



SLIGHTLY BROWNER THAN ME: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF *AMERICAN DIRT*

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I first became aware of the debate provoked by the launch of Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt*—and the editorial marketing machine behind it—thanks to social media. In spite of my academic research revolving around the representation of the borderlands, I tend to get caught in a work-oriented tunnel for days, during which I just focus on my writing and reduce the intake of external news. I do follow quite a few Latinx scholars and authors on social media though, so in my spare time scrolling I could watch the debate escalate without feeling the wish to participate; I am no literary critic after all. Then I bumped into Latino USA María Hinojosa's [combined interviews](#) on the *American Dirt* controversy to writers Myriam Gurba, Sandra Cisneros, Luis Alberto Urrea, and Jeanine Cummins. The former are all authors I enjoy reading and with whom—especially in the case of Gurba and Urrea—I personally share views on the matter; nonetheless, it is the Cummins' bit which caught my attention. Overstatedly dramatic comments on her own work aside, in the interview Cummins' discursive patterns are quite distinctive and easy to interpret. For example, employing the discursive constructions a victim of unexpected violence would employ, Cummins declared herself to be confused and distressed by the fact that Urrea publicly acknowledged the presence in the novel of passages lifted from his own work. Furthermore, her discursive exploitation of trauma emerges through the articulation of the—quite unnecessary and unrelated—recount of her father's death, eliciting the listeners' compassion instead of clarifying her patent research failures. I found her discourse to be crafted artificially enough to awake my curiosity; I am, after all, a critical discourse analysis nerd. So, I got myself a free copy of the ebook and dug into it.

As the author's closing note has been a widely contested text, I read it first to assess the critical stance of the comments on social media. As much as I find it appalling and



cringe-worthy, the most controversial sentence—among many—is certainly one of the most interesting to deconstruct:

I wished that someone slightly browner than me would write [this novel]. [*American Dirt*, author's note]

The statement relates to the supposed burden the writing represented for Cummins, marking her salvific position; a burden she took on because nobody else would, despite the alleged need of such a story to be told. The note also includes sentences explicitly referring to migrants, such as “a sort of helpless, impoverished, faceless brown mass”. In her interview with Hinojosa, Cummins agrees that the phrasing was “not [a] great” choice of words. Rather, I would say her deliberate use of the word *brown* quintessentially illustrates the conception—and the existence in practice—of the pigmentocratic facets of the US historical national discourse. She is clearly aware of the difference entailed by skin color tones; a difference that in my research work I define in terms of structural violence, as well as discriminatory practices and discourses intrinsic to the national public sphere. In spite of such awareness, her wishful statement implicates that any person—even slightly—browner than her purposely wouldn't write a novel on cross border immigration; she does not offer the readers any further explanation, leaving them wondering why no Latinx author would undertake such a narration. Moreover, Cummins' sentence construction inevitably implies that no Latinx author has ever really done it, which is evidently false. The definition of “browner” itself is also quite slippery, as she elevates herself as the obvious colorimeter to convey an ideological concept to the reader and—possibly—to anticipate critical remarks on the superficiality of her research work. In her note, Cummins also brings forward her Irish husband—who apparently lived undocumented in the US for four years until they got married—as an entitling example of her closeness to the novel's topics. I guess that in Flatiron Publishing Land I could brag to be slightly-more-entitled than her by having a Mexican ex-husband, migrant and undocumented for years; coincidentally, our husbands both seem to be among “the smartest, hardest-working, most principled people [we]’ve ever met”. Just like Donald Trump would say, some migrants—we guess—are good people.

I don't know Cummins in person—and digital photos cannot really add to that—but I am fairly sure that her complexion is *slightly browner* than my own, for the simple fact that I am a ghost-looking redhead. I am left wondering what kind of phenotypical traits correspond to her definition of *brown*; or perhaps I'd rather not investigate further, as I tend to be appalled by and critical of the *brown people* trope in general. Also, in spite of my slightly-whiter-than-Cummins colorimeter position, I would not depict a *concha* as a bread roll staining “napkins with grease” (chapter 4) as she does. No need to resort to my *suegra* Rocío's culinary teachings or my own passion for *panaderías*; as



others on social media have pointed out, just by eating a *concha* once anyone could safely describe it as it really is. One of the most problematic aspects of Cummins' work is indeed the construction of stereotypes on gratuitously unrealistic, fine details interspersing the novel; just as problematic are her discursive patterns building the *us/them* opposition.

In her closing note, she constructs the Mexican migrant population as opposed to an unspecified *we*, defining it by exclusion and bereaving it of any positive agency. In the aforementioned interview, pressed by Hinojosa she says that *we* corresponds to "the national dialogue", which would presume the existence of recognized interlocutor peers. Pressed further, she reduces the problem to national "storytelling" in politics, blaming the Manichean opposition between Republicans and Democrats for which "you're either red or you're blue"; she then admits the existence of "purple" shades in between, without ever suggesting who are the participants of such dialogue or purpleness. Cummins does not address why she feels part of the indefinite *we* category, nor why she structures a clear opposition between this "national dialogue" and the "brown mass" across her texts. In fact, much like Donald Trump's discourse (un)defines the category *true Americans*, leaving the right amount of identity blurriness to allow the self-inclusion of anyone assuming their belonging to it. Undefined marks her answers throughout the whole interview; she is "confused", it is "complicated [to explain]", the plagiarism claims on her work are "confusing" and the critiques "disappointing" for no clearly specified reason. Cummins articulates her defensive discursive strategy by means of patterns very similar to those employed by Trump; as it became patent especially with the development of the impeachment process, he, as well, does not "remember" factual details of his own doings.

After tackling the note, I embarked in the reading of the novel itself and things got even more interesting, discursively speaking. It is not my place to evaluate the literary quality of Cummins' writing; as a reader I found it excessively detailed, yet many commercial thriller/action novels seem to be characterized by an excruciating explicitness of banality that I personally don't seek in literary texts.

The characterization of the protagonist Lydia—a middle-class (from a "nice neighborhood" in Acapulco) bookseller—is developed in a flashback chapter reconstructing the recent past in which she is charmed by *narco* boss Javier. She becomes interested in the man right away, as he buys two books (out of "perhaps a dozen", no less) she considers editorial gems. In fact, in the ten years she's been cherishing them, "only twice had Lydia experienced the pleasure of a customer approaching her counter with one of those books in hand, unsolicited" (chapter 4). Furthermore, she finds him "fancily dressed" for wearing a *guayabera*, an outfit she deems—in agreement with the second paragraph in Wikipedia's related [entry](#) in Spanish rather than reality—"more suitable for Sunday Mass". Aside from the cultural research missteps, Cummins builds



her main characters as somehow alien to an assumed standard Mexican population surrounding them; they seem to behave in intellectually refined, distinguished ways, once again constructing a discursive opposition to an almost invisible—yet intellectually inferior—Mexican *them*. In fact

Tourism had always been the lifeblood of Acapulco, and the violence had scared most of those tourists away. She didn't know how long she'd be able to keep the shop afloat if they didn't return. [op. cit. chapter 4]

Cummins has been subtly building the idea that the average Mexican isn't a customer of her bookstore for 3/4 of the fourth chapter; she then reinforces the construction by implying that the conflicts caused by *el narco* took her (foreign) customers away. From the 50s through the 70s, Acapulco was indeed a favorite destination for Americans for many a reason; nonetheless, its tourist flow has always been chiefly composed by Mexican nationals, as a thorough paper by Valenzuela Valdivieso and Coll-Hurtado (2010) shows. International tourist flows have further diminished since 2006, when the *guerra contra el narco* was declared by the Mexican *Ejecutivo* in 2007; the aforementioned paper demonstrates that the foreign tourist percentage had already fallen to 1.5% in 2007 (Valenzuela Valdivieso and Coll-Hurtado 2010, 181), a few years before the opening of the character's bookstore. So, who is keeping Lydia's shop afloat if Mexicans don't? Any diegetic referral to customers identifies them explicitly as Americans, whose appearance engenders intellectual interludes much sought-after by the woman.

It might seem petty to linger on the critical analysis of such small discursive details, since the novel comes across as a very commercial product; it is overtly checking all the requirements to be a heavily marketed bestseller and none of them seems to be correlated with well-researched literature. Nonetheless, I think it is worth outlining the connection and similarity between the discourse Cummins constructs—by means of the novel, as well as her social media posting and public declarations—and the existing pervasive discourse on immigration. Whether consciously or not, Cummins is constantly building stereotypes and misrepresentations that stratify along the reading, facilitating the reinforcement of prejudices and platitudes that already characterize the US public discourse on the border. The articulation of such discourse is chiefly developed in media and political speech, then reconfigured by the public in its hidden transcript (Scott 1990), as well as reproduced and strengthened in mainstream popular culture products of all kinds. The initial characterization of Lydia's relationship with Javier is just one of the passages in which Cummins builds a Manifest Destiny-ish mood around the protagonists' linguistic skills. As many have highlighted (among them Gurba 2019), a sore point of the novel—linguistically speaking—lies in the imprecise insertion of expressions distinctive of the Mexican varieties; I was personally intrigued by “¿*Qué onda, güey?*” the boy says, using the borderland slang that marks him immediately as a northerner” (chapter 26), as that very collocation is one of the



staples of my *chilango* Spanish. Cummins' own Mexican Spanish skills might be lacking, but

[Lydia's] boy was perfect – so smart and accomplished, so guapo and happy. She'd been teaching him English for almost as long as he'd been speaking Spanish. [op. cit. chapter 6]

As she claims in a few sentences before, he is a “wunderkind”; the characterization of little Luca often reiterates his distinctively talented nature (chapter 8 is particularly hefty in this regard), stressing on the kid's English proficiency and obsessive knowledge of US geohistorical data. His bilingualism, though, doesn't seem to be an underlying compliment to that of migrants' children; rather, it comes across as an additional legitimation of the protagonists' border crossing, in contrast with the reality of Central American migration. Moreover, in a perspective taking into account public discourse, it's worth acknowledging the linguistic boundaries existing inside the United States. Their national assimilationist discourse has been historically monoglossic and tending to cultural uniformity (e.g. Horsman 1981); a nationalism based on the so-called dogma of homogeneity (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998, 195), which has legitimized the implementation of educational policies aimed at obliterating the US rich linguistic diversity in favor of the English language and the related Anglo dominant culture (anything by Ofelia García will do, e.g. 1983, 2003).

The occasional insertion of sentences such as “[Meredith, Carlos'] wife greets everyone with hugs, and has the sharp voice of a *gabacha* above the hum of reverent conversation in the room” (chapter 7) does not really make the novel's discursive premises any different. Rather, it configures as attempts at mimicking (stereo)typical Latino negative judgements. It also comes across as somehow disjointed from the overall style, as the protagonist's *mexicanidad* seems to linguistically rely on the constant use of *mijo* and not much else. Meredith turns out to be the hypocritical character who doesn't want to help Lydia; by its construction in chapter 7, I am left with the impression of yet another stereotype, this time exaggeratedly mimicking the uncompassionate character *true Americans* need to distance themselves from.

English-speaking Lydia and Luca might be Mexican and embarking in a dangerous journey apparently like any other Latino migrant does, and yet they are special from the start. Reaching the first migrant shelter, Hermana Cecilia registers them, apparently shocked by their one-time-only encounter with *narco* violence; in fact

[her] pen is at a momentary loss. It hangs suspended over the page for a few seconds before the nun can make it move again. She scribbles everything down and then makes her voice go again, too. [op. cit. chapter 12]



Even their reasons to migrate are constructed as special from the beginning of the travel, as they are persecuted directly by a *narco* boss; once again, they are not the average migrant escaping from daily *menudeo* violence. After all, the “enormity of Lydia’s loss is incomprehensible” (chapter 13). In several passages, the diegetic articulation of the protagonists’ migration steers toward travel narrative genres, as for example they make the most of a stop visiting the historical center of San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato (chapter 15), a popular destination among American tourists. Later on in Guadalajara, Jalisco—in the middle of a revealing conversation between Lydia and a fellow migrant—Cummins alluringly tells us out of the blue that they are “inhaling the fragrance of chocolate” (chapter 19); this and other fragments build up a bizarre patchwork of tourist travel brochure discourse and the novel itself. In spite of the hardship endured, *narco* persecution and their travel companions’ fates, nothing bad really happens to Lydia and Luca, probably—as Cummins lets us infer—due to their immediately acquired shrewdness. In chapter 20, Lydia is “constantly reminded that her [higher level] education has no purchase here, that she has no access to the kind of information that has real currency on this journey”; nonetheless, in chapter 22 they get away from *la migra* thanks to the kid’s knack for geography and the considerable sum of money she carries with her, unlike the other migrants.

The construction of the two protagonists as distinguished is constant throughout the novel; in spite of a twisted ankle, Lydia “looks like an Aztec warrior” (chapter 24) and she keeps on saving her travel companions time after time (chapters 22 through 36). Cummins’ insistent characterization excruciatingly pervades most diegetic sequences, with Lydia’s newfound compassion and consolidated superiority occasionally clashing:

Lydia has a growing sense that her very humanity is under siege, so as a flimsy defense against that attack, she permits herself to spend 10 pesos on a cup of coffee from a vendor. [op. cit. chapter 25]

Their travel goes on and on, ticking off a migrant trope after the other, based on most known news coverage and Urrea’s work. Once they eventually cross the border and we reach the happy ending epilogue, Cummins feels compelled to gratuitously stress that—compared to the protagonists—their companions and now housemates are having a hard time in the US not only “because their English is so minimal, or even because their schooling at home was rudimentary”. Conversely, Lydia and Luca’s future seems promising, once again thanks to the kid’s astonishing intellectual talents.

Cummins delivers a tale of wunder-migrants, fluently English-speaking and well-educated, from a “nice neighborhood”, implicitly enamored with the US in any diegetically suitable way; the kind of Latinx people Trumpian America approves of, ready to fit in the *true Americans* category. Because it shows the gap between critical and



strictly linguistic discourse analysis, the following is one of my favorite quotes from the corpus of Trump's speeches I've worked on:

I love the people of Mexico, I love Mexico. They're great people. I have thousands and thousands of Hispanics working for me, thousands. [Trump's campaign rally in Richmond, Virginia on October 14, 2015]

Despite an apparently, literally positive assertion, the contextualized message behind the implicature is that Trump loves his Hispanics subordinated; just as Cummins—albeit seemingly shedding compassion over them—seems to like them voiceless. She wishes they would have written *American Dirt* but—sorry not sorry, as the meme goes—she wrote it, and it is *our* storytelling of the—assumed by *us* as faceless—migrant Hispanic population.

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