failures in outlook because they are poorly positioned to determine whether certain descriptions of the group are accurate or not (Mills 2007). In addition, they are also poorly positioned to assess the overall quality of the work, because they do not see the glaring inaccuracies that flavor and detract from the

33. Again, the presence of an aesthetic defect does not automatically determine the aesthetic value of an entire work. There is room for holistic judgment, and overall aesthetic value might derive its positive value from other features the work contains. However, although a holistic judgment might find much aesthetic value in a work, it does not eliminate the aesthetic blemishes that a work could have. Arguably, *Lord of the Flies* had enough aesthetic value elsewhere to compensate for the major aesthetic flaw it contained in its inaccurate assumptions about corrective lenses, but that flaw still exists in the work.

34. Nussbaum (1983) famously argues that a work's success in getting readers to exercise these abilities is crucial to improving our moral imagination, and that it is both an aesthetic and moral achievement. For a different analysis, see A. W. Eaton (2012) who uses examples of compelling narratives that get us to take on immoral perspectives to argue that a work's ability to shift our perspectives is an *aesthetic achievement*. Related to this discussion, see Camp (2017) for a cognitive explanation for the ways in which fiction can exercise our ability to shift our perspectives, which can alter our emotional, moral, and other evaluative responses to situations we would face in real life.

35. These charges of inaccuracy in outlook, however, do not only apply to LRI. We frequently pan works for unrealistic depictions. Few would contest that *Fifty Shades of Grey's* descriptions barely seem to express the thoughts and speech patterns of real people, and that these constitute colossal aesthetic failures. What allows more people to recognize these inaccurate portrayals in these highly criticized works is their palpable failure to depict realistic people in general. Critics, who belong to the broad class of 'people', can thus immediately detect this failure of depiction and categorize it as an aesthetic failure.

36. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this connection to authenticity.

narrative. For example, Black critics easily detected the inaccurate portrayal of Black people in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*,³⁷ while the Board that awarded its author the Pulitzer Prize, comprised entirely of white men,³⁸ evidently did not.

Unsurprisingly, fewer readers are able to detect inaccuracies in more restricted experiences than in more commonplace experiences. A robust degree of cultural competence—over and above what is needed to recognize what people in general act, sound, and think like—is required. This is important in both the creation and the criticism of the work. When authors endeavor to express a racialized group's experience, they must have the cultural competence to do so well; and to assess this, a critic must also have the cultural competence to detect such errors. The work will fail on its own terms when it aims to express a certain group's experiences and way of life but fails to do so accurately. In other words, a conflict exists when a work presents itself as an accurate portrayal of a group experience but portrays it inaccurately.³⁹

4. LRI's Moral Defects

Even if one concedes that these inaccuracies are aesthetic defects, the puzzle of the response to works of LRI remains—why the moral outrage? Inaccuracies that constitute aesthetic defects *prima facie* hold no moral weight, for example, no moralistic undertone was present in the surgeon's correction to Eliot that pupils do not dilate with opium consumption. More must be said to explain the moral response that these aesthetic defects provoke in cases of LRI.

My diagnosis hinges on the social context in which works of LRI are produced. That is to say, the moral faults are socially contingent on, rather than intrinsic to, these aesthetic defects. Intrinsic moral defects are ones that are inextricable from the aesthetic defect and hold cross-contextually, for example, one might claim that murdering people for an artistic performance (e.g., snuff porn) is devoid of aesthetic value *because* it involves killing people. Proponents of this claim would maintain that this holds in any scenario, that is, there is no context in which an artistic performance including the actual murdering of people is not morally defective. Socially contingent moral defects are ones that only constitute moral faults in particular social contexts. For example, suppose we take flashing lights to be aesthetically defective, perhaps on grounds of garishness.

37. See Clarke (1968) for further discussion. It is debatable whether *The Confessions of Nat Turner* truly falls under the category of LRI, because many accuse the author of having explicitly racist motivations in writing the book. This could very well be the case, but nothing hinges on this.

38. <https://www.pulitzer.org/board/1967>

39. For further argument on why such conflicts constitute aesthetic defects, see Fleming (1992).

In a society without epilepsy, using flashing lights in an exhibition would not be morally faulty. However, in a society containing many people with epilepsy, flashing lights might cause severe harm, so an exhibition's use of flashing lights could also constitute a moral harm in this society.

Similarly, LRI is morally defective in a context of racial inequality. Such inequality enables narratives about dominant groups to be widely disseminated and consumed in mainstream culture, whereas narratives about marginalized groups are harder to come by (Cooper 2015; Hurka 1994; Matthes 2019; Nguyen 2016). In our current context, this means that the vast majority of available narratives are by and about white people and that few narratives by and about people of color are available. Publishing houses have historically discriminated against writers of color in favor of white writers (Akbar 2017; Deahl 2016); this in turn limits the availability of literature that reflects the experiences of people of color.

Within this context, disproportionate weight is given to narratives that purport to express the experiences of marginalized groups. Since fewer works by and for minorities are available, a single work about this subject will be thought of as more indicative of the group's experiences. When the vast majority of narratives center around white characters, works about non-white characters will inevitably stand out *in virtue* of not centering around white characters. This encourages those who have had little exposure to the experiences of the marginalized group to fill gaps in their understanding of the group by generalizing what is depicted in the narratives that are in fact available (Leslie 2017). Moreover, since there are fewer alternatives available to expand their understanding of the diversity within these marginalized groups, each work is assigned a greater role in representing the group than it would be in a context where many such works about the non-white group exist. Thus, the "insufficient exposure to the mainstream readership" imposes a burden on racialized writers to act as spokespersons for their racialized experience (Davis 2016; Li 2000).

Furthermore, narrative portrayals of marginalized groups are more likely to be seen as edifying than those of dominant groups. By this, I mean that they are more likely to be taken as promoting the empathetic reactions to ways of life that differ from one's own that Martha Nussbaum (1983; 1990; 1995) has identified as essential to human flourishing. She writes: "An ethics of impartial respect for human dignity will fail to engage real human beings unless they are made capable of entering imaginatively into the lives of distant others and to have emotions related to that participation" (Nussbaum 1995: xvi). We can qualify this to stress the importance of *accurately* entering imaginatively into the lives of these 'distant others' in order to promote genuine and rich understanding of their lived experiences. Otherwise, the understanding will be hollow and impoverished.⁴⁰

40. While the analysis of this paper focuses on the distinct worries with regards to accuracy in literary works, there are of course further worries with the subordination and appropriation of

In our current narrative economy, works of LRI take up the space that genuine racial narratives could have taken.⁴¹ When an opportunity to express a marginalized group's experience is squandered by promoting an inaccurate understanding of that group, it impedes the kind of human flourishing Nussbaum identifies as an important function of literature. This is the root of the moral defectiveness in works of LRI. Again, in our current context, narratives depicting the experiences of racialized minorities are held to a different standard of edification than those depicting white people. This standard imposes a responsibility for such works to actually cultivate a deeper understanding of these marginalized groups.⁴²

Some might be perplexed by this charge, especially since the nature of the inaccuracies I have identified as aesthetic defects are not obviously egregious. Failure to note cultural norms, using unidiomatic foreign translations, and making salient mundane features that ordinary people in the group would not find noteworthy seem a far cry from the explicitly degrading messages that are obviously antithetical to human flourishing and genuine empathy. These errors might even appear morally *innocuous*, albeit aesthetically defective.

The aesthetic defects are *prima facie* innocuous, but within our current social context, they are not free of moral error just because they are not explicitly degrading. Such errors presuppose an outlook that presents the racialized group as an 'other', despite purporting to adhere to the group's outlook and experiences. We can call this an 'othering stance', which describes the phenomenon of representing another person or group as somehow inferior and lacking in some way that distinguishes them from the representations of members of one's own group. LRI distorts the experience of racialized groups by projecting the expectations and stereotypes that white people have about those groups. For instance,

'authentic' or accurate racialized narratives to dominantly situated groups (classically explored by Du Bois 1926 and more recently by Wallace 2016); such questions are ones I intend to address in future work.

41. This is not to depict the narrative economy as inflexibly zero-sum, but to describe its current form in our social context. If there were better representation of racialized minority groups, individual works would weigh less heavily. Additionally, in a more diverse publishing landscape, works of LRI such as *American Dirt* would perhaps not provoke such moral outrage, even though they still contain the same aesthetic defects. This is why I argue that LRI's primary defects are aesthetic rather than moral; and why the moral status of such works is contingent.

42. One might be concerned that this responsibility is unfair to racialized minorities, as this means they must be held to a higher aesthetic standard in depicting their group as accurately as possible. However, within the current social context we are in, this is bound to be the case whether or not we want it to be. I have argued that this responsibility exists in part because of the relative scarcity of available narratives and unwillingness on part of the publishing industry to publish works by or about racialized minorities. Both of these issues stem from systemic inequalities and racial hierarchies present in our society. Ultimately, the solution to neutralizing this burden will require a change in the context. Diagnosing the problems of LRI as a result of this system and working to change the system are not mutually exclusive aims.

in *American Dirt*, it seems unlikely that an ice rink in Mexico City would stand out to Lydia unless she assumed that Mexico were the kind of place that did not have ice rinks, perhaps in-line with the stereotypical conception of Mexico as poor, dirty, and hot.⁴³ If the work is positioned as an accurate account of a group's experience, it can serve to reinforce existing prejudices in its readership (I. Young 1990). While the work might not contain obviously immoral directives or descriptions, the work points the readers' attention in a morally dubious way.⁴⁴ Thus, this inaccurate portrayal, while not filled with blatant racist content, is morally defective, as it insidiously reinforces narratives of Mexico's cultural inferiority. At the very least, it is morally suspect.

Despite these problematic features of the work's outlook, one could argue that LRI could have instrumental moral value in promoting compassion for a racialized minority group in a way that is more palatable to outgroup members. For example, Sandra Cisneros, describes the potential social impact of *American Dirt* on an audience who "maybe [are] undecided about issues at the border. It's going to be someone who wants to be entertained, and the story is going to enter like a Trojan horse and change minds. And it's going to change the minds that, perhaps, I [a Mexican-American author] can't change" (Hinojosa 2020). If such works bridge the distance between an apathetic response on the part of outgroup members to a desire to incite social change for a group they now empathize with, then is LRI actually morally defective?

We cannot rule out that works of LRI could indeed have such instrumental value.⁴⁵ A reader whose preconceptions are consonant with the ones of the author could ignore the aesthetic defects that more culturally competent readers might find distracting, and they might have an easier time engrossing themselves in the narrative and absorbing the overall message of the work.⁴⁶ Perhaps this could even translate into action, for example, a white person who reads

43. In addition, a more problematic feature is the work's depiction of the story's antagonists, Mexican 'bogeymen' who legitimize the myths and prejudices that (white) Americans have about the Mexican drug cartels. See Gurba (2019) for more on this point. My analysis does not rely on there being such stereotyped antagonists, and in accordance with much of the literary criticism, I have chosen to highlight the other aesthetic inaccuracies that seem more innocuous.

44. We might compare this to the way pornography has been argued to encourage audiences to view women as subordinate to men and reinforce gender hierarchies (Langton 2009; Liao & Protasi 2013).

45. Nor can we rule out that narrative works do not need to be considered fully good or fully bad. Any moral that *American Dirt* could have in virtue of this promotion of tolerance could still be there, but it could be outweighed by the defects I outline, i.e., it could be partially good but mostly bad.

46. This phenomenon is often related to 'whiteness' (Frye 1992; Taylor 2014). 'Whitely' people attribute fairness, honesty, and benevolence to themselves, and balk at accusations of their being prejudiced; this can hinder white people from proper engagement with genuine expression of racialized experiences because they might find it insulting to themselves.

American Dirt might take an interest in protesting the inhumane treatment of migrants. Moreover, one could argue that such pandering to white ignorance could even constitute an act of *resistance* insofar as it uses this ignorance strategically (Bailey 2007), or that some amount of catering to white interests is *necessary* to meet the ultimate aim of progress insofar as it requires ‘convergent interests’ (Bell 1980).

However, this suggests that pandering to white audiences by presenting such distorting portrayals may be an effective means to promote empathy and compassion for racialized groups despite the problems that come with such portrayals. I think there is a real danger in this line of thought. Literature is supposed to challenge readers’ preconceptions and exercise their capacity to engage with perspectives other than their own; this indicates that such preconceptions *can* be challenged and that the capacity to engage with different experiences *can* be exercised. It is dubious to attribute to white people an inability to engage with narratives that do not reinforce their preconceptions about racialized groups.⁴⁷

Moreover, the way LRI imparts its ‘moral message’ can be more insidious than good overall in the long run. Because works of LRI predominantly reinforce outlooks that privileged groups have on the racialized group, they typically give insufficient attention to the complicity of privileged people in perpetuating a system that largely benefits them at the expense of racialized minorities. Worse still, they can insinuate that the condition of the minority group is due to factors other than the systemic harms that the privileged group perpetuates. For example, *American Dirt* says much about the role of Mexican drug cartels in forcing the protagonist’s migration to the safe haven of the United States but fails to explore the complicity of the United States in creating the context for her to flee.

I cannot give a detailed analysis of systemic racism here, but I will offer some closing thoughts. The world in works of LRI is often distorted to give a more favorable view of the average white person, instead of presenting an outlook that exposes their complicity in perpetuating the system that disadvantages the minority groups. While this makes the work more palatable to such audiences and might even make them feel good about engaging with the ‘experiences’ of racialized minorities, it gives them a false impression of their relationship to the contents expressed. I suspect that any feel-good behavior that works of LRI can inspire will be ultimately insufficient in the long term, especially compared to a work that presents a less flattering but more accurate portrayal of people like them.

47. I say ‘white people’ because this is the readership Cisneros seems to have had in mind, but this claim could also apply to non-white people who share an uninformed and ignorant outlook on Mexican people.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Adele Watkins, Alejandro Naranjo Sandoval, Alexander Nehamas, Amit Singh, Anna Yu Wang, Claudia Dumitru, Elisabeth Camp, Hannah Read, Pen Long, Philip Pettit, and, in particular, Shen-yi Liao, for reading drafts of this paper at various stages and providing insightful comments.

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