Amanda Gorman's Dutch translator forced to quit because of race—a call for cultural segregation

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Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, the winner of the International Booker Prize for the debut novel *The Discomfort of Evening*, has been forced to resign as translator of Amanda Gorman's poetry into Dutch. Gorman is the young African-American woman who recited a work at Joe Biden's inauguration January 20, to undeserved media acclaim.

Rijneveld, who is transgender, was chosen by Gorman herself, and approved by the publisher, Meulenhoff. Rising to prominence in 2015 with their poetry collection Kalfslives, they worked with translator Michelle Hutchinson on the prize-winning English translation of *The Discomfort of Evening*.

Remarkably, Gorman's own choice of translator did not hold up in the face of the racialist hysteria affecting layers of the petty bourgeoisie in North America, Europe and elsewhere.

Writing in the Dutch daily *de Volksrant*, Janice Deul, a fashion writer and "activist," demanded that Meulenhoff re-assign the translation work, as Rijneveld lacked the most important qualification for such work, "blackness."

Deul wrote: "An incomprehensible choice, in my view and that of many others who expressed their pain, frustration, anger and disappointment via social media. Harvard alumna Gorman … describes herself as 'skinny Black girl.' And her work and life are colored by her experiences and identity as a black woman. Isn't it—to say the least—a missed opportunity to hire Marieke Lucas Rijneveld for this job? She is white, non-binary, has no experience in this field, but according to Meulenhoff is still the 'translator of dreams'?"

Deul then listed some "more deserving choices" in her opinion, and all "from my personal network."

After the absurd furor at Gorman's "incomprehensible choice" erupted, Rijneveld bowed out, commenting in a statement that "I am shocked by the uproar surrounding my involvement in the spread of Amanda Gorman's message and I understand the people who feel hurt by Meulenhoff's choice to ask me."

The publishers, for their part, pledged to "learn from this." Bowing down to the outrageous demands of moralizing racialists will teach everyone the wrong lesson.

In the first place, to be blunt, Meulenhoff could have saved a good deal of time, controversy and effort by simply running Gorman's entire oeuvre through Google Translate. No special literary sensitivity or exceptional imaginative intelligence would be required to render Gorman's banalities into Dutch or any other language. Except for the arbitrary line breaks, there is absolutely nothing poetic about her "verse."

Leaving that issue aside, it is remarkable that Deul and her supporters inserted themselves between the writer and her professional translator, against Gorman's own wishes. Their militant racialism, cynicism and self-seeking are poisonous, artistically and politically.

What does one's race have to do with one's ability to translate literature? Not only do Rijneveld's critics posit that it is an important factor, for them it seems to be virtually the only factor. The racialists take, as their starting premise, that Gorman's "experiences and identity as a black woman" are so unique they cannot possibly be understood by anyone else.

Furthermore, they assume that these "experiences" are so uniquely expressed in her poetry (a dubious assumption), so very *untranslatable*, that only those with Gorman's "experiences" can possibly be "qualified" to translate the art work into a foreign language. The translator's experience in the foreign language and its idioms the critics do not even deign to explore. They

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simply assume that Gorman's attempt at art is a direct expression of her "blackness." One wonders where the "art" is in such a conception.

Deul and her ilk hold that these experiences are their private property, which they reserve the right to exploit for profit, based on race. This is a debased notion of "culture," rooted in blood and race, a notion associated historically with the extreme right.

The logic of this argument is staggering, and horrifying. If one race is intrinsically incapable of understanding the other, why should this only apply to the translation of poetry? In fact, this would signify that white readers were intrinsically incapable of reading black writers in general (and vice versa). The complete marginalization of black poets and novelists follows from this. This is the perspective of cultural segregation, artistic apartheid. How can a black person direct white actors, unfamiliar as they must be with "white experience"? And so forth. This is a path that leads in the most sinister direction.

To be consistent, these "critics" should now demand, for example, that we boycott Jordan Stump's translation of French novelist Marie NDiaye's *Ladivine* (2013), "a masterpiece of narrative ingenuity and emotional extremes," according to the *New York Times*, which apparently reviewed the book before the editors realized they should have called for its banning. NDiaye is a black woman. Stump is a white man. Who knows what damage Stump did to NDiaye's work!

La Bastarda (2016), a novel by Trifonia Melibea Obono, a black woman, is the first novel by a female Equatorial Guinean writer to be translated into English. The translator was Lawrence Schimel, a science fiction and fantasy writer, born in New York City. The book, according to Good Reads, "is the story of the orphaned teen Okomo, who lives under the watchful eye of her grandmother and dreams of finding her father. Forbidden from seeking him out, she enlists the help of other village outcasts: her gay uncle and a gang of 'mysterious' girls reveling in their so-called indecency. Drawn into their illicit trysts, Okomo finds herself falling in love with their leader and rebelling against the rigid norms of Fang [an ethnic group in Equatorial Guinea] culture." What could a white, Jewish American know about any of this—unless of course he were gifted with some feeling for language and some understanding of human beings and their complex, contradictory behavior?

If racialist notions were implemented as a principle, how many black translators of white authors would now be unable to translate the "unique experiences" of "white people"?

Black American writers have been translated into foreign languages for decades. Did any of the authors ever register a complaint? Should those translations retroactively be judged "inaccurate" because the white, Asian or Indian translators missed the ineffable "experience" of the author's "blackness"?

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), for instance, has been translated into approximately 50 languages, making it accessible to great numbers of people around the globe. Poet Langston Hughes' verse has been translated into "a dozen languages." *Souls of Black Folks* by W.E.B. Du Bois has been "translated into dozens of languages." So too were James Baldwin's *Nobody Knows My Name*, *Another Country* and *The Fire Next Time*. C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* "has lived on by being translated into other languages, inspiring visual art, and even an opera." Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's famed *Things Fall Apart*, written in English, has sold more than 20 million copies around the world and been translated "into more than 50 languages."

Art is comprehensible and enduring insofar as it partakes of universal human experiences. Those universal qualities allow us to translate the peculiarities of one culture, or set of human experiences, however imperfectly, into the particular idioms of another. Translation is always an artistic approximation of sometimes unusual concepts into a new language where they do not neatly fit. That is the very art of *translation* itself.

The campaign against Rijneveld is thoroughly reactionary. Every possible voice should be raised against it.

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