Twitter Thread by Jeannette Ng ■■■



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So, you’re a writer and you’re worried about writing outside your immediate experiences and identities.

Here is the thread of practical advice for you.

EXAMINE YOUR MOTIVES. Why do you want to write this?

Are you trying to solve racism/sexism/colonialism with your work?

As writers we love stories about heroic writers whose work has changed the world. And as such we like to look to our own writing to solve societal problems.

And I understand this completely, not the least because I’ve felt the pull.

But if you’re looking to play saviour with your words, it is unlikely that you will do the marginalised people you are trying to save justice.

And I understand this very often comes from place of good intentions, but there is a reason that most of the moralising plays written by white abolitionists are deeply uncomfortable to read.

It is incredibly easy for works looking to play saviour to become patronising or traffic in simplistic stereotypes that ultimately hurt the people they are looking to rescue.

It’s not uncommon, for example for a parable about racism being taught via a racist protagonist learn a lesson.

But as such, you are still making the reader read about someone being awful to people like them for most of the story.

Are you looking to write a story about that identity?

There’s a huge difference between writing a story with a diverse cast that reflects the complexities of the world and a story which looks to represent them to the world.

It is fine and good to write a story with gay characters if you are straight.

I would strongly advise against writing a story that centres on the struggles of being gay in a oppressive society if you are straight.

Ask yourself what your story is ABOUT.

Be wary of allegories in which the people who are marginalised in the real world don't exist in the story.

Eg: Why does your mermaid stand in for an Asian woman have to be white in order to be sympathetic?

EVERYONE WORRIED ABOUT GETTING IT WRONG

Very often, I feel people are implicitly asking me for permission.

And I understand, there is this weight of expectation and responsibility that you want to be free from.

I desperately want to write with the freedom that I felt when I was 10 when I didn’t worry abt what people thought about my work or who was reading it.

Self awareness can be uncomfortable, and you think perhaps this can help you return to that state of innocence and grace.

There is no simple fix that can be done once and allow you to stop worrying about cultural appropriation or hurting marginalised readers forever.

It doesn’t work like that.

And we all worry about what we write.

We all worry about hurting the people we are writing about.

Marginalised writers, if anything, worry more abt such because we intimately know the hurt that can be caused.

We remember the many books that have disappointed us.

We worry about doing our own cultures and subcultures justice.

We worry about accidentally confirming or validating stereotypes and further entrenching them in our culture.

If we are diaspora, we worry about our authenticity and being estranged from those cultural impulses.

You aren't alone in this.

We all worry and I sincerely believe this is a good thing.

It is what keeps us honest.

It is what makes us do better.

STOP LOOKING FOR RULES

There is a tendency in humans to desire rules, of what should and should not be permitted.

It is very easy, however, once you've reduced things to rules, for some to forget why something is bad.

To start looking for loopholes and exceptions.

But it was never about the rules to begin with.

And it is the constant societal repetition of certain stereotypes and ideas that creates harm.

Symbols gain meanings.

Very often, a single instance will seem trivial.

The point, however, is not contributing to that deluge.

As such you have to understand these things in aggregate, as patterns.

Stop trying to find equivalents.

Stop it with the thought experiments about likening cheongsam to lederhosen or asking if blackface is the same as a child wearing a long-sleeved Thor costume that has that bare arms with white skin.

These things come back down to the power and privilege of different groups within a society.

It's about history and repetition and cultural memory.

Symbols and actions and tropes all gain meaning through the people who have used them, who have weaponised them before.

STOP WORRYING ABOUT PEOPLE CRITICISING YOUR WORK.

This isn't about you.

I know it feels bad to be shouted at when you know that you have good intentions, but it's not about any given individual's intentions.

I know you want to shield yourself, to point to the people who liked your book, to point to all the due diligence that you have done.

But the hurt of cultural appropriation causes is very real and you can't argue your way out.

The best way to avoid hurting people with your work isn’t to approach this defensively.

This isn’t about how to lawyer up before the verbal accusations begin.

Worry about the harm you can cause and understand it.

Listen and believe people when they say something is bad.

And yes, there isn't always consensus, and that's also okay.

No culture is a monolith.

It is very possible for some people of that cultural background to love your work and others hate it.

It's not your place to demand those who love it to defend you.

It's not your place to demand consensus.

And there are a thousand and one articles and websites and workshops out there just a google search away.

Only by actually understanding this can you avoid these issues.

So stop worrying about your reviews.

IF YOU ARE DOING RESEARCH, BE VERY AWARE OF WHO WROTE WHAT AND WHY

Be very aware that there are many people who are more written about than writing.

This isn’t to say that only portraits from within a culture are accurate or insightful.

But if your only sources are written by outsiders, then it is very easy to pick up unconscious biases or outdated ideas.

There will be misconceptions that have been rattling around that literature for years because people are just citing each other in an echo chamber.

Also be aware that, say, Norse myth has been claimed by Nazis and you don't want to be reading their websites.

Be aware of the purpose behind a book.

Things written for tourists, for example, will often be looking to package the culture in a way to appeal to the traveller, to sell them that experience.

MARGINALISED PEOPLE OFTEN HAVE A CULTURE INVISIBLE TO THE DOMINANT ONE

One of the reasons why marginalised people are so able to write about the dominant culture is that we often don’t have our

own fiction, we are used to empathising with the Aragorns and the Tony Starks.

But more than that, marginalised cultures are definitionally often depicted in problematic ways or just not depicted at all.

You will likely thus have blind spots.

This isn't for a second to suggest that marginalised people are fundamentally different or alien in some way, but there will likely be things that you are not familiar with.

For example, white people often aren't aware about the discussions around the Asian "double eyelid".

People who aren't black probably don't know about the hair chart, or the fraught history of how natural black hair has been deemed unbeautiful and unacceptable by dominant white society in America.

So when I urge you to research, these are the things you should look for.

Marginalisation means having these aspects of culture be hidden from the mainstream.

BE AWARE OF THE TROPES THAT HAVE GONE BEFORE

If you're writing about a culture that is not your own, it is very possible that you're not aware of those tropes about it and within it.

You won't necessarily know what has been done to death and what you should perhaps avoid.

Eg: White women, for example, are sick of being the love interest.

But for black women, being seen as desirable is still very rare in fiction.

Which is to say how Uhura being single in The Original Series was not empowering.

And remember the opposite of a stereotype is likely also cardboard nonsense.

So whilst trying to avoid the evil, inhuman savage, be aware that the opposite stereotpye of the noble savage is equally insulting and two dimensional.

The docile doormat woman is annoying and ubiqutious but so is her opposite.

These dichotomies are themselves toxic and should be torn down.

PAY THE PEOPLE TEACHING YOU

The wesbites and many resources on the internet. Writing the Other is an excellent place to start, they have a specific section on cultural appropriation that I recommend you read. Attend one of their workshops.

https://t.co/4WvtHKphHt

Many of these resources are available for free on the internet, so consider contributing to their patreons or ko-fis.

Buy their books. Promote their work.

If nothing else, but that friend a coffee.

This is labour and they deserve to be paid.

RAISE UP MARGINALISED VOICES

Returning to the first point about wanting to play saviour with your own writing, remember there is more that you can do than just write about something.

Don’t set yourself up as a spokesperson.

Raise up the marginalised voices.

Tell people about their books.

RT their tweets.

Cite them as your sources.

Recommend their books to your friends.

Include their books on lists you write.

Promote them.

This is a twitter thread version of my article.

You can read it in paragraph form there.

https://t.co/2fDp0Imd61

If you're looking to read more, there's these nested threads: https://t.co/yIehzSJRfh

> signing off with this incredible thread by @djolder re: criticizing art, the inevitability of imperfection, and the genuine benefits of discussing different responses to works of art from multiple perspectives.
>
> criticism \u2260 an attack.https://t.co/66YOz7WseV
>
> — Saba Sulaiman (@agentsaba) August 22, 2018

This is another good resource from the comments: https://t.co/pVNwk6rM3Y

> Great thread! If anyone wants a good resource I follow a blog https://t.co/kG19QSAPdh where people can ask questions and get general advice about writing characters of color.
>
> — Marissa Renea (@writingrissa) October 30, 2018

Also, for the record as I'm getting those comments, I've zero interest in debating if appropriation is real.

The premise of this piece is that you already know and want to avoid it.

A cake recipe does not need to justify why you should eat cake. You either do or don't.