Genus Envy: Is Our Culture Fixated on Plagiarism?
Marcus McCann

Suggestions that Harvard sophomore Kaavya Viswanathan plagiarized passages in her 2005 novel *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild and Got a Life* reached a fevered pitch in May of 2006. In late April, *The Harvard Crimson* published allegations that *Opal Mehta* contained passages similar in structure and wording to Megan McCafferty's first two books, called—and nobody is missing the irony here—*Sloppy Firsts* and *Second Helpings*.

But that wasn't the end of it. On May 1, *The New York Times* reported that passages in *Opal Mehta* bore a striking resemblance to Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories.* The next day, the paper ran another story, this time suggesting that Viswanathan had allegedly lifted from Sophie Kinsella's *Can You Keep a Secret*. By mid-May, Viswanathan was accused of borrowing from more than a half a dozen books.

The whole thing reared its ugly head a year later, this time with Ian McEwan, who defended himself against accusations of plagiarism in an interview in The Guardian in November of 2006. McEwan later discussed it in a further Guardian interview. McEwan went as far as submitting Andrews's book, the one he was accused of ripping off, to his editor when he submitted the manuscript. And he acknowledges his debt to her in *Atonement*'s gratitudes.

Viswanathan's defense at the time—one that places *Opal Mehta* in an uncomfortably gray area of, I don't know, everything ever written—was that she had unconsciously internalized passages of McCafferty's book as a young teen. But no defense was possible; even the suggestion of plagiarism is a literary death-sentence and Viswanathan lost her million dollar book deal.

I haven't heard her name in a while. But I found myself referencing her recently, when St Catherines poet Gregory Betts got stuck at my end of the table last month during his Ottawa visit and he had virtually no choice of conversation partners save me.

A newspaper editor told me a couple of years ago that, next to murder, plagiarism was the greatest evil she could imagine. If her comments seem a bit extreme (if, Marcus? If?), consider the glut of media attention that Viswanathan received. Think of the combined hours spent by bloggers and journalists, combing through dozens of novels looking for comparisons with *Mehta*.

Wasn't the media attention a tad... overboard? What is it about literary theft that so captures our interest?

I remember attending a couple of lectures by University of Ottawa professor Naomi Goldenberg in 2004. Okay, I attended a lot of her lectures, but there are a couple that are relevant here. Bear with me. Goldenberg, a feminist, Freudian religious studies scholar, spoke on the subject of the authorship of sacred texts. Her argument, and I'm simplifying it a lot, is that men needed to be the bearers of cultural production because of male birth envy. It's all tied up in Freud's theory of penis envy, since baby, penis, and feces are "ill-distinguished" in the mind, according to our friend Sigmund, the desire for each being a desire for "a little one."

The strict policing of female authorship of all "important" texts (but sacred texts in particular), is an indication of male anxiety about their own inability to (re)produce. Finding themselves incapable of

having real babies, they seek to make their production—the literary one—more valuable, eventually elevating it to the status of holy, she argues. As a general statement, authorship is important culturally because it's conflated with the fantasy of male birth. So disrupting authorship is about as welcome in our culture as stealing a baby.

Male birth envy doesn't sound credible? Is it a leap to apply to to authorship? Look at Stephen Cain and Jay MillAr's collaboration Double Helix (Mercury Press, 2006). In *Double Helix*, the Toronto friends each write 26 poems in the other's voice (as an aside: that description already sounds like plagiarism by the nutty standard poor Kaavya Viswanathan was held to, but that's besides the point). Writing from A-Z and Z-A, the two strands form what they describe as a double helix: their own MillAr-Cain DNA. Sounds like a male birth fantasy for the scientific age, doesn't it?

But that takes me away from plagiarism anxiety. After my semi-consensual conversation with Betts, I picked up a copy of his interview in filling Station.

Betts and Seelig talk about a lot about authorship and only incidentally about plagiarism in discussing Betts's two books, If Language (Bookthug, 2005) and Haikube (Bookthug, 2006). What registers is Bett's dissatisfaction with our understanding of authorship. *If Language* is a set of 56 anagrams of found text by Steve McCaffery and *Haikube* uses a Rubik's-like cube with words instead of colours to aide in the manufacture of the poems. So the bounds of authorship are front and centre in Betts's Bookthug output. In fact, in his *filling Station* interview he collects a virtual curio of other possible authors for his work: including positing the formal constraint as author (or part author), randomness as author, and, in the case of *If Language*, McCaffery as author.

Poets, who are often the first writers to take us out of our comfort zone, have been experimenting with the bounds of authorship for some time now. From found poems (such as the famously disturbing set in Lynn Crosbie's book *Paul's Case*, lifted from Karla Homolka's journal) to uncited references, poetry has been playing fast and loose with the rules of plagiarism for some time. Still, Betts's deliberately provocative statements to me and others—*I plagiarize everything I write. That's what I do, I steal*—pack a punch.

He wasn't talking about either Bookthug book. He was talking about plunderverse, a method of composition (or is that decomposition?) where the poet begins with a text (usually someone else's) and removes words, creating a new piece. The only tool at the poet's disposal is deletion. His original essay on the subject is still online, thanks to the folks at poetics.ca. My first exposure to this was rob mclennan's *Variations* (above/ground, 2006) chapbook — whose cover art, incidentally, also involves a string of DNA — where he takes longish works by Meredith Quartermain, Stephanie Bolster and others and plunders them.

Is that, as Betts says, plagiarism? The constituent parts, words, aren't owned by anyone, after all. Thus, it would be difficult to compare plunderverse to, say, recutting a feature film into a short film and passing it off as your own—which would be an interesting project, by the way, except that the constituent parts, scenes or camera shots, are owned by someone. Usually, someone with a lot of money to sue you.

Nor would it be the same if someone took a pop song and reproduced, for instance, just the beats—and that's exactly that which has gotten many a musician into trouble: sampling. Both the scene in the film and the beats in the club anthem are very different from an individual word, which as I said, nobody owns (yet).

Not that I agree with censoring *The Grey Album* or anything—fair use isn't getting a fair shake today—but I think plunderverse is different, that's all. Can Betts call what he's doing plagiarism? If the arguments against our poor Harvard softmore, Kaavya Viswanathan, are credible, then yes, plunderverse probably fits in. If something as ephemeral as sentence *cadence* can by copyrighted, as some of the accusations implied, then Viswanathan, Betts, you, me: we're all plagiarists. Which to some extent is Betts's point, I suspect.

Betts has a longer leash than most artists do. It may be that given the pull of capitalism toward ownership, poetry's relative detachment from the almighty dollar has given the medium extra freedom. When I say that, I realize that ownership and authorship are becoming increasingly disconnected generally (heck, they should just open a Beatles Catalogue Stock Exchange and get it over with). Moreover, there's a Marxist critique that can and should be levelled at any naive "I make, I own" trope put forward in this day and age. Notwithstanding the above, I do believe that the relatively small amount of money involved makes any discussion of plagiarism easier to have in the world of poetry than, say, in the world of gray market DVDs or even music sampling (ugh, again, worth its own post).

Anyway, as Goldenberg and Freud show, the more interesting line of questioning doesn't centre around the cataloging of what is or isn't plagiarism. For me, it's the overwhelming hostility plagiarism engenders, its obsessions and it's taboos, that's more interesting.

Future investigation into the cultural importance of plagiarism may find an unlikely future subject: those publishing under pseudonyms. If, as is suggested in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a thing and its opposite often originate in the same psychical machinery, then the pen name may be an ideal site for research into plagiarism: after all, plagiarists put their name to other people's work, while pseudonymous authors put other names to their own, while the latter lacks the cultural taboo that would likely hamper research.

If Viswanathan's absolute withdrawal from media attention during the first few weeks of her trial-by-popular-opinion was any indication, those accused of plagiarism are unlikely to consent to interviews (other than Betts, of course). Therefore, an oblique route, namely the study of those who utilize a *nom de plume*—incidentally, a practice so common to hip hop artists, graffiti taggers, and practitioners of other urban disciplines from DJing to shoe design that in some circles it is not *exceptional* but *conventional*—may prove the more accessible venture.

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