

JARAMILLO Sara

Crossing the River

Because I am a writer, I am approaching this panel by telling you a story. It's about a young author who published her first novel in Colombia. The book was praised by critics and turned out to be a bestseller. Translation rights into many languages were quickly sold. Not surprisingly, it narrates in exquisite prose the journey of a woman whose adopted son wants to meet his biological mother. The woman they were visiting lived in an isolated jungle territory that could only be reached by traveling upriver on a boat. The synopsis itself is striking, right?

Attention: here comes the twist of the plot. The story happens in a real territory called: Chocó. The river exists, and it's called Atrato. The book was inspired by a real event—a massacre. Are you wondering what the problem is then? The problem is that most people of Chocó are black, and the author is white.

Here are some relevant details. The author knows the territory well because she lived there for ten years. The main character of the novel is a white woman, who adopted a black child and the story is told from her point of view. The massacre is the only real thing in the novel. The rest is fiction. Yet the people of Chocó did not forgive their territory, river, and the massacre narrated by a white writer. Several black cultural leaders have gone further than that. They accused the novel of racism, which generated a media scandal.

Here are some personal opinions:

I studied journalism and practiced the trade for more than ten years. So I understand that it is crucial to describe reality accurately, objectively (if such a thing exists), with a balance between sources and without reflecting personal opinions. But it happens that the novel we are talking about is fiction, so I am giving my opinion not as a journalist but as a fiction writer. I think a fiction writer should be concerned with telling a story in the best possible way for it to be engaging and interesting for readers. Does this mean that there are no limits when writing? Yes, there are limits. But you can always cross the river knowing that it is your responsibility as a writer to set them by asking yourself if you are in a position to write about this or that ethnic group or territory without falling into stereotypes or cultural appropriations. That's called: being professional.

You may have realized that I didn't bring this topic today because I have answers to offer you. On the contrary, I bought it because the more I think about it, the more questions I have. And I think it's important that you too question yourself about it.

Is this a case of cultural cancellation? Are there borders that storytellers should not cross? When is freedom of expression violated? What is the limit between freedom of expression and disrespect for others? Is it possible to write the not-self without hurting others' feelings?

You will tell me because I still need to keep thinking about it.

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Angel Igov (Bulgaria); Hajar Rachedi (France); Sara Jaramillo Klinkert (Colombia); Shehan Karunatilaka (Sri Lanka)

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