

# The controversy surrounding Jeanine Cummins's novel *American Dirt*

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*American Dirt*, a novel that deals sympathetically with the plight of migrants traveling through Mexico and seeking refuge in the United States, has come under attack because its author, Jeanine Cummins, is not “an actual Latino,” but “white,” and therefore, according to this logic, has produced an “inauthentic” book.

On February 12, for example, #DignidadLiteraria, a group of Latino writers, invited Oprah Winfrey to discuss her choice of *American Dirt* for her popular Oprah’s Book Club. The four spokespeople of the group, Myriam Gurba, Roberto Lovato, David Bowles and Matt Nelson, called on Winfrey to discuss “the continued underrepresentation of Latinx authors in publishing and in your highly influential book club. We urge you to open your mind and heart to actual Latinos.”

This is only the latest episode in the attempt to discredit Cummins’s novel, which has been at or near the top of the *New York Times* Hardcover Fiction best-seller list for five weeks. Recently, Flatiron Books, owned by the publishing behemoth Macmillan, cancelled Cummins’s appearance on March 21 at the Palm Beach Book Festival, citing death threats.

*American Dirt* treats the experiences of Lydia Quixano Pérez, the middle-class owner of a bookstore in Acapulco, Mexico. Her journalist husband, Sebastián, is murdered—along with numerous other family members—when he exposes the crimes of a drug lord, Javier. Fearing for her life, Lydia escapes from the city with her young son, Luca, and heads for relatives living in Colorado.

They must travel incognito along *La Bestia* (“The Beast”), the network of freight trains that brings refugees and asylum-seekers, almost all from Central America, to the Mexico-US border. There they meet up with a “coyote,” a paid guide, who leads them, with other migrants, across the deadly Sonoran Desert in Arizona.

Along the way, mother and child live in fear of killers in the pay of the drug lord, the Mexican migration police, petty criminals and, eventually, US Custom and Border Patrol agents and fascistic vigilantes at the American border.

The subject matter could hardly be more pertinent: the US government, headed by a fanatically anti-immigrant bigot, has taken draconian measures to intimidate, imprison and abuse tens of thousands of impoverished people detained at the US/Mexico border. Similar processes are taking place in Europe and other parts of the world. Globally, the numbers of refugees (26 million in 2018) and displaced persons (71 million) have reached record levels.

Artistic works that shed light on the lives of the people fleeing poverty, violence and dictatorship are urgently needed. From that point of view, the appearance and success of—and popular interest in—*American Dirt* has some importance, although the question of its artistic merit and depth should not be pushed aside. On the other hand, the ethno-centric attacks on the book, which are neither balanced nor seriously analytical, have a significance of their own.

While initial reviews of the novel were glowing, critical comments began appearing prior to and following its release January 21. The latter

range from the merely indignant to foul-mouthed race-baiting. Several writers have defended Cummins’s right to write about any topic she chooses, and others, while ostensibly supporting that right, have jumped on the hostile bandwagon.

The Mexican-American writer and visual artist Myriam Gurba (*Mean*, 2017) set the reactionary tone of the campaign against Cummins. Gurba termed the latter a *gabacha* (a pejorative term for a non-Latino English speaker), who has followed in a tradition of “Appropriating genius works by people of color, slapping a coat of *mayonesa* on them to make palatable to taste buds *estados-unidenses* [American], and repackaging them for mass racially ‘colorblind’ consumption.” (Cummins’s paternal grandmother was born in Puerto Rico, and she has said “that was the ethnicity and the culture of my father.”)

After Gurba’s attack, other authors and commentators followed suit. The Mexican-American translator David Bowles wrote, “Latina or no, Cummins certainly isn’t Mexican or Chicana. That’s a problem. ... The telenovela plot is a pastiche of stereotypes and melodramatic tropes of the sort one might expect from an author who did not grow up within Mexican culture.”

The *New York Times* critic Parul Sehgal acknowledged that authors needed to write about “the other,” but capitulated to the vulgar condemnation of Cummins for her race and nationality, even implying there might be prejudice tainting Cummins’s writing: “Still, the book feels conspicuously like the work of an outsider. The writer has a strange, excited fascination in commenting on gradients of brown skin.”

*Philadelphia Inquirer* writer Helen Ubina advanced the predictable, “The privilege is real and those who have been its biggest benefactor—white men—have a chokehold on it. ...”

Finally, 142 writers, mostly Latino, penned a letter to Oprah asking her to rescind her endorsement of the book. “The book is widely and strongly believed to be exploitative, oversimplified, and ill-informed, too often erring on the side of trauma fetishization and sensationalization of migration and of Mexican life and culture.”

The attempts to discredit or dismiss the novel, however, should be met with a loud cry of “Stop!” *American Dirt* may flag artistically at times, but it displays a deep—and rare—sympathy for the oppressed. It shows the desperate conditions that migrants endure in order to escape intolerable lives in their home countries. In portions of her book, Cummins effectively and movingly brings to light the bitter experiences that millions of working people south of the American frontier undergo to survive as they travel northward. If this is “oversimplified...trauma fetishization,” then we need more of it, not less.

*American Dirt* is flawed, but the critics tend to be attacking its strong points.

The initial portions of the novel, in this reviewer’s opinion, are its weakest. No doubt Cummins, like other novelists, playwrights and filmmakers at present, is at a disadvantage. She does not have a recent tradition of powerful social narratives to call on. She tries awkwardly to fit

her drama into the “page-turning” thriller genre and it weakens the work. The sections of *American Dirt* that treat the family mass murder and then go back in time to recount how Lydia met Javier, the cartel chief, are formulaic and unconvincing.

Javier, the murderous gangster who loves books and writes poetry, feels much more like a plot contrivance than a real human being, and Lydia’s lack of guardedness seems unlikely for a middle-class woman in a city that is controlled by the thug. The liquidation of her entire family—without threats and warnings—also stretches belief. Lydia’s remarkable and clearheaded ability to flee thousands of miles—or even to think coherently—after the brutal massacre of so many loved ones runs the danger of losing the reader altogether.

Fortunately, if the reader stays with the novel and continues to follow Lydia and Luca’s flight northward through Mexico, we often find a genuine and fresh approach not only to their plight, but, more enduringly, to the hardships of others, more hard-pressed economically.

The migrants are forced to ride on top of the speeding freight trains. Here is what the journey on *La Bestia* is like, according to *American Dirt*:

“The possible manners of death available on *La Bestia* are all gruesome: You can be crushed between two moving cars when the train rounds a bend. You can fall asleep, roll off the edge, get sucked beneath the wheels, have your legs sliced off. (When that happens, if the migrant isn’t killed instantly, he usually bleeds to death in a remote corner of some farmer’s field before anyone finds him.) ... You can die by beating or stabbing or shooting. Robbery is a foregone conclusion. Mass abductions for ransom are commonplace. Often, kidnapers torture their victims to help persuade their families to pay. On the trains, a uniform seldom represents what it purports to represent. Half the people pretending to be migrants or coyotes or train engineers or police or la migra are working for the cartel.”

Along these lines, the novel reproduces this television interview:

“Here’s a Guatemalan man—twenty-two years old—who lost both legs three days before his interview. He’s missing a front tooth as well. ‘Somebody told me, before we got on the train,’ he says, ‘if you fall, if you see your arm or your leg getting sucked under there, you have a split second to decide whether or not to put your head in there too.’ The young man blinks into the camera. ‘I made the wrong choice,’ he says.”

Who are the people on the train? In plain but revealing terms, Cummins tells us. “Most of the migrants have backpacks and grim faces. They’re a thousand miles into their journeys already, weeks from Tegucigalpa or San Salvador or the mountains of Guatemala. They’re from cities or villages or el campo. Some speak the languages of K’iché or Ixil or Mam or Nahuatl.”

A group of men waiting for *La Bestia* explain their situations to Lydia, her son and the two Honduran girls she is traveling with: “‘We make this journey every other year. We’ve done it eight times.’ Lydia’s mouth drops open. ‘Why?’ Soledad asks. The men shrug in unison. ‘We go where the work is,’ the first one says. ‘Come back to visit our wives and children,’ the second one adds. ‘Then we do it again.’ They both laugh, as if it’s a comedy routine they’ve been performing for years.”

For passages like this, whatever the novel’s other shortcomings, the author and her work deserve respect and credit, especially at a time of open and merciless hostility to migrants by the American state. The cold terror of US government policy emerges in various scenes in *American Dirt*, including one in which Lydia meets a group of *deportados*, immigrant workers who have previously been caught by ICE and expelled from the US, as she gets closer to the American border:

“They live in the United States, güey. Like forever. Like, for ten years maybe. Since they were babies, maybe. And then they’re on their way to work one morning, or coming home from school one day, or playing fútbol in the park, or shopping at the mall for some fresh new kicks, and then bam! They get deported with whatever they happen to be carrying when they’re picked up. So unless they happen to be carrying a backpack

when la migra gets them, they usually come empty-handed. Sometimes the women have their purse with them or whatever. They don’t get to go home and pack a bag. But they usually have nice clothes, at least. Clean shoes.”

And Lydia’s group crossing the border going north faces death in the desert: “Their two-and-a-half-day path winds around the worst of the impassible sections, and funnels them toward cattle tanks in case they get desperate for water, all while keeping them as far away from popular hiking trails and known migra patrolling routes as possible.”

These passages should help to demonstrate that the criticism of the novel’s “authenticity” is largely trivial and reactionary. How many of the critics have devoted themselves to exposing the conditions of refugees from Central America? Virtually none of them actually cite passages from the book. They take for granted that their readers share the same communalist views.

Critic David Bowles cites Daniel Peña’s characterization of the book as “lab-created brown trauma built for the white gaze and white book clubs to give a textural experience to people who need to feel something to avoid doing anything and from the safety of their chair.”

This is the miserable “left” jargon of the day, which doesn’t withstand the slightest scrutiny. In fact, art and literature that exposes social conditions activates and galvanizes people. Bowles and Peña are not only insulting the author and the readers—who may or may not be white—but millions of working people from south of the border and their struggles.

Which monuments of world literature were written by authors who “stayed in their lane”? Tolstoy writing in his *War and Peace* about the French peasant soldiers whom Pierre Bezukhov encounters as a prisoner, or the urbane Flaubert writing about Madame Bovary, a provincial petty bourgeois? Perhaps Upton Sinclair should never have written *The Jungle* because he had no experience, unlike his protagonist Jurgis Rudku, of Lithuanian immigrant life or conditions in a packing house? One could go on ad infinitum. Let’s not discuss Shakespeare, and Dante, presumably, had not been to the Underworld, although there were rumors in Verona and Ravenna to that effect.

Cummins, for her part, has maintained a relatively low profile since the attacks began. To Oprah Winfrey, she said that it was clear “that we need to have a different kind of conversation about *American Dirt*.” Last week, she taped a discussion on the book in Tucson, Arizona, in front of an audience of 250 to air on AppleTV this month.

What is at stake here? It is worth noting that hardly an article or comment goes by without mentioning that Cummins received a large advance for the book or that her publisher will conduct a lavish marketing campaign. As Bowles noted in the *New York Times*: “Reporters are marshaled to support it. The book is pushed hard with established chains and indie booksellers. They make it a success.”

Bowles remarks elsewhere, “Chicana and Mexicana colleagues struggle to get their stories told, to get their manuscripts into the hands of agents and past the publishing industry’s gatekeepers.” In the whole controversy, one senses a good deal of envy and bitterness, and a fixation on those seven figures.

Groups like #DignidadLiteraria only seek a more “equitable” distribution of the existing, paltry returns offered to writers, and, no doubt, of the few big payouts. Myriam Gurba complains in a Twitter posting that she only makes five figures.

After a meeting last month between a delegation of Latino authors and Macmillan officials about the *American Dirt* controversy, the publisher acknowledged there were “deep inadequacies” in the rollout of the novel and that it would be “substantially increasing Latinx representation” across the company, “including authors, titles, staff and its overall literary ecosystem.”

The economic pressures that make so many writers turn to academia has had the result of landing them in an intellectually retrograde milieu and

estranging them from broader currents of life. The universities today, and their various humanities departments, are breeding grounds of unhealthy views about objective truth, history and the significance of social class. Trends such as postmodernism hinder the writer from engaging with reality on its own terms. Academia is a hotbed of the self-absorbed identity politics so many authors have advanced in relation to *American Dirt*.

Recent decades have not been conducive to serious, worked-through artistic treatment of social life. Most writers are oriented in other directions. Writing about the working class has proven extraordinarily difficult for several generations.

Atticus Lish tripped on this problem in his depiction of the poor in New York City (one of whose characters was an immigrant worker) in his novel *Preparation for the Next Life*, and even as fine a writer as Mary Gaitskill tended to treat Dominican life in Brooklyn in her *The Mare* in an unrelievedly one-sided and grim manner.

One of the signatories to the open letter to Oprah Winfrey, Valeria Luiselli, the author of the recent, acclaimed *Lost Children Archive*, in which a Latino family of middle-class professionals travels south from New York City, suffers from the same tendency. While her central characters feel deeply (and convincingly) about the children deported by the Trump administration, the non-Latino Americans they encounter in their journey are almost universally silent, stupid or bigoted.

The problem of artistic truth cannot be grappled with from the standpoint of the irrationalist politics of race and blood. When central or even significant consideration is given to the ethnicity or nationality of a given author, serious analysis and discussion of objective artistic and social problems are impossible.

Nor can the affluent upper middle-class layer obsessed with race and gender address the general cultural needs of the population. This layer only proposes to realign things slightly, redistributing the wealth to a handful of minority authors, not to replace the existing set-up with a more democratic and truthful culture.



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