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These Stories are Yours, These Stories are not Yours: On Wamariya's Framework of Sharing

Andrea Rupp

Abstract

I have never totally found myself in stories of the mountains, nor are stories of Philippine beaches familiar to me. There is no blueprint for someone like me, a half-Filipina woman raised in rural West Virginia. Instead, I find my identity in pieces, in scraps of others' lives that make sense. When I read *The Girl Who Smiled Beads*—of Clemantine's difficulty pinning down any place as "home," of her strained relationship with an older sister who would do anything it took to survive, of her own difficulties understanding herself and her place in the world—I grappled heavily with how, if anywhere felt like home, it was the ideas of this book. I worried, in trying to understand myself, was I twisting the words and messages of other marginalized people?

This preoccupation led me to join Clemantine Wamariya's webinar on building community during WVU's Festival of Ideas. There, Wamariya spoke of the gesture of sharing tea with strangers. Tea, like art, is both universal and culturally specific. Its sameness draws us together, but each blend exalts different ingredients, different preparation. There is no auteur of tea; we build upon each other's creations and honor the opportunities they have made for us. In the same way, Wamariya asserted that "you cannot be a storyteller alone." Through *The Girl Who Smiled Beads's* complex narrative of her lived experience and the storytellers who shared their language so that she might find her own, Wamariya invites us to join the lineage of stories that exist in all time, all places, and all things.

On Wamariya's Framework of Sharing

Clemantine Wamariya's 2018 memoir, *The Girl Who Smiled Beads: A Story of War and What Comes After*, arrives at a tumultuous time in global social justice history. In 2020 alone, people worldwide have rallied to protest racist police brutality, Latinx and Islamic detention camps in America and China respectively, rising sinophobia in the wake of COVID-19, and growing income inequality and poverty while billionaires profit from a pandemic. As awareness of these issues has grown since the turn of the millennium, so has interest in marginalized peoples' narratives (Naghbi and O'Malley 224). In her deftly woven dual narratives of Africa and America, Wamariya addresses issues of genocide, poverty, sexual violence, dehumanization, trauma, and identity. The book became a *New York*

Times best seller, a *Washington Post* Notable Nonfiction Book of 2018, and was lauded by reviewers from *People*, *The Minneapolis Star Tribune*, and *Bustle* as “unforgettable,” “gripping,” and “utterly eye-opening” (“The Girl”).

However, as postcolonial literature researcher Graham Huggan notes in his 2002 publication *The Postcolonial Exotic*, western praise for global literature does not necessarily reflect investment in anti-imperialism or social justice action (24). Rather, these stories are expected to conform to readers’ exotic, savage images of other cultures while exalting the perceived enlightening, universalizing potential of western culture and art (Naghbi and O’Malley 226). Significant cultural capital is afforded to works that pander to this view. For instance, in Azar Nafisi’s best-selling *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, freedom reaches young Iranian girls via their consumption of the Western “Great Works” (225). In contrast, the cultural markers of Iran, such as the veil, are presented as signifiers of women’s oppression (225). This orientalism reinforces dominant Western perceptions of Western culture as enlightened and freeing, and of Asian cultures as repressive and “other” (225). Even more complex works exploring the under-sides of both western and postcolonial global culture, such as Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel *Persepolis*, are misconstrued to uphold dominant cultural values (226). Satrapi’s childhood love of Kim Wilde makes her like any child; her near-arrest is seen as a plot device to drive that point home (236). The liberal humanist viewpoint assimilates all, “[transforming] the radically other into the domesticated other in a way that consolidates the (Western) self” (226). The author, their culture, and even their messages are overlooked in favor of the works’ enjoyability or dominant relatability. Identification and narrative empathy become self-serving rather than impetuses to altruism.

In its prologue, *The Girl Who Smiled Beads* anticipates this appropriation. Wamariya shows she is no stranger to having her life served on a stage for western consumption. (For practical purposes, Wamariya will henceforth be referred to as “Clemantine” when referred to as a character within the memoir.) At age sixteen, Clemantine wins an Oprah Winfrey essay contest about the contemporary relevance of Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (Wamariya and Weil 2). She states in her essay, “Maybe if Rwandans had read *Night*, they wouldn’t have decided to kill one another” (2). Like the other winners, she is brought onto the show for recognition (4). But Clemantine has been summoned for more than that praise: Oprah has found Clemantine’s family in Rwanda, and she has had them flown to America for their first meeting in twelve years (6). At first glance, their family reunion on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is the quintessential American feel-good story made possible by a generous celebrity (6). Just a few hours later, though, her family returns to her sister Claire’s apartment, and it is painfully awkward (7). Oprah’s grand, showy gesture does not heal twelve years of separation and pain. Instead, Clemantine is left feeling like her life is “some psychologist’s perverse experiment” (8). Coupled with the memoir’s epigraph from renowned intersectional feminist Audre Lord, “What are the words

you do not yet have? What do you need to say?” the prologue cements Wamariya’s agency and refusal to be shoved into a comfortable, audience-centering narrative (Lorde 41; Wamariya and Weil). Instead, Wamariya presents within *The Girl Who Smiled Beads* an alternative to liberal humanism’s assimilationist gaze: a dialectical approach to narrative identification and empathy rooted in a framework of sharing.

During her early years in Illinois, a teenage Clemantine struggles to articulate her experiences and bond with others. Years of living as a refugee taught her to see kindness as conditional (Wamariya and Weil 64). Local do-gooders give her gifts and treat her like “an egg, the poor fragile refugee girl,” and Clemantine’s belief is that they do it to make themselves feel better (58). Her classmates treat her like a curiosity, and she resents their unconscious entitlement to her pain (106). And while Claire and other local members of the Rwandan diaspora share Clemantine’s experiences, they prefer to suppress their traumatic past (106). Confounded by a memory that feels like “fragments” and a silently suffering community, Clemantine finds herself identifying more with a different marginalized group: Holocaust survivors (94, 106).

In April of her third year in the United States, Clemantine reads Elie Wiesel’s Holocaust memoir *Night* (Wamariya and Weil 95). *Night* comforts and thrills her (95). Wiesel’s walk through the snow and frozen feet resemble her walk through the heat and the bugs in her soles; his relationship with his father matches Clemantine’s relationship with Claire (100–01). She declares, “Wiesel was white, European, male, and Jewish. Wiesel was me” (95). Clemantine’s total identification with Wiesel mirrors the liberal humanist tendency to center ourselves in marginalized persons’ narratives. Such centering would be considered appropriative if Clemantine came from a dominant social group; as is, it could still be considered a case of lateral appropriation. After experiencing years of dehumanization, from being reduced to a unit number in Ngozi to being expected to perform the role of a special “genocide princess” for American inspiration porn, Wamariya is fully cognizant of the erasure that stems from treating marginalized experiences as consumable tools for self-reflection (43, 241). She acknowledges that each life affected by genocide—be it the Holocaust, Rwandan genocide, the Cambodian killing fields, or Bosnian ethnic cleansing—is a “different, specific, personal tragedy,” unable to be contained within one word or story (94–95). In a later chapter chronicling her college years, Clemantine further acknowledges that while she has memorized every word of poet Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise,” “Angelou’s pain was not my pain. The slave story ... was not my story. White America had not caused my wounds” (213). But as a young Black female survivor of a very recent genocide, what existing narrative reflects her story? For Clemantine and other multiply marginalized individuals, the question remains: How does one reconcile the desire for representation and self-understanding via art while respecting other oppressed creators’ experiences and intent?

For Clemantine, the answer is found in two very different sources: W.G. Sebald and her mother. When Clemantine takes a seminar on German writer W.G. Sebald's works at Yale, she develops the belief that "we all live in all times and places at once" (Wamariya and Weil 222–24). In one of Sebald's books that Clemantine mentions by name, *Austerlitz*, the titular character discovers his memory of his parents not just through navel-gazing, but by finding physical evidence of their existence (Sebald). This emphasis on exogenous memory is complemented by Sebald's incorporation of anachronistic, seemingly irrelevant, or otherwise impossible elements (Wamariya and Weil 222–23). A modern New York museum appears in Europe of the past; real people interact with fictional characters; ominous, contextless photos accompany hazy prose (222–23). Sebald's work encourages Clemantine to examine her reactions to external stimuli, even the same stimuli in different contexts, and process why she reacts in the ways she does (224–26). By assessing her external present and working backwards, she can create order in a scattered memory (224–26). This patchwork approach to memory and identity provides a framework for Clemantine to recognize the discrete triggers within others' work that resonate with her rather than wholly adopting and transforming their narratives.

On its own, the Sebaldian mindset can still appear appropriative and self-centering. To reconcile this, Wamariya threads themes of sharing throughout various chapters of *The Girl Who Smiled Beads*. When Clemantine was young, her mother used portions of oranges to teach her the value of sharing (Wamariya and Weil 176). "We were never to think, *This orange is mine. I'm giving you what's mine.* We were to think, *This orange is ours. We're sharing what's ours*" (176–77). Clemantine rejects the framework of giving, as it creates hierarchy and debt (178). When asked about her relationship with the works of Angelou and Toni Morrison in a West Virginia University Festival of Ideas webinar, Wamariya emphasizes the importance of honoring the invitation those authors have given readers (Wamariya). The language of invitation implies that these authors' words are less like a gift to be consumed, but more like an invitation for a visit, for sharing of a setting and a story, a coexistence that emphasizes the host's agency. There is no expectation of repayment or illusion of a selfless rescue (Wamariya and Weil 178). A framework of sharing and invitation respects marginalized creators' agency and permits dialectical significance rather than a single appropriative reinterpretation.

To reinforce this point, Clemantine invites this approach to her own work. She quotes Toni Morrison's Sula—"My lonely is *mine*."—to emphasize her frustration with others' entitlement to her pain and story (Wamariya and Weil 135). Nonetheless, she bares herself: "Here is my story. Use it now or later. When you need it, it'll be there for you. Maybe someday you'll be facing a challenge, and you'll think of my story. You'll think of Claire" (240). The emphasis, though, does not lie on donning her narrative like a costume, but crafting our own. "Maybe you'll realize that you need to learn to tell your own [story]. You'll

start thinking: *How did I come to have my possessions? How did I come to believe in my God?*” (240) By encouraging readers to engage with her narrative from that mindful Sebaldian lens, Wamariya creates not only her story, but provides us a framework for answering that epigraph: “What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say?” (Lorde 41).

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Andrea Rupp is a freshman English major at WVU. She grew up in Aurora, West Virginia, a small community 50 miles southeast of Morgantown. Her research interests include postcolonial literature, Appalachian literature, mixed-race narratives, and cultural performances of grief. In her precious spare time, she writes self-indulgent poetry; bakes; and lovingly stares at her roommate’s cat, Liam. After her bachelor’s, she hopes to pursue a Master of Library Science. She would like to thank Dr. Lisa Weihman and Dr. Ian Harmon; their feedback, patience, and faith in her made this paper possible.