Opinion-Perspective Article

From Appropriation to Hybridity: A Comparative Study of Cultural Representation in *American Dirt* and *Counting and Cracking*

Zixiao Zhang

Beijing 101 High School International Department, No.11, Yiheyuan Street, Haidian District, Beijing 100091, China

ABSTRACT

This article comparatively examines the dynamics of cultural hybridization and cultural appropriation through two contemporary case studies: American Dirt (2020) by Jeanine Cummins and the theatrical production Counting and Cracking (2019) by S. Shakthidharan and Eamon Flack. While American Dirt generated controversy for its portrayal of Mexican migrants by a non-Mexican author and was widely criticized as cultural appropriation, Counting and Cracking exemplifies cultural hybridity through its community-rooted and multilingual representation of the Sri Lankan diaspora. Drawing on theories of transculturation, cultural appropriation, and hybridity, this article argues that the distinction between hybridization and appropriation is shaped by historical power asymmetries and institutional frameworks. It concludes that equitable cultural exchange depends on reciprocity, collaborative authorship, and structural accountability within cultural industries.

Keywords: Cultural appropriation; Cultural hybridization; Transculturation; Policy reform; Cultural representation; Diaspora

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary cultural production operates within a complex global matrix in which social and ethnic narratives raise critical questions about authenticity, cultural ownership, interaction, and power. This tension is manifested across multiple fields, and is vividly illustrated through two contrasting cases in the arts and literature sector: Jeanine Cummin's 2020 novel *American Dirt* (1) and the 2019 theatrical production *Counting and Cracking* (2), co-created by S. Shakthidharan and Eamon Flack. The former, a heavily marketed and commercialized thriller about Mexican migrants written by a non-Migrant Latina author, ignited fierce controversy and was widely criticized for "cultural appropriation" – specifically, "cultural exploitation." Exploitation is defined as the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation (3). On the other hand, *Counting and Cracking* is an intergenerational story of diasporic migration involving Sri Lanka and Australia, inspired by and adapted from director Shakthidharan's own experiences. This production can be perceived as an epitome of "culture hybridity," which, as defined by Homi Bhabha, refers to the "culturalization of intervals" (4). Bhabha's conceptualization emphasizes mutual and equal interactions between cultures and analyzes how cultures reconstruct themselves by drawing on other cultures. This paper explores how the differing legislative, social, and institutional frameworks in the two cases shape the dynamics of cultural hybridization and cultural appropriation in transnational art and literature.

This paper draws on foundational texts and theoretical

Corresponding author: Zixiao Zhang, E-mail: wingzhang1225@qq.com.

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frameworks including "cultural appropriation," "exploitation," and "hybridization." In addition, this paper engages with the concept of "transculturation," as first introduced by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s (5). Ortiz's concept negates simplistic notions of cultural exchange and conflicts that define culture as single-bounded, static entities. He highlights a more fluid, complex understanding of cultural reshaping: cultures are inherently multifaceted and are fundamentally transformed by, while simultaneously shaping, cultural interactions. This paper synthesizes cultural appropriation, exploitation, and hybridization within the framework of transculturation by examining the dynamics between agency and cultural heritage. It argues that these concepts are not mutually exclusive but are instead interdependent. Through this lens, subcultures can preserve their legacy without falling into self-constraining stereotypes, while simultaneously gaining agency; dominant cultures can use their agency to protect marginalized cultures from exploitation. Such an approach provides a pathway to exploring the real-world significance of these issues, offering realistic and pragmatic insights into how different stakeholders can approach a more equitable model of cultural interaction.

SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS, CONTROVERSY, AND AFTERMATH

The plot of *Counting and Cracking* spans from the 1950s to 2004, tracing four generations of a diasporic family from Sri Lanka to Australia, thereby engaging directly with the defining political and social ruptures of modern Sri Lankan history. It chronicles the 1956 Sinhala Only Bill, which instituted Sinhala as the sole official language and is widely regarded as a catalyst for ethnic conflict through the legal marginalization of the Tamil community. The narrative then builds toward the 1983 anti-Tamil pogroms ("Black July"), the core traumatic event of the play, presented as the direct cause of forced exile, family fragmentation, and diasporic experience. The ensuing 26-year civil war forms the unresolved tension that underlies the story. (6)

To understand these events, over thirteen years, the director interviewed hundreds of family members and Sri Lankans worldwide—a personal journey to understand his heritage rather than research initially intended for a play (7). This sustained engagement provided the foundational knowledge that enabled Shakthidharan to pursue a truthful portrayal of historical events. Such authenticity yields cultural respect and equitable representation, transforming the specificity of Sri Lankan diasporic experience into a broader lens for understanding diaspora, memory, and reconciliation.

This commitment to cultural authenticity is further entrenched through the play's innovative expressive techniques. Notably, it employs five languages in its script: English, Sinhala, Tamil, Arabic, and Yolngu Matha. The opening lines are delivered in Sinhala and Tamil, with English functioning largely as translation for much of the plot, before all five languages are ultimately interwoven throughout the performance (7). This blending, sustained through the actors' linguistic nuance, maintains coherence while preserving difference. This multilingual approach creates a stage for equalization and decolonization by resisting the notion of English as the "default" language of authority and superiority. The deliberate integration of languages forms a microcosm of Homi Bhabha's "Third Space," an interstitial site of cultural encounter where identities are negotiated and hybridity is produced (4). By deconstructing binary oppositions and essentialist identity, the play presents culture as fluid and relational. The presence of these languages on a mainstream stage thus signals cultural survival and political resistance against Western hegemonic narratives.

For its sophisticated approach and the visceral experience it crafted for the audience, the play received broad acclaim and celebration. It won several awards, including the Victorian Prize for Literature and Victorian Prize for Drama. Mainstream press such as *The Australian* described the play as "(A) powerful epic of love and war, exile and reconciliation" (8). *The Guardian* remarked that "(Counting and Cracking) makes for an absorbing journey from separation to reconciliation, always alive to the pulse of history" (8). *Counting and Cracking* also entered international stages, including the Edinburgh International Festival and Birmingham Repertory Theatre in the UK, and the New York University Skirball Center for the Performing Arts (in collaboration with The Public Theater). These global opportunities solidified the play's entry into the world's epicenters of performing arts, where it garnered widespread international attention, interest, and esteem.

The reactions of vulnerable stakeholders highlighted how the play fostered cultural agency, empowering subordinated cultures to reclaim their history and transform from passive victims to active narrators. S. Shakthidharan, Sri Lankan Australian and the director of this play, noted that "We can sense where the Tamil or Sinhala speakers are in the audience; they understand

the lines before everyone else does and they respond… they'll laugh, or they'll be shocked (7)… Sonia N. Das, Associate Professor of Linguistic Anthropology at New York University who researches the Tamil population, likewise acknowledged how the play "attest(s) to how migration can be a calling and condition, dually characterized by hopes and realities of renewal and pain." (9).

Overall, *Counting and Cracking*'s integration of traumatic historical testimonies with its unique multilingual delivery constitutes its innovative form, validated by the array of prestigious awards, critical acclaim, and global success it received. The play therefore holds exceptional value as a potential model for successful and equitable cultural hybridization.

Turning to *American Dirt*, the novel has experienced significant backlash and was criticized as "trauma porn" (10) for its exploitative portrayal of Mexican migration. Written by a non-Mexican author, the novel follows a mother and son fleeing cartel violence. While marketed as an emotional exploration of migrant suffering, it quickly drew criticism for sensationalizing Mexican culture, with many viewing it as a commodification of trauma for a white mainstream audience.

The protagonist Lydia, an affluent bookstore owner turned desperate refugee, was criticized for being reduced to a one-dimensional, victimized figure. Her transformation functions as a simplified plot device that sidelines the complex social, political, and economic forces driving migration. As critic Myriam Gurba argued, the novel presents "a collection of gross stereotypes intended to be consumed by a white audience with a sweet tooth for Mexican pain'' (11). This flattening extends to its geography: the United States appears as an abstract sanctuary, while Mexico is rendered as what Gurba calls "a tourist's version" of the country—a landscape of violence stripped of historical and social depth (11). The "white gaze" also became a central critique, with critiques contending that the novel reframed migrant trauma as spectacle for a predominantly white readership. Its commercial success in media, amplified by Oprah Winfrey's book club selection (12), further highlighted how mainstream publishing institutions continue to privilege outsider narratives of racial suffering, reinforcing structural imbalances in who dominates discourses.

The backlash spurred the #DignidadLiteraria movement (13), which highlighted the frustration of Latinx communities, particularly Latinx writers, whose voices were overshadowed by the book. The movement emphasized the exploitation of marginalized communities for profit, with no direct benefit to those communities. This controversy ignited broader conversations within the literary world about representation and led to calls for policy reforms to ensure marginalized communities can tell their own stories.

The divergent outcomes of *Counting and Cracking* and *American Dirt* stem from the creators' contrasting positions and representational aims. As an experiencer, Shakthidharan crafted a nuanced, hybridized narrative for international stages that illuminated an underrepresented diaspora, fostering agency and acclaim. While his personal background provided valuable insight, he conducted extensive research and interviews to broaden his perspective. In stark contrast, Cummins lacked the same depth in portraying migrant struggle, reducing it to commodified trauma for consumption and failing to authentically grasp its complexities. This misalignment between authorial identity, narrative depth, and intended audience ultimately determined whether each work perpetuated oppression or enabled equitable cultural recognition.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

The cultural expressions and classifications of works as either appropriation or hybridization are contingent upon the historical power dynamics between the cultures involved. This historical context is bipartite: first, it encompasses the direct interactions between the cultures; second, it involves the national policies developed regarding multiculturalism or assimilation. These two developments are symbiotic, each continuously shaping the other.

In the context of Counting and Cracking, Sri Lanka's traumatic ethnic conflicts – including state-sanctioned discrimination and events such as the 1956 Sinhala Only Bill and the 1983 anti-Tamil pogroms – forms the foundation for diasporic narratives of displacement, survival, and identity negotiation. Australian society, in turn, has historically mediated migration through policies that are committed to multiculturalism. The 1973 *National Agenda of Multicultural Australia*, developed under the Whitlam government (14), formally recognized the rights of migrants to maintain their cultural heritage whilst participating in national life. Such policies were further solidified with the publication of the *Multicultural Australia: The Way Ahead Report*, which acknowledged the country's diverse migrant communities, particularly from Asia, the Middle East, and the Pacific Islands

were integral to Australia's future and must be actively supported through inclusive policies. Both frameworks endorsed multiculturalism as a defining feature of Australian identity. Initiatives such as the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) operationalized these principles by providing culturally diverse, multilingual media to give voice to migrant communities.

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora carries this collective memory characterized with ethnic persecution, systemic discrimination and historical placement, rendering the culture and population structurally vulnerable. Australia's multicultural policies for immigrants provided the stability and integration necessary for these communities to preserve and express their identities, granting migrants social and institutional support without forcing assimilation into dominant cultural norms. This environment not only legitimized and preserved migrant experiences but also cultivated fertile conditions for hybrid artistic expressions: multilingual storytelling, intergenerational narratives, and cross-cultural engagement became both feasible and valued. Counting and Cracking emerges from this interplay, which actively preserves Sri Lankan histories and facilitates reciprocal cultural exchange through hybrid theatrical form, simultaneously enriching Australian cultural landscapes through linguistic diversity and representational innovation.

By contrast, the historical relationship between Mexico and the United States provides a markedly different structural context. Tensions can be traced back to the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), which resulted in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, through which the US acquired approximately 525,000 square miles – about 55% of Mexico's territory at the time (15). This treaty represents the physical manifestation of the ideology of Manifest Destiny, a belief in divine right that justified the US acquisition of Mexico's territory. For the United States, it embedded a sense of entitlement to land and resources and fueled fervor to expansion. For Mexico, the loss created national trauma of dispossession and subordination. Thus, this event established a precedent of extraction and power asymmetry that has defined bilateral relations ever since. The territorial and geopolitical tensions solidified economic subordination of Mexico to the United States, a dynamic that fuels continuous pursuits of immigration through powerful push factors – such as economic disparity (10 to 20-fold wage gap) and domestic instabilities (e.g. War of the Reform) – and pull factors, including geographic proximity and the structural demand for labor within the U.S. economy (16). The evolution of immigration policy in U.S in response to this trend, however, exacerbated tensions. Prior to 1965, immigration policy, particularly the Bracero Program (1942-1964), institutionalized a circular flow of legal Mexican labor (seasonal and temporary migrant labor) that met explicit US economic demand, primarily in agriculture (17). By 1965, the US launched the Hart-Celler Act, which imposed a struct numerical cap for immigrants (120,000 visas for the entire Western hemisphere, with a per-country limit of 20,000 added in 1976), coinciding with the termination of the Bracero Program (18). This change created a severe policy check as the established socioeconomic networks and incentives for migration persisted, but the legal avenues were suddenly reduced to a fraction of historical demand. The law's abrupt criminalization of the decades-long, binational practices of interdependency in migration underscores the structural power imbalance. It implies that the US retains the unilateral prerogative to dismantle frameworks of mutual economic reliance and relegates Mexico and its citizens to a vulnerable position of disposability. This legislative rupture alienated Mexican migrants and cemented a stifled impression in the US that reductively associated Mexican identity with smuggling and illegal migration, obscuring the historical complicity of US policy in creating these very phenomena.

The historical relationship between cultures fundamentally determines whether a work achieves hybridization or appropriation—*Counting and Cracking* emerged from Australia›s multicultural framework and Sri Lanka›s diasporic legacy to enable reciprocal exchange, while *American Dirt* was inevitably shaped by centuries of U.S.-Mexico power imbalances, territorial dispossession, and policy-driven marginalization that made Mexican narratives vulnerable in U.S. as commodities for external consumption rather than subjects of their own storytelling.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Besides historical policies and developments, *Counting and Cracking* receives a dual foundation of support: a broad legislative framework form the government and self-negotiated backing from private corporations.

First, the Australian Government's Major Festivals Initiative (MFI) provides structural support to eligible projects that are "new, innovative, and distinctly Australian". This collaborative investment model

administered by the Confederation of Australian International Arts Festivals (CAIAF) is in partnership with Creative Australia to provide seed funding, 70% of developmental cost coverage, and up to 50% of total cost compensation for viable projects (plays with three presenting partners) (19). *Counting and Cracking* benefitted from all three levels of investments and achieved artistic and logistical success. Private philanthropy complemented this framework, including the Playking, Macquarie, Neilson, and Naomi Milgrom program, with each foundation funding specific phases ranging from research to execution to domestic tours and international expansions, respectively. This distributed funding model reduced financial risk while safeguarding creative autonomy, enabling the play to retain multilingual structure, ensemble scale, and historical fidelity without commercial compromise. Furthermore, UK-Australia cultural diplomacy initiatives, including the UK/Australian Season 2021-22, reinforced the play's international reach, highlighting how public endorsement can enhance cross-cultural exchange and global visibility.

The success of *Counting and Cracking* demonstrates how public frameworks and private initiative reinforce each other. Government programs such as the Major Festivals Initiative provided structured funding and a collaborative roadmap, while also signaling national commitment to cultural production. By formally endorsing and investing in the work, public funding conferred institutional credibility and visibility, positioning the play as a project of cultural significance rather than merely a commercial venture. This state-backed recognition created an environment in which private corporations were incentivized to participate—not solely for financial return, but as contributors to nationally valued cultural discourse. Private backing, in turn, supplied the autonomy and resources needed to fully realize the play's hybrid vision. Together, these layers of support formed an ecosystem in which public validation encouraged private cultural participation, enabling the production to sustain both artistic integrity and international reach.

By contrast, the inadequacy of the institutional framework surrounding *American Dirt* is bipartite: the absence of regulation addressing cultural appropriation, and the commercial infrastructure that propelled the book into mainstream success. Together, these conditions expose the power imbalances in the U.S. literary industry, where cultural exploitation is normalized and amplified by market mechanisms.

First, the controversy surrounding *American Dirt* reflects the lack of oversight in US publishing that enabled the insensitive depiction of Mexican migration. Dominated by white gatekeepers who shape which narratives gain visibility, the industry often marginalizes authors from the communities depicted. Jeanine Cummins, who has no lived experience of Mexican migration, was positioned as an authoritative voice, and the novel was marketed as a definitive account of this experience. This structural imbalance – exacerbated by a lack of diversity among critics, approximately 85% of who are white (23) – enabled the circulation and endorsement of narratives about marginalized communities without sufficient accountability or questioning its legitimacy, reinforcing patterns of cultural appropriation.

Second, *American Dirt* benefitted from a robust commercial infrastructure that fueled both its success and subsequent controversy. Marketed as an "immigrant thriller," the book capitalized on broad American interest in migrant stories, often framed through a sensationalist lens. Oprah Winfrey's endorsement, calling it "a new American classic," propelled it to international acclaim and mass pre-sales (12). This endorsement, coupled with aggressive marketing and a media blitz, ensured the book's widespread exposure, despite backlash from Latino communities questioning its authenticity.

American Dirt's economic value is justified with a seven-figure advance, illustrating its appeal to the mainstream market and its potential for high commercial return (24). This large advance, coupled with aggressive marketing, reveals the performative nature of its commercialization, framing the immigrant experience as a marketable, sensational story. The book's "success" was driven by its commercial appeal rather than authentic representation, turning migrant struggles into a consumable product for broader, predominantly white audiences. Together, these mechanisms reveal how publishing structures reinforce power imbalances, perpetuating the exploitation of marginalized voices and the normalization of cultural appropriation.

The institutional ecosystems surrounding each work proved decisive: Australia's layered public-private funding model—from the Major Festivals Initiative to philanthropic foundations—provided *Counting and Cracking* with the resources and autonomy to maintain multilingual integrity and community authenticity, whereas the U.S. publishing industry›s lack of regulatory oversight, commercial gatekeeping, and profit-driven amplification transformed *American Dirt* into a vehicle for exploitation despite widespread community opposition.

TRANSCULTURATION AND POLICY INSIGHTS

Transculturation conceptualizes the ideal of cultural interaction by promoting the notion that culture's form and inherent nature are everchanging, and hybridization supports emergence of new forms. Counting and Cracking exemplifies this dynamic as the play itself emerges as a new cultural form. It stages the encounter between Sri Lankan and Australian contexts through the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora experience—an inheritance largely transmitted through oral storytelling within kinship networks. Because such memory depends on proximity, language continuity, and intergenerational presence, migration renders it structurally vulnerable and susceptible to erosion. The play intervenes by reorganizing this fragile inheritance within a hybrid theatrical framework: multilingual dialogue in Tamil and English, intergenerational and cross-ethnic casting, international staging, and sustained consultation with diasporic communities. The transformation grants durability and public legitimacy to narratives that might otherwise remain dispersed or silenced. In doing so, the production reframes both contexts: Sri Lankan historical memory survives through Australian aesthetic adaptation, while Australian theatre expands its linguistic, temporal, and representational norms by adapting Sri Lankan practices. The resulting diasporic public culture did not previously exist in either setting but now operates across both, exemplifying transculturation through mutual transformation rather than assimilation.

American Dirt presents a contrasting model. The novel draws on the experiences of Mexican and Central American migrants, yet its production did not involve sustained collaboration or reciprocal exchange with the communities depicted. Narrative authority remains external to the cultural subjects represented, and those subjects exercise limited influence over interpretation, framing, or dissemination. The material is shaped within the conventions of the commercial English-language thriller, structured by U.S. publishing market expectations rather than by dialogic engagement with migrant cultural forms. Because the relationship is unidirectional, no mutual transformation occurs. Mexican and Central American migrant experiences are incorporated into a pre-existing genre framework without altering its narrative structure, linguistic norms, or institutional orientation. At the same time, the represented cultures are rendered as fixed contexts of violence and victimhood rather than as evolving social formations. The two cultural domains—the U.S. publishing industry and the migrant communities depicted—do not meaningfully interact to generate new hybrid forms. Instead, one absorbs and reorganizes the other within established market parameters. The resulting asymmetry underscores the limits of representation when reciprocity and shared authorship are absent.

The divergence between Counting and Cracking and American Dirt demonstrates that cultural outcomes are not determined solely by artistic intention but also stems from historical and institutional conditions. Hybridization in one case and appropriation in the other emerge from different structures of collaboration, authority, and market control. Whether a cultural exchange becomes transculturation therefore depends on the frameworks that shape participation, authorship, and distribution. In the United States context, where publishing institutions operate within commitments to diversity and inclusion yet remain vulnerable to public backlash over representational inequities, there is both cultural obligation and practical incentive to foster more equitable modes of exchange. Policy intervention is thereby necessitated as a means of cultivating conditions in which collaborative hybridization can flourish and controversies from asymmetry can be mitigated.

A unified legislative framework should precede the establishment of specific policies. The successful international precedents are not isolated exemplars, but is organized into a coherent three-pillar framework involving distinct but interdependent functions: visibility (data transparency to diagnose inequity), obligation (enforceable standards to embed accountability), and voice (coalitions and funding to redistribute narrative authority). Visibility generates the empirical foundation and awareness necessary for actionable obligations; without it, institutional mandates may lack precision and direction. Obligations transform identified disparities to enforceable structures an operational requirement. Voice ensures that the targeted communities can exercise the narrative authority collectively facilitated by obligations and visibility. Resolution may become fragmented with the absence of any elements. This framework further necessitates a coordinated policy across the interlocking domains of industry, education, and cultural funding.

At the industry level, the U.S. publishing sector can address structural asymmetries through enforceable diversity reform. The industry remains disproportionately white, limiting editorial perspective and sensitivity to appropriative representation. One foundational step is mandatory demographic data collection and public

reporting to enable institutional self-assessment. The Dutch publishers' association, Mediafederatie, provides a model: following its national diversity survey, it documented more than thirty active D&I initiatives across the sector, increasing transparency and prompting practical interventions (25). These included the revitalization of the E. du Perron Prize, which publicly recognizes works that promote intercultural understanding (26). Together, these measures demonstrate how data-driven reform can extend from workforce awareness to market visibility and national cultural recognition. An evidence-based, awareness-first approach would similarly allow U.S. publishers to identify representational gaps and implement targeted structural reforms rather than relying on reactive responses to controversy.

Such representations generate knowledge yet lacks compulsion. Complementarily, the U.S. publishing sector requires enforceable standards to ensure diversity functions as an operational requirement rather than a voluntary commitment. The Royal Society of Chemistry provides a model through its data-driven equity, diversity, and inclusion publishing standards. These include formal EDI commitments, designated leadership oversight, mentoring structures, compliance monitoring, and public reporting mechanisms (27). By embedding accountability into editorial workflows and requiring measurable progress, the framework transforms diversity from aspiration into institutional obligation. A comparable model in the United States would integrate cultural competency into acquisition, review, and publication processes through transparent standards and oversight.

A collaborative infrastructure may sustain both. Isolated firm-level reforms risk inconsistent standards and competitive disincentives that penalize early adopters. Cross-industry coordination resolves these problems by directing resources and establishing sector-wide norms. Canada's Coalition for Diversity and Inclusion in Scholarly Communications offers a model. Founded by ten trade associations to address workforce inequity, the coalition established a Joint Statement of Principles and developed practical resources such as a Toolkit for Disability Equity (28). It sustains accountability through Communities of Practice focused on recruitment and retention challenges and through biennial Workplace Equity Project surveys that benchmark diversity and promotion disparities across the sector. Parallel initiatives, including the Indexing Society of Canada Diversity in Publishing Bursary, further extend financial and mentorship support to underrepresented professionals (29). A comparable U.S. coalition could institutionalize shared standards, sector-wide benchmarking, and collaborative resource development rather than leaving reform to isolated firms.

Taken together, the Dutch transparency model, the UK's enforceable standards, and Canada's coalition-based infrastructure illustrate complementary mechanisms for structural reform: data visibility, operational accountability, and sustained collaboration. Among them, visibility through systematic data collection and public reporting should be prioritized in function. Without such an evidence base, obligations may be misdirected or superficial, and community voice cannot be effectively mobilized. Enforceable standards further guarantee pragmatic transformations and pragmatic outcomes. Lastly, associations embed such practices and enhances its sustainability.

At the state level, education serves as the foundational prerequisite for building citizenry capable of preventing cultural misrepresentation. By embedding equality, respect, and inclusivity into curricula, states can shape citizens who acknowledge diverse perspectives and include migrants and minority communities. However, this mission is pursued within a contentious legislative context dominated by Critical Race Theory debates—an academic framework examining how race and racism are embedded within American legal systems. Currently, over thirty states have introduced legislation restricting how teachers can discuss race and American history, with many implementing bans on teaching "divisive concepts." This existing framework justifies current constraints and the need to reformation. However, despite these obstacles, racial education can be facilitated through a dual approach: affirmative state mandates requiring inclusive content, and multilingual education initiatives.

Existing affirmative mandates offer a blueprint for preventing misrepresentation crises like *American Dirt*. California's Assembly Bill 1078 provides enforcement mechanisms ensuring instructional materials reflect diversity and cannot be removed by local bodies swayed by political pressure (30). The model's desirability lies in shifting from passive non-discrimination to active, positive representation. By mandating that students learn accurate histories of marginalized communities, such policies build baseline public knowledge. An informed audience is the first defense against a book like *American Dirt* gaining traction as definitive narrative; readers would possess contextual understanding to evaluate its

authenticity critically. Furthermore, Minnesota have embedded ethnic studies into K-12 standards. Adopting such measures broadly would create generations for whom cultural inclusivity is fundamental civic knowledge (31).

Given the contextual uniqueness of education (which is a historically and culturally contingent sector), existing state-level reforms mentioned above offer the most viable or relevant models for addressing cultural misrepresentation. Under the three-pillar framework, education functions as a mechanism to extend visibility into the public sphere, cultivating civic knowledge and audience sensitivity to diverse narratives. By fostering critical awareness of perspectives, such reforms can preemptively discourage harmful or appropriative portrayals, generating disincentives for corporate appropriations. These initiatives are therefore both foundational and transformative: they provide essential, long-term conditions for equitable cultural engagement while requiring careful, sustained implementation. This underscores the urgency of enactment alongside the recognition that meaningful societal impact emerges gradually over time.

At the federal level, the United States can draw from Australia's multicultural policy framework. Australia's Australian Cultural Diplomacy Grants Program funds projects that "tell Australian stories, amplify First Nations voices, deepen bilateral partnerships and build cultural understanding." (32). The U.S. could establish a parallel U.S. Cultural Diplomacy and Community Storytelling Fund supporting community-rooted cultural projects led by marginalized communities, ensuring authentic stories emerge from within and receive federal support. Beyond cultural diplomacy, Australia's place-based funding models offer lessons. The Regional Multicultural Alliance Victoria successfully advocated for "sustainable, place-based funding" addressing historical "inequitable funding allocation for multicultural organizations," proposing "Need-Based Funding" supporting organizations "deeply connected to their communities." (33). The U.S. could implement federal Community Cultural Capacity Grants prioritizing grassroots organizations. Additionally, Australia's investment in multicultural media provides a template. The Albanese Government committed $11.3 million over three years to support multicultural media, recognizing its "critical role in fostering an inclusive and informed society" as "the most trusted source of news." (34). The U.S. could establish a Multicultural Media Sustainability Program providing grants to ethnic media outlets, enabling digital transition and authentic storytelling. Such federal investment would create platforms for communities to represent themselves, reducing the likelihood that a single externally authored narrative dominates understanding of any cultural group's experience. Together, these Australian-inspired initiatives build structural support for authentic representation, ensuring migrant and minority communities possess resources and platforms to tell their own stories.

Beyond reforms within the U.S. to foster a more inclusive and structurally accountable environment, Mexico can likewise exercise agency by strengthening its own position through cultural diplomacy. This strategy is also central to Mexican diplomacy in the status quo and has been proven successful through implementation. Institutions like the Mexican Cultural Institute has proactively collaborated with foreign media producers, offering grants or consultancies to ensure more accurate depictions (36). Such a model would contrast with a passive stance against stereotypical portrayals, instead positioning Mexico as an active partner in shaping its global image. Mexican embassies, cultural institutions, and government-backed initiatives could spearhead these efforts, forging collaborations with foreign counterparts to foster cross-cultural understanding. An instructive model is the Netflix Series *Narcos: Mexico*, which involves Mexican historians and cultural advisors to avoid stereotypical characterization and cooperated with U.S production company *Gaumont International Television.* Consequently, this show is ranked in top 10 of Netflix's most-watched shows (36). This example epitomizes how authentic representation of Mexican identity can amplify cultural power and command global attention. The collaboration further presents that investing in authentic representation across communities yields both visibility and influence – a lesson Mexican cultural institutions can apply through proactive, institutionalized engagement with global media producers.

All above analysis demonstrates that transculturation cannot be consistently achieved through artistic intention alone, but it requires an institutional architecture that empowers and operationalizes reciprocal exchange. Realistically, the coordination of different pillars and sectors requires meticulous weighing of its political feasibility and implementation efficacy. Three criteria may be used for weighing: leverage (does the intervention alter conditions under which multiple other actors operate?), speed (can be implemented within existing authority, or does it require new legislation?) and durability (the sustainability and timeframe of impacts

achieved?). These criteria classify the said policies into distinct phases of implementation and consequence. Short-term activities with physical products, being the mandatory data reporting, may achieve the most immediate outcomes. The formation of enforceable standards and coalitions may require time for negotiation to achieve consensus and cultivate solidarity. These policies restructure institutional conditions first. The provision of media funding and discourse power should occur as co-requisites, yet they may require more time to create transformative results. Lastly, the state educational reforms require the most considerations due to its broad scope and inherent significance, whilst its consequences may also manifest later as it primarily targets future generations. Because increased diplomatic engagement by other stakeholders does not require legislative changes, such efforts can be developed continuously alongside these policies and may expand in scale as social integration and coordination deepen. Overall, the framework's goal is to facilitate the normalization of reciprocal cultural exchanges as defaults. The policies represent the cumulative pressure of interventions advancing in coordinated sequence, through which success is secured.

CONCLUSION

The comparative examination of *Counting and Cracking* and *American Dirt* underscores a pivotal truth: the boundary between cultural hybridization and appropriation is deeply shaped by the structures of power, history, and institutional frameworks that govern cultural production. *Counting and Cracking*, supported by Australia's progressive multicultural policies and an ecosystem of collaborative, authentic investment, demonstrates how reciprocal cultural exchange can be structurally sustained under supportive institutional conditions. In stark contrast, *American Dirt* exemplifies how cultural appropriation thrives in the absence of oversight, perpetuated by commercial interests that commodify the suffering of marginalized communities for mass consumption.

This analysis calls for an urgent reckoning within global cultural industries: we must move beyond reactive debates and toward proactive, transformative models of cultural exchange. If we are to build a world in which cultural narratives are not only protected but empowered, we must shift the power dynamics that govern storytelling—ensuring that marginalized voices are not just represented but lead the charge in telling their own stories. Only through collective accountability, policy reform, and cross-cultural solidarity can we begin to dismantle the systems that reduce cultures to products and pave the way for a future where hybridity is championed and authenticity is celebrated.

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