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Fictions, Knowledge, and Justice



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Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts (Thesis Only)

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Declaration

This thesis comprises only my original work towards the Master of Arts (Thesis Only) in Philosophy. To the best of my knowledge, due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all research material used. This thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies, and appendices.

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the millions of marginalised peoples who have long known the power and impact of fictions. Your willingness to share your stories, giving testimony to the way fictions have impacted you, made this thesis possible. Your efforts do not go unnoticed. I hope to honour you with this work. I hope you get to live a thousand different lives through stories gifted to you.

Acknowledgements

I am so grateful to my friends. They have endured countless of my winding rambles about this project with patience and affection; they have soothed me, built me up, and seen me through. Yuwei Cai and Yaameen Al-Muttaqi, in these last months especially your friendship has been a cushion to every anticipated fall. I will watch the videos you sent me soon, I promise. Shannon Carter, doing honours in philosophy with you was a treasure; thank you for some of the most cerebral conversations I have ever had, and some of the best laughs. Thanks to Antonia Smyth, my constant companion on this postgraduate adventure and a fellow appreciator of handwritten book dedications. Holly Whitfield, your dedication to learning is inspirational and your support unwavering, thank you. You all have helped me so much in this process and I cannot wait to see you all on the other side of it.

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I would also like to honour the memory of my grandparents, Rita and Carlo. In part, my pursuit of education has been a raging against the opportunities you never had, and in part, an effort to make good on the doors that you opened for us. I know you were proud of me. I miss you.

I would also like to thank past-me, for not giving up. This work is hard, but doing this work while living in this world and in this brain is harder. Our culture is not one that rewards doing things purely for oneself, but that is what I did. Finishing this thesis after many setbacks, difficulties, and struggles, was ultimately an act of self-love.

Contents

Introduction 5
1. BACKGROUND 7
Philosophical background 7
Psychological background 10
Neuroscientific background 12
Walton 14
2. CONTRASTING VIEWS 17
Captive Consumer View (CCV) 17
View of Increased Agency (VIA) 24
3. WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON IN FICTION 29
Camp's Perspectival Engagement. 29
'Stickiness' 37
The Socially Situated Knower 40
4. FICTIONS AS EPISTEMIC RESOURCES 45
Epistemic Resources 45
1) they are things with which we know 46
2) they are collectively held and maintained 48
3) they must answer to experience 51
"The good writers touch life often." - Fahrenheit 451 54
Where is the fictional resource? 56
Making the 'leap' 59
Resemblance 60
Isomorphism 62
What might this look like in a fiction? Case Study: Black Panther (2018) 63
'Lesser epistemic contribution' criticism 70
Perspectives 71
Characterisations 72
5. Fictional Injustice 75
Fictions in the world. 75
Epistemic Injustice 77
Kyriarchy and Fictions 81
Fictions as sites of epistemic injustice. 85
1. Institutionalised injustice 86
2. Absence and abundance 87
3. "Show me the money!" - Jerry Maguire 90
4. Compounding Stereotype and Harmful Salience 91
5. Access issues 93
6. Censorship 95
7. Tropism 97
8. Archetype 99
9. Wilful Ignorance 101
"Let me explain. No, there is too much. Let me sum up." - Inigo Montoya, 'The Princess Bride'. 102
"You and what army?" or, Resisting Injustice 103
Conclusion 110
Bibliography 115

Introduction

When I was nine years old, my primary school showed us students the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence.* I cannot remember the facts they gave us, the explanations or discussions - I just remember the film and how it made me feel. Years later in my final year of high school, we were shown the 2009 film *Samson and Delilah*. Again, today, I cannot remember the theory and facts that bookended this part of the curriculum. Both films were intended as teaching tools to inform students of the ongoing gap between Indigenous and white lives in Australia, yet in both cases, the *story* of the film has had the most lasting impact.

I had 13 years of standardised state education, and in that time I was shown two films about Indigenous Australians. Were this the only exposure to such stories I had, my understanding of Indigenous Australia would be at best bereft, and at worse inaccurate entirely.

There are two things to note in this anecdote. Firstly, these films present fictional or fictional*ised* stories to the audience. Though *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is based on true events, the dramatization involved in its narrative cannot claim to be factual in the sense of a documentary or news report. *Samson and Delilah* depicts experiences that many Indigenous Australians have faced, but 'Samson' and 'Delilah' themselves are not out here in the actual world, as actual people. These films present fictional stories. Secondly, these films were deployed in an educational setting with the intention of being able to impart *knowledge* through their viewing. This is an oft-repeated approach to teaching in many educational institutions. The use of films, television, books, plays - any text which is able to convey information about the 'actual' world while being ostensibly fictional - frequently accompanies rote learning of facts from a textbook.

Beyond my own experience, there are countless examples of fictions being used intentionally to educate about the actual world. Orwell's *Animal Farm* is still a popular text for teaching about communism and the Red Scare in Western 20th Century history. The

Broadway musical *Hamilton* is used in some American schools to teach about the War of Independence. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is still used as an educational doorway to talking about race in America. My school showed us the film *Gallipoli* when I was 15 to teach my classmates and I about Australia's involvement in the First World War. And so, fictions seem to frequently play a role in how we thinkers learn about and approach the world. That is, even when we know fictions to be 'unreal,' they seem to play a role in people's practices of knowing and interpreting the actual world. And it follows, then, that what precisely the fictions 'teach' us can have ethical and social stakes.

The main aim of this thesis is to examine more carefully this lived phenomenon of knowing from fictions, that countless people have already experienced, but which lacks sufficient exploration and description in the literature. I will consider existing literature from philosophy and other disciplines, to determine some appropriate parameters for inquiry. I will outline a debate between two contrasting and popular views of fictions - one which asserts its societal impact and one which denies it — taking it as the principal problem I am aiming resolve. To do so, I will draw heavily on Elisabeth Camp's account of perspectival engagement with fiction, and Gaile Pohlhaus' work on epistemic resources and the situated knower. With these I aim to show that fictions, via perspectives and characterisations, provide us with epistemic resources leading to genuine knowledge of the world. In the final section, I will explore the implications of this claim in a broader sociopolitical context. I will use Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice to discuss how fictions are produced and shared in our actual world, determining that fictions can be a site of multiple epistemic injustices, and that these injustices correlate to long-observed systems of oppression. To elucidate the structural and systemic nature of these injustices from fiction, I will draw upon Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's theory of kyriarchy.

Importantly, I will aim to produce an account which coheres with the lived experience of as many people as possible. A primary purpose of this thesis is to grant academic legitimacy to lived phenomena that countless people have already experienced.

1. BACKGROUND

Philosophical background

The impact of media generally upon our social imaginary and lived experiences is well documented. Mass media has a "significant power to shape popular ideas and attitudes."[1] There is ample first-personal testimony about the effect consuming fictions has on people's approach to knowing and interpreting the world. And ample testimony, as well, about the treatment real people receive when others apply the lessons learned from fiction to their interactions. And yet, to my knowledge, this phenomenon has not been adequately addressed in the philosophical literature.

'Fictions' are generally taken to be statements, expressed propositionally, that are analogous in structure to knowledge statements, but are *not* true of the *actual* world. Instead, we take fiction claims to be fictionally true of the *fictional* world. Different theorists have proposed competing accounts of the distinction between actual and fictional worlds. For our purposes, the details of these accounts do not matter. Instead, we will be concerned with what is standardly considered to be our primary mode of engagement with fiction: our engagement with fictions is supposed to take place not through *rationality* (the mental faculty epistemologists identify as doing the job of 'truth-telling', ascribing truth or falsity to different knowledge claims) but through *imagination*.[2]

For epistemologists and metaphysicians, this raises the quandary of *how* everyday people can be so emotionally moved by fictions, when they know them to be not true of our actual world. Because to be *moved* by something that one knows is not true, as though

[1] Topos Partnership, "Social Science Literature Review: Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys," *The Opportunity Agenda,* (October 2011): 13, https://opportunityagenda.org/messaging _reports/media-representations-black-men-boys/

[2] Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 13.

it were true, seems like a great failure of rationality. Answering this question has led some theorists to enrich our standard folk psychology. Walton, for example, suggests the emotional reactions from fiction are 'quasi-emotions,'[3] not to be conflated with standard, genuine emotions. Tamar Szabó Gendler offers a propositional account of exporting and importing content between fiction and the actual world,[4] acknowledging that the two realms are not exactly quarantined in the mind of the imaginer.[5]

In this thesis, it is not my aim to resolve debates about the rationality of our engagement with fictions. Like Walton and others, however, I will be aiming for new resources to enrich the standard toolkit to which philosophers turn when discussing knowledge and rationality. To this end, I will draw primarily from Camp's account of perspectival engagement with fiction, which allows explanation for how we are affected by fictions despite knowing they are non-actual.[6] On that account, the author's deliberative construction of a fiction primes the consumer to temporarily adopt certain dispositional *perspectives*, and as such, the nature of our engagement with fiction is more complex and affective than a facsimile of rationality parsing out truth or falsity.

Another distinctive feature of the philosophical literature on fictions is that conversation between aesthetic and metaphysical concerns largely discusses engagement with fiction at the *microlevel:* happening between a single subject, and a single fiction. But, fictions are created and collectively distributed, shared, accessed, and consumed *en masse*, and by people who live within complex sociopolitical and cultural contexts. This is the *macrolevel*. There is an absence in the literature of what happens with fictions at this macrolevel.

As such, I will be aiming with this thesis to present a unified account of epistemic practices with fictions, that addresses both the micro- and macrolevels.

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[3] Kendall L. Walton, "Fearing Fictions," *The Journal of Philosophy* 75, No. 1 (January 1978): 6, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2025831

[4] Tamar Szabó Gendler, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," *The Journal of Philosophy* 97, no. 2 (February 2000): 75-79

[5] Gendler's work will be discussed more later on.

[6] Elisabeth Camp "Perspectives in Imaginative Engagement with Fiction," *Philosophical Perspectives* 31 (2017): 73-102, https://doi.org/10.1111/phpe.12102

Additionally, I will consider the ethical concerns around justice and identity that this macrolevel discussion enables. Ethical considerations in the literature, and therefore at the microlevel, often centre around notions of disgust or moral affront in the mental world of the consumer of the fiction, as they are consuming it, whereas consumption of fiction considered at the macrolevel entails whole populations, and practises that can be systemically entrenched.

There is already *some* discussion of the societal impact of fictions within other disciplines, as well as popular culture. For example, cultural panic over violent video games spawned numerous psychological studies.[7] Social scientists have analysed "distorted patterns of portrayal"[8] in media; where a social group is depicted in media as very different from what is typical of that group in the 'real world'. This discrepancy often perpetuates prejudicial stereotypes. For example, in the case of Black American men and boys, the general media depictions of this group encourage "exaggerated views related to criminality and violence; lack of identification with or sympathy for Black males."[9] However, these analyses rarely make the distinction between fictional media, like said video games, and media that intends to make truth claims about the world, like the nightly news. 'Media' is taken wholesale, disregarding actual versus nonactual. In contrast, I will be discussing fictions exclusively.

There is also literature on *transgressive* fictions - fictions which intentionally aim to overstep the boundaries of acceptability in everyday society.[10] But this is largely discussed as an aesthetic choice, the expansion of the totality of artistic works. Rarely is the transgression at play discussed in terms of tangible moral implications that it could have in the broader actual world.

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[7] Christopher J. Ferguson, "The School Shooting/Violent Video Game Link: Causal Link or Moral Panic?" *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling* 5, vol. 1-2 (2008): 25-37.

[8] Topos, "Media Representations and Impact," 13.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Robin Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

In this thesis I will therefore be attempting to proceed with three key parameters to my inquiry, derived from consideration of existing literature. Firstly, I will focus on fictions exclusively and in themselves, not as derivative or analogous to other phenomena, and both in the sense of an epistemic category of claim as well as in the sense of a type of media available in the world. Secondly, I will consider our engagement with fiction as it occurs at both the person-to-fiction microlevel and the fiction-person-society macrolevel context. And finally, I will explore some ethical implications that emerge in consequence of fictions being considered in societal contexts.

Psychological background

In addition to philosophers, many other theorists have been interested in the phenomenon of fiction. In psychology, for instance, inquiry is rooted in speculation as to fiction's cognitive purpose, benefits, and effects. While some researchers postulate that that fiction's purpose is simply entertainment and diversion,[11] many suggest that fictions are a sort of dress rehearsal for 'real life.' These *simulation* theories of fiction claim that one can cultivate empathy and social mores by practising via our engagement with fiction, without the risk of consequence in the actual world.[12]

Much psychology of fiction makes a distinction between 'literary' fictions and 'popular fictions.'[13] Literary fictions are, roughly, those authored in a manner which requires the consumer to co-write or 'fill in gaps' of the fiction in order to make it comprehensible. This is because the author makes "writerly"[14] narrative choices which preference artistry and aesthetic rather than the provision of coherent information or description of events, leaving

[11] Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley, "The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no.3 (2008): 173.

[12] This is harmonious with some of Walton's claims about make-believe and imagination; that we as subjects engage in imaginative practices to grow skills and practice for actual life.

[13] Emanuele Castano and David Comer Kidd, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," *Science* 342, no.6156 (October 2013): 1.

[14] Castano and Kidd reproduce Roland Barthes' distinction between 'scriptible/writerly' and 'lisible/readerly' texts.

the consumer to make the fiction coherent to themselves. By contrast, popular fictions are roughly those fictions which are widely disseminated and considered imaginatively shallow, or which engage in fictive traditions like tropes and character archetypes. Popular fictions therefore face some denigration as a less intellectual product.[15]

For psychology, the suggestion is that different species of fiction elicit different cognitive processes and behaviours in the consumer in order to engage with them. Academic and scholarly tradition encourages literary fiction to be read deeply, consideringly, and that it be reflected upon later. By contrast, popular fictions can presumably be consumed passively, and largely without critical reflection.[16]

However, some theorists refute this. Jennifer Barnes, for example, argues that popular fictions can and frequently are consumed with a deeply critical engagement equivalent to what is expected of literary fictions.[17] This is shown by the prevalence of 'fandom' culture in which popular texts are treated seriously. Barnes' explanation for this is that popular fictions encourage the sort of emotional investment in fictional characters and narratives that is emblematic of fandom, and this is the impetus for fans to engage in critical analysis of their favoured fictions as though they were literary by design. Fans form parasocial relationships with fictional characters in the way many people form parasocial relationships with celebrities.[18] In short, fans look deeply into their favourite fictions because they care so much about them. Additionally, popular fictions can garner this deep level of engagement because consumers often identify with the characters: they see similarity between themselves and the characters and this fosters emotional investment in the fiction overall.[19]

I would like to explicitly suggest that the distinction between 'literary fiction' and 'popular fiction' is an elitist one. As mentioned, institutions with a lot of social power

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[15] It should be noted that many of the studies which use this terminology deal exclusively with fictions in the form of written text.

[16] Castano and Kidd, "Reading," 1.

[17] Jennifer L. Barnes, "Imaginary Engagement, Real-World Effects: Fiction, Emotion, and Social Cognition," *Review of General Psychology* 22, no.2 (2018): 129-130.

[18] Barnes, "Imaginary Engagement," 130.

[19] Ibid.

preference the former. 'Popular fiction' is also clearly used as a pejorative in many circumstances, with much research taking literary fictions to be more meritorious and deserving of exploration. And the distinction is not substantiated with clear definitions or evidence of these two emergent categories, but appears in psychological literature as a repeated rule, entrenched in any practise of enquiring about fictions.

In such an approach, theorists run the risk of unreasonably denigrating some fictions as 'less than' — particularly fictions which have cultural significance for marginalised communities, whose populations are often prejudicially judged as 'unscholarly.' By perpetuating this distinction, psychology (and the philosophical predecessors that contributed to this approach) are at real risk of, firstly, missing important information in the course of research, and secondly, precluding certain populations from receiving due consideration in that research.

As such, to avoid those very risks I will be considering fictions wholesale. Since my focus in this thesis is on fictions as sources of knowledge, including for the marginalised, I will resist making distinctions between fictions based on perceived aesthetic merit: I will consider their value to be epistemic and ethical. Further, where I specify 'popular' fictions, it is purely to highlight the extent of their dissemination to the public. My inquiry will be open to fictions of all types.

Neuroscientific background

Accepting that fictions are engaged with through the imagination, a mental faculty, and if the brain is the physical seat of the mind, then it is due diligence to consider what science tells us about the *brain* and fictions.

In neuroscience, studies of neural correlates (which parts of the brain 'light up') during engagement in fiction are largely focused on the consumption of *written* fiction. There is comparatively little analysis of engagement with audiovisually presented fictions such as

film and television, stage productions, or purely audible fictions presented in podcasts, radio shows, and audiobooks, or more besides. As one might expect, then, the ability to comprehend written fictions is inextricably tied with the language-processing areas of the brain. A temporo-parietal dorsal pathway enables grapheme-to-phoneme conversion: the translation of letters seen on a page to sounds thought in the head. This allows consumers of fiction to cognitively access the language in which the fiction is presented. Importantly, good functioning in these areas of the brain is essential for "ludic literary reading" [20] — reading for pleasure. Thus, subjects with poor cognitive function in the language areas of the brain may have functionally or qualitatively poorer experience of fiction. My eventual account of engaging with fictions therefore comes with the caveat that it may not describe the experience of subjects whose mental access to fictions is hindered by cognitive limitations.

In neuroscience research, the comprehension of fictions at the level of *cognition* is tied to engagement with fictions in the sense of emotional investment or *'aesthetic* appreciation.' Neuroscience is yet to agree on the evolutionary origins of aesthetic appreciation. The Panksepp-Jakobson Hypothesis posits that evolution at no point necessitated the development of a designated 'art' section of the brain in which aesthetic appreciation takes place, but rather this mental process is annexed to several other areas of the brain whose functions lend themselves to aesthetic appreciation.[21] Particularly, this hypothesis links the aesthetic appreciation involved with consuming fiction to the ancient emotion circuits of the brain that human beings share with most mammals. For my purposes, the lesson here is that the experience of consuming fiction may be inherently emotional even at the physical, neuronal level; neuroscience corroborates the testimony of many who say they have been emotionally moved by fictions.

Engagement with fiction also occurs in the same areas of the brain that are activated when a subject is at-rest with their mind 'wandering.'[22] The (pre)/cuneus and anterior

[20] Arthur M. Jacobs and Roel M. Willems, "The Fictive Brain: Neurocognitive Correlates of Engagement in Literature," *Review of General Psychology* 22, no.22 (2017): 148.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid, 150.

medial prefrontal cortex constitute areas of the Default Mode Network (DMN), to which our idling brain-processes 'default' when we are not actively and intentionally engaged in an absorbing task.[23] This is where in the brain daydreaming is thought to occur. When a subject is immersed in a fiction, these areas are active. The commonality is due to these areas being responsible for *inferential model building*; that in the absence of information necessary to comprehend a situation, these areas fill in the gaps. As noted from psychology, the ability to sufficiently 'fill in the gaps' is necessary to comprehending fictions that are presented obscurely. The DMN, because of inferential model building, is also the site at which we *simulate* fictional detail and is therefore crucial to the psychological benefits of rehearsal for actual life. It is suggested that this adds to the affectivity of fictional engagement, providing partial explanation for how we are moved by fictions. Thus, we begin to see a cohesive multidisciplinary picture of our engagement with fictions.

Instructively for my inquiry, there is little (or perhaps even nothing) from neuroscience to suggest that our brains perceive fictions in strict quarantine away from *knowledge*. Imagination is certainly involved, and the medium in which a fiction is presented (like written language) affects its uptake in the brain. But there is no contradiction from neuroscientific evidence to my claim that fictions have a role in our knowledge practices. If anything, the association between engagement with fiction and default networks may even support it.

Walton

I'd like to close this first section by acknowledging my debt to Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Several aspects of Walton's approach to fiction have received critical examination. Yet, Walton's work on fiction has been and still is hugely influential. It has informed my work in this thesis.

Walton's characterisation of fictions aims at reconciling aesthetic and metaphysical

[23] Ibid, 150.

concerns where they are usually separated in the literature of philosophy of language. According to Walton, fictions are expressed in propositions, which are analogous to the factive propositions that we encounter in traditional knowledge claims.[24] As such, fictional propositions can be 'fictionally-true' and 'fictionally-false' in the same way a factual proposition can be true or false. The divergence, however, comes from the fact that fictional propositions are not describing the actual world, but a fictional world. For Walton, a fictional world is a technical category: it is the total set of fictional propositions which describe it. A fictional world does not have to be fully articulated or explored, a set comprising of a single fictional proposition is enough to describe a fictional world.

As such, Walton's account asserts that even abstract works of art and forms of media that are not immediately intelligible to us, so long as they are able to communicate a fictional proposition, can comprise a fiction. We are familiar with the idea that we encounter fictions in works like film, television, and literature, but there are undoubtedly many forms of fictional text with which I, for example, am unfamiliar, and other media forms that I might be tempted to assume are fictional but are not.[25]

It is largely accepted in philosophy that fictions are imagined, and that we do not 'commit' to a fictional proposition in the way that we do to a factive belief. On Walton's account, too, we consider truth/falsity propositions through rationality, whereas, if we are aware a proposition is *fictional*, we engage with it understanding that it does not describe the actual world, and therefore we use our imagination. That is the central character of a fiction: "What is true is to be believed, what is fictional is to be imagined."[26] For Walton, rationality as it considers factual truth, and imagination as it considers fictional truth, are discrete kinds of mental process: neither better than the other, structurally similar, and often overlapping in our conscious experience.[27]

Cohering with the insights from other disciplines, Walton also suggests that imagining

[24] Walton, *Mimesis*, 35.

[25] For example, that the Dreaming stories of Indigenous Australians should not be conceptualised as 'stories' in the sense of fictional stories.

[26] Walton, *Mimesis*, 10.

[27] Ibid, 42.

fictions, and 'games of make-believe' have benefits to our overall development, functioning, and navigation of the world. Through imagining fictions, we rehearse circumstances which we may encounter in the world and gain provisional insight to ourselves and others.[28] Imaginings and make-believe have "a profound role in our efforts to cope with our environment."[29]

On the one hand, I will be utilising some core points from Walton's account in the course of this thesis. 1) I will take it as given that fictions are imagined. 2) And, I will agree that we do not engage with fictions in the same way as truth claims. 3) I will also not be putting restrictions upon what type of texts may contain fictions, though my examples may be dominated by film and literature. 4) And of course, I will also aim to show that fictions have functional utility to our experience of the actual world.

On the other hand, I will have to diverge from Walton's account at some points. 1) Though fictions are imagined, I am particularly interested in elucidating the internal mechanisms of how we imaginatively engage with them, whereas Walton asserts that an intuitive understanding of how we imagine is a sufficient basis for his account.[30] 2) Though we do not take fictions to be making factive truth claims, I will be trying to show that fictions provide us with resources for a *kind* of genuine knowledge. 3) Though I will try to avoid cultural hegemonies of what 'counts' as a fiction, material elements of texts which contain fiction will be crucial to the functioning of those internal mechanisms of engagement, so the text itself cannot be totally left behind. 4) While fictions can be useful for navigating the world, I will be particularly interested in pushing the discourse further to discussing ethical implications and the potential for fictions to harm.

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[28] Ibid, 35.

[29] Ibid, 12.

[30] Ibid, 19.

2. CONTRASTING VIEWS

I have shown in the introduction to this thesis that fictions are often used for educational purposes, and hinted at a broader wealth of testimony regarding fiction's effect. Now, having identified parameters for how to proceed from existing academic literature, it is worth revisiting this point of *testimony*, and expanding upon what is popularly believed about fictions and their function.

As an aside, to precisify my usage of 'popular' I defer to Stuart Hall, who characterises 'the popular' as a feedback loop, comprising a constantly shifting set of endorsements made by the general population, which dominant culture and its institutions are constantly trying to identify, influence and benefit from.[31] While this power struggle favours dominant culture because of its overwhelming resources, there are at times successful resistance and "moments of supersession."[32] I am partial to this definition given discussions of differential power dynamics that will occur later in this thesis. 'Popular fictions' therefore denotes fictional works which have received broad dissemination and uptake, in flow with these shifting endorsements generated by power relations.

When it comes to popular, public opinions on the impact of fictions, much like in academia there is not a consensus. In this section, I will outline and compare two popular views regarding fiction's impact in the world.

Captive Consumer View (CCV)

On one side, even though we are usually aware that a piece of media we consume, or a story we are told, is fictional — and therefore describing a fictional world, not our own world — many people nonetheless report that their or others' engagement with fiction has affected their lived experience. There is a seemingly paradoxical 'spill-over' from fictional

[31] Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," in *Cultural Resistance Reader,* ed. Stephen Duncombe (Verso 2002), 189.
[32] Ibid, 187.

world to actual world.

Often, the effect reported is an emotional one. Recalling the philosophical problem of how we are *moved* by fictions, there is ample testimony from consumers of fiction to support that it does happen. Our experiences with fiction can appear deeply *affective*, seeming to cause a range of emotional responses, and either confirmation of, or affront to, our moral sensibilities. For example, screenwriter Phoebe Waller-Bridge told the *New York Times*:

> "I definitely started walking like a badass while reading Lisbeth Salander. I was horrified yet set alight by the brutal amorality of Sebastian Dangerfield from J. P. Donleavy's 'The Ginger Man,' and I'll never quite shake the impact of Cheryl Glickman from 'The First Bad Man,' by Miranda July. Humbert Humbert in 'Lolita' was the most unforgettable, uncomfortable relationship I've had with a character I can remember."[33]

In contrast to philosophical literature, however, popular accounts of engagement with fiction are additionally concerned with the impact fictions have on broader society, particularly the ethical impacts. That is, they engage macrolevel issues. When there is a trend among widely disseminated fictions to usually represent dominantly situated social groups — people who are white, able-bodied, heterosexual, and so on — marginalised consumers of fiction keenly feel that they are excluded.

> "In all of my reading and book devouring, not once did I read a book that featured a black girl or woman. There were no black girls slipping into fantastical worlds and saving prophesied kings. There were no dark-skinned girls facing down their serial killer boyfriends or black women falling in love with their millionaire bosses… Magic, love, and heart-stopping action just didn't happen for black girls. We didn't exist in those spaces, in those books. It was an apartheid of a different kind, a literary

[33] "Phoebe Waller-Bridge Loves Antiheroines. Of Course." *The New York Times,* November 21, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/21/books/review/by-the-book-interview-phoebe-waller-bridge.html

> genocide for black women, and by extension, an apartheid of the imagination. By reading those books, I began to believe that those things also didn't and couldn't exist for me."[34]

Here Ireland demonstrates that there are real harms that marginalised peoples experience when the gamut of fictions available to them do not attend to them. Firstly, because the fiction is not reflecting in the fictional world what is true-of or true-for the marginalised person; what some might call 'good representation.' And secondly, by restricting a marginalised person's possibilities to partake in various imagined adventures and 'games of make-believe'.[35]

Moreover, our imaginative experiences accessed through fictional engagement appear to be constricted by popular fictions not including us. This is particularly relevant to young people in a critical time of self-identity formation. In a survey on youth engagement with media, Arizona highschooler Dazhane Brown said: "If you see people who look like you and act like you and speak like you and came from the same place you come from… it serves as an inspiration."[36] And logically, the inverse is true: an absence of fictional subjects like oneself contains no inspiration. To ensure imaginative experiences are expansive, it is a common practise for libraries to highlight books with diverse characters and narratives, compiling reading lists of such texts for the public or for librarians to circulate amongst themselves so they can be prepared for requests.[37] So, Ireland's experience is not a unique one, but describes a broader discontent with the lacking availability of diverse fictions, and the view that such bereavement can be genuinely harmful.

When this restriction or expansion of imaginative possibilities occurs as a widespread

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[34] Justina Ireland, "An Apartheid of the Imagination," *Story Magazine,* July 11, 2016. https://www.storymagazine.org/an-apartheid-of-the-imagination.

[35] Walton's phrase.

[36] Rewan Elbaba, "Why on-screen representation happens, according to these teens," *PBS News Hour,* November 14, 2019. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/why-on-screen-representation-matters-according-to-these-teens.

[37] Dawn Abron, "Diversity YA Life: Diverse Science, Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror," *The Hub: Young Adult Library Services Association,* August 31, 2015. https://www.yalsa.ala.org/thehub/2015/08/31/diversity-ya-diverse-science-fiction-fantasy.

trend, we see prominent public discussion of how fictions influence society. For example, political theorists and players have historically been oft-concerned with the influence of fictions on the public's opinions. In 1992, then Vice President Dan Quayle criticised the sitcom *Murphy Brown* for glorifying single motherhood, which he believed contributed to the erosion of traditional American values. The ensuing uproar was swift,[38] but the most interesting thing for this thesis is the fact that an elected leader publicly committed to the claim that a fiction could so greatly influence people's actions in the world. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that fiction does influence belief systems such as political opinions:[39]

> "Fictional media often contain socially or politically relevant topics, themes, plots, dialogue and imagery. People watch fiction to be entertained, but they may do so with an eye toward accessing distant—but realistic—places, people; and situations."[40]

In order to control or shape this access, some governments and institutions censor fictional media. This could be schools and libraries banning books. For example, the picture book *And Tango Makes Three* in which two male penguins bond and are given an orphaned penguin chick to raise (based on true events) was banned from 5 US schools in 2021.[41] It could also be governments banning films, as the Kuwaiti Ministry of Information did to the film *Barbie* this year.[42] Banning books and other forms of fictional media is often a feature of increasing government control over the population (to the degree that it inspires further fictions featuring this practice in the fictional world, such as *Fahrenheit 451*, *1984*, or *V for Vendetta*).

In the decades after the Quayle scandal, the popularisation of identity-based analysis

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[38] Diana Mutz and Lilach Nir, "Not Necessarily the News: Does Fictional Television Influence Real-World Policy Preferences?" *Mass Communications and Society* 13, no.2 (April 2010): 196.

[39] Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel, "The Implications of Fictional Media for Political Beliefs," *American Politics Research* 41, no.1 (2013): 122. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X12453758.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Jennifer Martin, "The 50 most banned books in America," *CBS News,* November 10, 2022. https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-50-most-banned-books-in-america/2.

[42] "Kuwait bans Barbie movie as Lebanese minister calls for action," August 10, 2023. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/10/kuwait-bans-barbie-movie-as-lebanese-minister-calls-for-action-over-film.

has provided new language with which to examine fictions and politics. For example, The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Southern California (USC) have each conducted extensive data research into the representation of marginalised communities in fictional audiovisual media like television and film.[43] Analogously, for written fictions, literary publishing houses often employ 'sensitivity readers' to check that manuscripts will not alienate marginalised peoples from their customer base.[44] Such discussion employs the term 'representation,' to describe the activity of fictional media describing fictional subjects or content which resembles and reflects subjects and content in the real world, particularly marginalised subjects. In 2016, in conjunction with the release of USC's Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity, the hashtags #OscarsSoWhite and its expanded #HollywoodSoWhite showed massive social media traffic on the topic,[45] and the #MeToo movement exposed women's exploitation in the film industry. Though these waves of awareness were mainly centred on Hollywood as an inequitable industrial complex, an off-shoot consequence of that complex is that diversity was also lacking on-screen, within the final fictional texts that constituted the 'product'.

As such, discrete texts are often criticised for having *insufficient* or *inappropriate representation* of certain identity groups. An example of *insufficient* representation would be the practise of *whitewashing*, which in the context of fiction describes when new fictions which are adaptations from previous fictions take characters who were people of colour (POC) in the source material and reinvent them as white characters or have them portrayed by white actors.[46] The films *Ghost in the Shell, Aloha,* and *Prince of Persia* were all criticised for this practise.[47] As an example of *inappropriate* representation, in 2017 was the release

[43] Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, "Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment," *Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative* (February, 2016): 1-25.

[44] Lucy Knight, "Sensitivity readers: what publishing's most polarising role is really about," *The Guardian,* March 15, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/mar/15/sensitivity-readers-what-publishings-most-polarising-role-is-really-about.

[45] Andrew Pulver, "#HollywoodSoWhite: diversity report gives damning picture of US film industry," *The Guardian,* February 23, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/feb/22/hollywood-so-white-diversity-report-us-film-industry-ethnic-minorities-lgbt-women.

[46] Tom Brook, "When white actors play other races," *BBC Culture: The Reel World,* October 6, 2015. https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20151006-when-white-actors-play-other-races

[47] Steve Rose, "Ghost in the Shell's whitewashing: does Hollywood have an Asian problem?" *The Guardian,* March 31, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/31/ghost-in-the-shells--

of the documentary *The Problem with Apu* which discussed racial stereotypes in media depictions of Southeast-Asian communities.[48] Following this, after 30 years of voice-acting the character Apu on *The Simpsons*, Hank Azaria said: "Part of me feels like I need to go to every single Indian person in this country and personally apologise."[49] These examples show a popular propensity to judge fictions not only as aesthetic works, but also on their social impact.

Some fictions are also criticised for *cumulative representation,* established over time, such as data research into *Law & Order,* which showed that the crime procedural over-represented perpetrators as female, and under-represented victims as Black, when compared to FBI nationwide statistics.[50] The concern being, that over many years of consuming the fiction, viewers may acquire skewed perceptions of how much certain groups are affected by or commit crime. This sort of influence, research suggests, results in negative mental health outcomes for young Black men in the actual world, and contributes to the kinds of biases[51] that see Black men become the most incarcerated demographic group in the US.[52] But the harm can also turn inwards, in how consumers see themselves. For example, media that depicts Black men pejoratively may reinforce those stereotypes in the self-conception of Black men in the world.[53]

The desire for representation in public outcry, therefore, seems to often be a desire for acknowledgement that marginalised subjects are present and important to one's society; that people like me exist, we have these experiences, we take up this space. And a consequent desire of that is for representation to not become *mis*representation; that

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whitewashing-does-hollywood-have-an-asian-problem.

[48] *The Problem with Apu,* written by Hari Kondabolu, directed by Michael Melamedoff (2017: truTV), Prime Video, Apple TV.

[49] Dax Shepard, "Hank Azaria," April 12, 2021, in *Armchair Expert,* produced by Dax Shepard, Monica Padman, and Rob Holysz, podcast, 1:49:06, https://armchairexpertpod.com/pods/hank-azaria

[50] John Sides, "The surprising racial and gender bias in 'Law and Order,'" *The Washington Post,* January 3, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/01/03/the-surprising-racial-and-gender-bias-in-law-and-order.

[51] *Racial and Ethnic Disparities in the Criminal Justice System*, The National Conference of State Legislatures, May 24, 2022. https://www.ncsl.org/civil-and-criminal-justice/racial-and-ethnic-disparities-in-the-criminal-justice-system.

[52] Amy L. Solomon, "In Search of a Job: Criminal Records as Barriers to Employment," *National Institute of Justice* 270 (June 2012): 43. https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/search-job-criminal-records-barriers-employment.

[53] Topos, "Media Representations and Impact," 13.

marginalised peoples are not, in general, bad, or that our presence is not a negative one.

As such, there is both a quantitative and qualitative aspect to popular opinions of 'representation' in fiction. Quantitative, because criticisms of fiction can criticise specifically the amount of representation a fictional work contains, and the amount of representation of a group in a broader collection of fictions (too little representation of marginalised people and too much of dominant social groups). Qualitative, because the inner content of the representation is relevant to ethical considerations of the fiction, such as whether the representation is stereotyping, biased, prejudicial, one-dimensional, etc.

Taking all this information together, a standout feature of our interactions with fiction seems to be that the fact they will have *some* effect is unavoidable and inevitable. There is the distinct sense that being affected by fictions is somewhat out of our control as consumers; whether that is being emotionally moved, morally confronted, imaginatively restricted, or being the subject of impoverished representation. That some institutions prohibit certain fictions also demonstrates the belief that fictions' effect does not have an 'opt-out,' as surely banning them would not be necessary. This locates one side of popular thought regarding fictions, to which I will frequently refer in the course of my inquiry, and which I will be calling the Captive Consumer View (CCV), because it is one which centrally claims that a consumer of fiction has depreciated control over the fiction's impact upon them.

The CCV is comprised of the following core claims. 1) We, as consumers, usually understand that fictions are not describing the actual world. 2) And yet, fictions affect us. They emotionally move us, they may imaginatively restrict us, they influence our understanding of ourselves and others, they affect our conduct in the actual world. 3) Further, these effects are largely out of the control of the consumer. We may stop reading a book or walk out of a cinema, but to engage with a fiction is to be affected by it. 4) These involuntary effects have secondary consequences in the actual world, owing to the way other people are also influenced by fiction, and these consequences may constitute an injustice.

View of Increased Agency (VIA)

As mentioned, however, the CCV on its own does not describe a popular consensus about the nature of fiction. There is a counter-position which many hold and which defines the other side of the field of inquiry in which I am interested. It agrees that fictions do not describe the actual world, but believes that this means fictions do not *have* to impact the actual world in any meaningful way. As a result, creators of fictions ought to be free to explore imaginative possibilities that they could not in the actual world.

Consider this excerpt from fiction author Lionel Shriver:

> "What is the purpose of literature? To shape young people into God-fearing adults who say no to drugs? To accurately mirror reality? To act as a tool for social engineering? To make the world a better place? Certainly fiction is capable of influencing social attitudes, or trying to. But the novel is magnificently elastic. Fiction is under no obligation to reflect any particular reality, pursue social justice, or push a laudable political agenda. The purpose of any narrative form is up to the author. Yet contemporary university students are commonly encouraged to view literature exclusively through the prism of unequal power dynamics—to scrounge for evidence of racism, colonialism, imperialism, sexism, the list goes on. What a loss. What a pity. What a grim, joyless spirit in which to read."[54]

In this excerpt, Shriver posits that there are two ways readers can approach their engagement with fiction. One, for Shriver, is a 'correct' or 'good' way: approaching texts in a manner which honours the purpose of the fiction as the creator intended it. The second is an 'incorrect' or 'bad' way, where readers disregard the will of the author in favour of interpreting texts according to their own social or political concerns. Whether one approach

[54] Lionel Shriver, "Writers blocked: how the new call-out culture is killing fiction," *Prospect,* February 21, 2018. https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/other/writers-blocked-how-the-new-call-out-culture-is-killing-fiction.

is better than another is not as relevant, for our purposes, as the fact that Shriver denigrating one approach while advocating another implies a juncture of *choice* on the part of consumers of fiction. That is, a consumer of fiction can purposely and deliberatively change their aims or interests when approaching engagement with a fiction, such that their interpretation of the fiction is different that it would have been with a different approach.

Beyond Shriver's two options, there is a plurality of different approaches to fiction in the field of literary critique. These conflicting methodologies are in strong competition with one another, claiming to allow the reader to arrive at the most correct or meritorious interpretation of a fiction's meaning (and therefore its potential impact). Some of these approaches emphasise authorial intent in their formula, while others elevate the role of the consumer in generating meaning.[55] Regardless, whether any of these actually identify the 'best' mode of approaching fictions is not relevant. Crucial, however, is that in advocating one approach over another – as though readers will convert – the running implication is that consumers are able to decide to *switch* approaches, based on their aims and preferences. Again, we are introduced to a consumer of fiction who is able to deliberate over and influence how the fiction will impact them.

The belief in firstly creators' and then also consumers' power to influence the effect of fictions in the world amounts to a claim that the outcome of consuming fiction — its reach 'beyond the page' — *is voluntary and intentional*. (In contrast to the CCV, in which the effect is unavoidable and inevitable). A consumer's engagement with a fiction may result in an effect that the author did not intend, but that is due to choices of the consumer. We see this argument arise when fictions are associated with extreme events, such as the rise in suicide rates after the release of *13 Reasons Why,*[56] or the stabbing a teen by her friends in sacrifice to the online cryptid Slenderman, or the four school shooter incidents linked to Stephen King's book *Rage.*

[55] See Wimsatt and Beardsley on 'Formalism' in *The Intentional Fallacy*, Roland Barthes on *the Death of the Author*, and Louise Rosenblatt on 'Reader-response' in *Literature as Exploration,* for authorial-intent-defying approaches to literary interpretation and critique.

[56] Jeffrey A. Bridge, Joel B. Greenhouse, Donna Ruch, Jack Stevens, John Ackerman, Arielle H. Sheftall, Lisa M. Horowitz, Kelly J. Kelleher, and John V. Campo, "Association Between the Release of Netflix's *13 Reasons Why* and Suicide Rates in the United States: An Interrupted Time Series Analysis," *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 59, no.2 (February 2020): 242.

Some creators — and supporters of fiction — admit to having a role in the causal chain leading to these events, in a manner suggestive that they support the CCV. King, for example, requested that *Rage* never be reprinted:

> "I… recognize the fact that a novel such as *Rage* may act as an accelerant on a troubled mind; one cannot divorce the presence of my book in that kid's locker from what he did … To argue free speech in the face of such an obvious linkage (or to suggest that others may obtain a catharsis from such material which allows them to be atrocious only in their fantasies) seems to me immoral."[57]

Note, how this is sharply juxtaposed to Shriver's position. Others, however, land more on the side that consumer agency is tantamount; that 'viewer discretion' is rightfully advised.

> "That art can upset, disgust, and even trigger is a given, but a reader's pain is no more an author's responsibility than the tragic Slender Man stabbing was the fault of Erik Knudsen, the fictional entity's creator. Artists can no more control how people feel while engaging with their work than they can prevent its egregious misinterpretation, two things which often go hand in hand…Calls for the destruction or censorship of such stories constitute a rejection of life's intrinsic complexity, a retreat into the black and white moral absolutism of adolescence, or theocracy."[58]

Part of creators' desire for this authorial freedom from criticism seems to originate from the desire to utilise fictional worlds in ways transgressive to actual-world sensibilities. As

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[57] Stephen King, "Vermont Library Conference/VEMA Annual Meeting: The Bogeyboys," Vermont Library, VEMA Annual Meeting, May 26, 1999. https://stephenking.com/works/speech/vermont-library-conference-vema-annual-meeting-the-bogeyboys.html.

[58] Gretchen Felker-Martin, "What's the harm in reading? The controversy that erupted over a recent sci-fi short story by Isabel Fall raises questions about how we encounter difficult art," *The Outline,* January 24, 2020. https://theoutline.com/post/8600/isabel-fall-attack-helicopter-moralism

Shriver states:

> "I was drawn to writing fiction in the first place because on paper I completely control my world—where I can be mischievous, subversive and perverse. Where I follow no one else's rules but my own. Where I can make my characters do and say abominations."[59]

Many creators see fiction as a *fundamentally* transgressive art form, able to be deployed in direct challenge to a deeply entrenched status quo. The *aesthetic of transgression*[60] characterises many works of fiction that are repeatedly hailed as 'classics.' Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, for example, or the iconoclastic novels of D.H. Lawrence. Indeed, Lawrence gave the novel credit for jolting consumers back into a sort of authenticity, writing, "only in the novel are *all* things given full play, or at least, they may be given full play, when we realize that life itself, and not inert safety, is the reason for living."[61] The transgression contained in the fiction is the *purpose* of the fiction, able to open all kinds of ethical and existential quandaries:

> "Transgressive satirists treat flashpoint subjects without taking any kind of moral stand and treat bizarre behaviour as if it were absolutely normal. Further, they maintain a sort of authorial anonymity that makes it difficult to extract some semblance of intent from the work to clarify its meaning as a gesture."[62]

So, part of the reason these creators resist identity-based and political criticism seems to be that accepting such criticism allows for restrictions to be placed upon their *own* imaginative games of make-believe. This echoes the concern of the CCV that consumer

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[59] Shriver, "Writers Blocked."

[60] John Haegert, "D.H. Lawrence and the Aesthetics of Transgression," *Modern Philology* 88, no.1 (August 1990): 24.

[61] DH Lawrence, "Why the Novel Matters," in *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature Volume 6: The Twentieth Century and Beyond,* ed. Joseph Black, Leonard Conolly, Kate Flint, Isobel Grundy, Don LePan, Roy Liuzza, Jerome J. McGann, Anne Lake Prescott, Barry V. Qualls, and Claire Waters (Broadview Press, 2006), 413.

[62] Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction,* 2.

imaginative experiences are curtailed by poor representation in fiction; two sides of the same coin.

The additional concern seems to be that in allowing fiction to be open to political criticism, we eliminate the possibility of transgressive works, and thereby impoverish fictions as a whole. That is, many creators take the transgressiveness to be a core feature of the best fiction, the removal of which is the mutilation of something beloved. Creators have personal, emotional stakes in preserving fiction and forwarding this counterargument to the CCV, arguably as much as consumers do in seeking diversity in fictions.

Taking this discussion together, the opposite side of this popular tension about fictions is delineated. I will be calling it the View of Increased Agency (VIA). Because, in contrast to the CCV, this is a view which asserts that the consumer has a level of intentional control over engagement with fictions. The VIA claims that: 1) fictions describe a fictional world, not the actual world. (Upon this the VIA and CCV are agreed. Generally, no one is claiming that fictions describe the actual world.) 2) The creator may have an intended purpose and therefore impact of the fiction via their authorial intention. 3) However, the consumer is able to significantly control the way the fiction affects them by choosing their approach, up to and including the rejection of the author's intention. 4) Substantial consequences of engaging with fiction are likely due to deliberate consumer deviation from authorial intent rather than the fiction itself.

3. WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON IN FICTION

As the academic background and popular testimony show, there is more going on in our engagement with fiction than just the imaginative entertainment of fictional propositions. But the question remains as to *what* is occurring internally to the fiction and the mind of the consumer. As mentioned in discussion of Walton, I am particularly interested in illuminating the internal mechanisms of how we, as consumers, engage with fictions. To do so, I will be relying upon Elisabeth Camp's account of *perspectival engagement* as the primary framework.[63] Camp claims that in order to even know *what* to imagine, the consumers of a fiction need more than sequential propositions: they need a *perspective*.

Camp's Perspectival Engagement.

According to Camp, a key element of a fiction is its *"psychological comprehensibility:"*[64] a fiction is psychologically comprehensible insofar as the consumer is *primed, by the fiction,* to imagine the content in a certain way and make interpretations and judgements of the content in a way that aligns with the creator's intention for how the consumer ought to engage with the fiction. According to Camp, someone engaged with a fiction needs to be able to *intuitively* navigate the fictional world, imagining what needs to be imagined easily without everything being pre-specified. I suggest this is aligned with the inferential model building and 'gap-filling' activity described in psychology and neuroscience. Notably, this is a sort of coherence rarely accounted for in metaphysical theories that are preoccupied with the logical coherence of fictions.

The 'priming,' Camp argues, occurs through the adoption of a *perspective,* which is intentionally crafted by an author, to ensure the imaginer[65] engages with the fiction in a

[63] Deeper consideration of Camp's account was deliberately omitted from the earlier discussion of philosophical literature in anticipation of this present attention to her work.

[64] Camp, "Perspectives," 78.

[65] Because her paper focuses particularly on written fiction, Camp uses the terms author/imaginer. As my account considers many fictional media I use creator/consumer, respectively.

desired manner.[66] The perspective, when adopted, elicits in the imaginer the disposition to interpret things in a certain way. "Readers need to cultivate an intuitive species of understanding which enables them to amplify, recall, predict, and evaluate events in the fictional world."[67] Perspectives are the means by which to cultivate this understanding.[68]

As Camp explains it, adopting a perspective involves a particular psychological participation, "Actually structuring one's thinking in certain ways."[69] On this account, a perspective is more than simply an "imagined point of view,"[70] imagistic representations (the film-like procession of imagined pictures in the mind), or a set of prescribed fictional propositions to be imaginatively entertained. It is understood more as a reflexive mode of interpretation appropriate for certain agents in response to certain things. Camp says:

> "A perspective is an open-ended disposition to notice, explain, and respond to situations in the world — an ability to 'go the same way' in assimilating and responding to whatever information and experiences one encounters."[71]

This describes perspectives generally; certainly those we encounter when navigating fictional worlds, but also those we utilise in everyday life, to navigate the actual world. In fiction, specifically, perspectives are used by author and consumer alike to induce the appropriate kind of engagement with a fiction: *perspectival imaginative engagement.*

To this end, the *crafting* of perspectives is a strategic practice for authors which involves the deployment of stylistic and aesthetic choices to construct the fiction; choices guided by

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66 Camp, "Perspectives," 84.

67 Ibid, 78.

68 Recalling the neuroscientific explanation, we may suppose that this reflexive, intuitive deployment of characterisations is happening at the site of Default Mode Network, whose task in fictions is filling in gaps where information is not explicitly provided by the author, in order to make the fiction comprehensible to the consumer.

69 Ibid, 74.

70 Ibid, 78.

71 Ibid, 78.

the author's intention for how the fiction 'ought' to be experienced.[72] How well or how thoroughly a perspective is crafted impacts its uptake when an imaginer engages with the fiction.[73] As such, on Camp's account the authorial intention functions as a blueprint for 'appropriate' imaginative engagement with the fiction; in a way that, I suggest, coheres with the values of the VIA.

Perspectives, once they have been adopted, produce intuitive interpretations which Camp calls *characterisations*.[74] Characterisations structure our intuitive thinking through forming structures of association between properties and a subject. These properties can be general traits as well as highly specific, and are based on the assessed *"fittingness"*[75] of the properties to the subject. As an example, Camp cites her characterisation of American football quarterbacks, wherein they are fittingly associated with the general feature of being natural leaders, and the specific feature of a 'square jaw'.[76] Further, a characterisation structures intuitive thinking about the subject by setting properties in relief from one another based on the perceived 1) *prominence,* and 2) *centrality* of certain properties over others.[77] These structures are holistic, in the sense that the properties bear relations to one another; one property changing its position pushes and pulls others around within the structure.[78]

I propose imagining a characterisation to be like a multi-point star, with the central point the object in question, from which lines of association are drawn to properties deemed fitting for the subject.[79] From our point of view some properties are in the foreground where others are in the background, some are in the central field of vision where others are peripheral.

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72 Ibid, 85.

73 Ibid, 89.

74 Ibid, 79.

75 Ibid, 80.

76 Ibid, 79.

77 Ibid, 80.

78 Ibid, 81.

79 There are certainly going to be other, equally apt, ways to visualise this

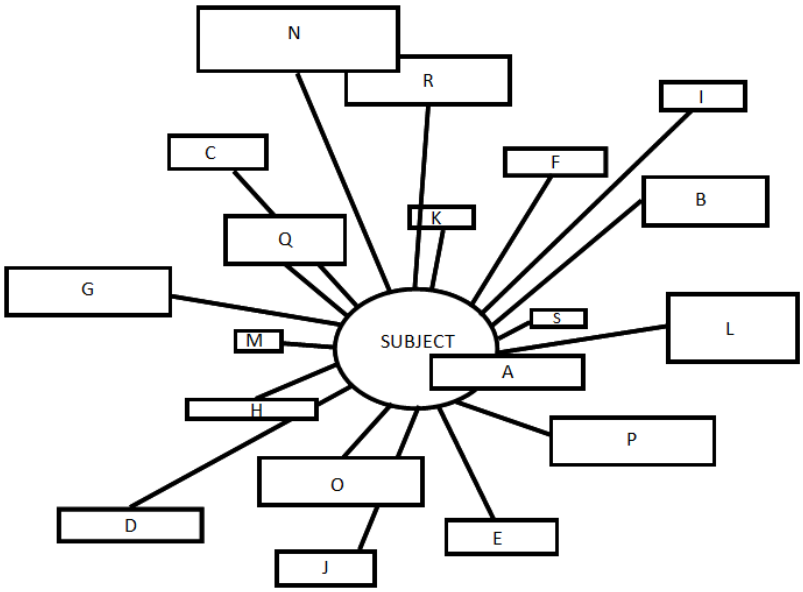


Fig. 1: possible visual representation of a characterisation

Prominent features are, "more initially noticeable and quicker to recall."[80] That is, prominent relative to the standing point of view of the agent. A certain property of a subject is prominent in terms of how much they 'jump out' to the agent - we can visualise this as properties being more toward the foreground or background in space relative to the central subject. Prominence is dependent on the agent's assessment of the subject rather than a property being fixedly prominent to a subject vis-a-vis it being that subject. In the diagram, property *A* is certainly prominent, obscuring as it does the line of sight to the subject in the middle of everything. Property *O* is more prominent than *J*, as its comparative size implies it is more in the foreground. Property *R* is more prominent than *K*, but less prominent than *N*, and so on. Ambiguity as to how some properties relate to one-another is also built-in, as it certainly will be in the experience of a characterisation. Importantly, were we to view the subject from another vantage point in space — from a different perspective — we would perceive other features as more prominent than from this vantage.

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[80] Elisabeth Camp, "Perspectives and Frames in Pursuit of Ultimate Understanding," in *Varieties of Understanding: New Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology,* ed. Stephen R. Grimm, (Oxford University Press, 2019), 20.

Please note: in future abbreviated footnotes, "Perspectives and Frames in Pursuit of Ultimate Understanding," will be referred to as "Frames," to avoid conflation with "Perspectives in Imaginative Engagement with Fiction."

Centrality is a little harder to represent. The assumption of the diagram would be that the properties closest in spatial proximity to the subject are the most central, as the subject itself is certainly the 'centre' - both of our focus and of the represented three-dimensional space. But centrality, according to Camp, is more about how the property relates to the other properties of the subject; it describes how entrenched the property is in a characterisation owing to its enmeshment with other associative properties. From this, characterisations derive their holism. Thus, another dimension to the diagram:

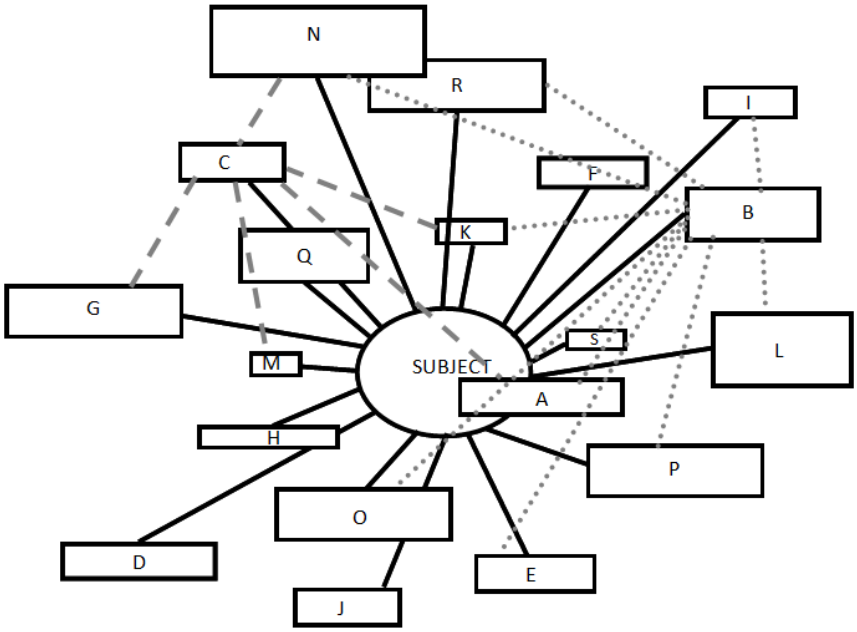


Fig. 2: Diagram with centrality represented

In this figure, for readability, we can only see the centrality relations of property *C* and property *B*. Note that property *B* has more lines of relation to other properties of the subject than *C* does, and as such, we may judge that property *B* has greater centrality to the subject, and property *C* has less centrality. We can see centrality as describing how important or necessary the feature is to understanding the subject overall, as it has all these integral associative connections to other features. An alteration to the position of property *B* would have a greater impact than an alteration to property *C*, as *B*'s plenitude of associative relations means it would impact more of the other properties; the holistic push-pull. Conversely, other features in the structure cannot be noticed and thought of without pulling in the highly central feature, by association.

Camp argues that characterisations influence a subject's emotional responses and judgements, particularly moral judgements: "people's intuitive characterisations are closely intertwined with their actual emotional and evaluative responses, and depend heavily on how the represented situation is presented."[81] Some accounts call this interplay the *normative triangle*.[82]

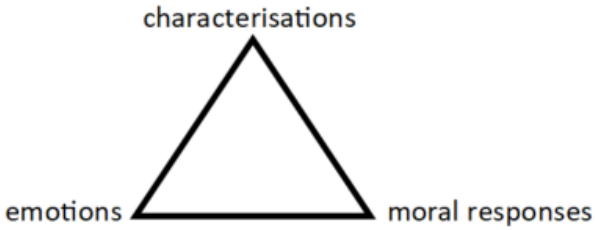


Fig. 3: the normative triangle

When an imaginer adopts a perspective and its characterisations, it is a standpoint from which to interpret the fictional world. As such, which properties are given prominence and centrality in the characterisations can affect the imaginer's subsequent interpretations. This in turn affects the emotional responses and judgements that the imaginer makes regarding the fiction.

Importantly, on Camp's account, adopting a perspective and applying its constituent characterisation does not mean the agent *endorses* the characterisation as correct in its assignment of properties.[83] Rather, as mentioned, the commitment of the agent to the characterisation is a judgement of fittingness, which is to say that associating property *y* with object *x* may be appropriate for *x* but the imaginer does not assert that it is essential to *x*. *X* can still be *x* even if *y* is not present. For example, a quarterback may have no particular leadership aspirations, and a rounded jaw. This is why, when we encounter subjects which defy their stereotypes, it does not discount the subject from being what it is, but we may

81 Camp, "Perspectives," 81.

82 Ibid, 82.

83 Ibid, 88.

think it is a special circumstance.[84] We take it as *un*characteristic. The metaphor of 'trying on' a perspective is apt, here, as a consumer deploying a characterisation is doing so *provisionally*. That is, just because a consumer in the course of imaginative engagement with a fiction imagines something that in the actual world would meet moral reprove, does not mean they believe or endorse it. After all, as we saw from discussion of the VIA, often creators craft fictions with an intention to transgress everyday moral sensibilities.

There are, however, instances where consumers of fiction do not wholly adopt the perspective, or deploy the characterisation according to the intention of the author. Camp describes two species of this rejection of perspective: *imaginative resistance*, and *disparate response*.

Imaginative resistance is a pre-existing concept in philosophy where an imaginer of fiction either cannot or refuses to imagine the content a creator of fiction has set down to be imagined.[85] Often this is because the fiction conflicts morally or ideologically with deeply held beliefs of the imaginer; these beliefs become a barrier to imagining the fictional content prescribed. For example, when reading *Ethan Frome* I could not help but sympathise with Zeena and hold her in positive regard, though she is depicted unfavourably and as an antagonist. Though Edith Wharton leveraged many choices in crafting a perspective which would dispose me to characterise Zeena with her negatively-valenced traits prominent and central, my bias to be concerned for the conditions of women brought other features to the foreground — her lack of agency, opportunity, safety, and her social isolation — which elicited in me a sympathetic response. Thus, I did not imaginatively engage with the fiction according to the author's intention, I resisted it.

Disparate response, by contrast, is Camp's term for where a consumer is *so* effectively primed by the crafting of the fiction that they imagine things they would not entertain under everyday circumstances, or they fail to pay attention to things they ordinarily would.[86]

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84 Ibid, 80.

85 Ibid, 73.

86 Ibid, 74.

> "Thus, I find it funny rather than cruel that the Three Stooges bop each other over the head with heavy implements. I find the events in a Stephen King novel thrilling rather than disgusting. And I root for Scarlett O'Hara to get her man and her mansion rather than to emancipate her slaves."[87]

As such, we can begin to see how engaging with the transgressive fictions described earlier is not evidence or grounds for a moral reprove against the imaginer, as perspectival imaginative engagement has this quality of provisional, temporary uptake, resulting in reflexive, dispositional judgement.

Camp argues that it is perspectival imaginative engagement which can explain both imaginative resistance and disparate response. These phenomena, which are each other's inverse, originate from the same set of circumstances: a tense interplay between the authorial intention and the imaginer's ordinary dispositions. This is largely compatible with the interplay between creators and consumers that we saw in popular views of fiction, but in contrast to the CCV or the VIA, this is not a moral issue on Camp's account. Where the VIA criticises consumers rejecting authorial intent as a failing, and the CCV upbraids creators for creating harmful perspectives (or none at all, for certain groups) Camp's focus is the competency of crafting a fiction. A creator offers a fiction with an intended way to imagine it, and the consumer resisting that prescription is likely due to the fiction being crafted insufficiently to induce the right perspective in the consumer.

However, there is another aspect — some murky waters — around this idea of consumer agency in perspectival imaginative engagement that will be important for my purposes. Camp's account describes perspectives as dispositional and reflexive.[88] Crucially, this means consumers of fiction are able to deploy perspectives with little conscious administrative effort. That is, not every fictional proposition is held up to the light and accepted or rejected in the process of consuming fiction. Part of the process is cognitively automated. "Because it involves actual patterns of attention and response, adopting a

[87] Ibid, 74

[88] Ibid, 78.

perspective is partly but not entirely under one's voluntary control."[89] The concession that control over enacting these patterns is only partly voluntary will be crucial for this thesis. The partial *in*voluntariness is a potential site at which I can find explanation for how fictions can impact us even without our conscious knowledge, and in a manner that extends beyond disparate response, into epistemic practices.

Partial voluntariness — as I am calling it, derived from Camp's quote — is consistent with both the VIA and the CCV. Recall the VIA's claims that consumers have some control over how they interpret fictional texts by adhering to or deviating from the creator's intention. Under Camp's perspectival engagement, that can be true insofar as consumers are able to influence the deployment of perspectives, consciously resisting elements of the author's prescriptions. Conversely, the seemingly inevitable emotional and cognitive effects of consuming fiction described in the CCV may occur in the space where perspectives are dispositional, reflexive, and therefore involuntary.

While Camp's account focuses largely on literature, perspectival imaginative engagement can be applied to the full range of fictions with which humans engage. Watching a play or film, hearing a song, the retelling of mythological stories, even small fictions like 4-second advertisements in between YouTube videos — all these fictions offer the consumer a perspective to adopt. Presumably, different forms of fictional media will have their own parameters and stylistic tools for being 'well' crafted - a novel would not be concerned with stage lighting, for example - and therefore how to sufficiently support the consumer's adoption of the perspective.

'Stickiness'

Adoption of a perspective through engaging with a fiction is largely provisional. Camp describes it as 'trying on' a perspective,[90] in a similar sense to walking a mile in someone

[89] Ibid, 74.

[90] Ibid, 93

else's shoes., In the popular testimony there is a sense of living vicariously through the experience of a fiction.

According to Camp, perspectives in fiction can be designed for 'tourism' or for 'exportation.'[91] This is an extension of Tamar Szabó Gendler's claims that fictional truths "clamour for exportation."[92] As Gendler discusses, sometimes it is explicitly the creator's intention that some learning or moral growth takes place in the consumer — growth which will then affect their interaction with the real world outside of their engagement with the fiction. Thereby has the consumer of the fiction 'exported' lessons from the fiction to the actual world. Gendler claims that where a creator is too obvious about this moralising intention, a consumer may wilfully resist the fiction, in order to avoid adding the challenging fictional truth to their conceptual repertoire.[93] As though by merely entertaining the proposition, it can develop in the mind into a genuine belief about the world.

Camp uses tourism to describe the inverse case, where a fiction (or elements of it) is *not* crafted with the creator's intent to affect change beyond the time that someone engages with the fiction. Instead, its content is intended only for passing visits, wherein the imaginer is a 'tourist' to the fiction.[94] On this picture of export and tourism, some fictions may have the carry-over effects to the actual world — such as the effects propaganda or parables induce — precisely because they were designed to do so. And some fictions can be mere entertainment, whose emotional or cognitive impact are quarantined to the time with which we engage with them, again owing to the intention of the creator. Initially, this seems quite harmonious with the claims of the VIA; that knock-on effects of fiction are a matter of opting in or out of the author's intention.

However, as I suggest and Camp acknowledges, once tried on, a perspective is not always easy to take off again."[95] There seems to be something about adopting a perspective that makes the influence of that perspective endure past the time that the consumer

[91] Ibid, 93.

[92] Gendler, "Puzzle," 78.

[93] Ibid, 77.

[94] Camp, "Perspectives," 93.

[95] Ibid, 94.

engages with the fiction. "And even when we try on perspectives temporarily, in the context of fiction, doing so may have lingering cognitive effects."[96] This is, for one thing, because perspectives involve the partial voluntariness I described — we are not consciously opting-in at all times. For another thing, perspectives enduring beyond engagement is exacerbated by the *affective* quality of the characterisations the perspective generates. Characterisations are "informationally, experientially, and affectively rich, integrating as much data as possible into an intuitive whole."[97] We know affect impacts memory; if an experience generated strong emotional responses, it is more likely to be remembered later and remembered vividly. As such, that characterisations can have this affective quality suggests they, too, can have lasting cognitive impact, even beyond the time we encounter them while engaging with fictions.

I will refer to this endurance as the perspective's *stickiness*.[98] Much like gum on the pavement stepped on by a shoe, if someone adopts a perspective half-heartedly or if it was poorly crafted in the first place, they may come away from it unchanged, but effective crafting and proper adoption — a firm press — will see the perspective 'stick' and continue on with them. That which a certain perspective deems important, relevant, or worthy of attention may be things the subject continues to look for in the world. As Camp says,

> "In many cases, we drop these characterising dispositions soon after we close the book. But often, there is at least some lingering effect. And sometimes, with or without realising it, these subtleties ramify to alter our interpretive judgements of analogous situations in reality."[99]

That some consumers resist imagining content which is contrary to their ordinary values, is, if anything, in support of the notion of stickiness: some consumers anticipate, however unconsciously, that fictions can impact our conceptual repertoire beyond our say-so, and so try to avoid it altogether.

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[96] Ibid, 74.

[97] Camp, "Frames," 20.

[98] I did not know about Malcolm Gladwell's use of 'stickiness' in his business theory book, *The Tipping Point*, when I started to think of perspectives in this way. The similarity in concept is coincidental.

[99] Camp, "Perspectives," 94.

Thus, from Camp's account we now have a nuanced account of perspectival engagement with fiction: adopting finely crafted perspectives that is only partially voluntary, which leads us to make reflexive judgements within the fiction in the form of characterisations, and from which it can be difficult to extricate ourselves owing to 'stickiness'.

The Socially Situated Knower

While Camp's framework of perspectival imaginative engagement is able to elucidate the cognitive mechanisms at work in consuming fiction, it is not an exhaustive account. Perspectival imaginative engagement is necessarily a microlevel explanation: it explores only the internal, mental goings-on of the creator-fiction-consumer relationship. I will show, however, that perspectival engagement as a framework can be utilised at the macrolevel to consider fictions in the broader contexts which consumers inhabit. Expanding the account in this way is necessary to then understanding how fictions contribute to our knowledge practices.

That much enquiry into fictions focuses on the microlevel is a default of usual philosophical methodology: enquiry tends to take human beings as primarily rational individuals. As Miranda Fricker puts it: "In the humanities it is distinctive uniquely of philosophy that it is centrally concerned with rational idealizations of human beings and their activities."[100] These idealisations can be reductive of human beings, missing that we are deeply complicated, oft-times cognitively messy creatures. Further, in overstating the power of an individual's rationality, philosophy may overlook how much the world around us influences our beliefs and decisions. Moreover, much philosophical exploration of fiction is focused on the atomistic fictional proposition – what it aims at describing, whether it is a matter of rationality or imagination, etc — because it assumes this "generic knower of

[100] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), vii.

classical epistemology"[101] to be the typical individual who engages with fiction. If we take consumers of fiction to be mainly rational thinkers, it justifies examining fictions only on their propositional content, as though our engagement with them occurred independently of the broader context.

As we have established, however, there is much more happening with fictions than imagining individual propositions: creating and consuming fictions are not activities that occur in a vacuum. If we 'zoom out', we see that creators and consumers alike are concerned with the macrolevel personal, moral, and sociopolitical impacts certain fictions may have. Thus, the broader contexts which everyday creators and consumers inhabit are going to be an additional, crucial dimension to understanding our engagement with fictions: this can be described as their *situatedness.*

In critical psychology, situatedness is the theory that the mind is: "ontologically and functionally intertwined within environmental, social, and cultural factors."[102] Situatedness has three key principles: that the mind is (1) embodied, (2) embedded, and (3) extended.[103] Firstly, the mind is *embodied*; rejecting dualism, the situated mind exists in and because of a body, which is, at any one time, located in a specific point in time and space. Therefore, the mind is in contact with particular stimuli that is contingent upon this bodily spatial-temporal location. For example, I cannot right this second gaze upon the Colosseum, because I am in Australia, not Italy. Nor can I watch a gladiatorial match there, because I — and my mind — am in the modern day, not ancient Rome. Secondly, the situated mind is *embedded* into a complex social, political, cultural context. My cognition will be largely concerned with facilitating my interaction with my immediate environment. So, owing to the fact that I am here in modern Melbourne and not in ancient Rome, my cognitive activity is of a kind tailored to navigate modern Melbourne. This is a stronger claim than just that the mind attends to the world: the situated mind *cannot help but* be intertwined with the world around it. Thirdly, the situated mind is *extended* such that, as well as the mind interacting

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[101] Gaile Pohlhaus Jr, "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of 'Wilful Hermeneutical Ignorance,'" *Hypatia* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 716.

[102] Matthew Costello, "Situatedness," in *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* (New York: Springer, 2014), 1757.

[103] Ibid, 1757-8.

with the world, mental activity aims to leave artefacts of itself in the world. For example, this last claim would take Van Gogh's 'Irises' as not only a static physical work, but as an extension of Van Gogh's mind. The important insight for our purposes is the interconnectedness between the mind, the 'outside' actual world, and works emanating from the mind.

Gaile Pohlhaus Jr, in her account of wilful hermeneutical ignorance, emphasises that epistemology needs to understand knowers as situated and interdependent, in order to account for different social dimensions of our epistemic activity.[104] In a vein with Fricker, Pohlhaus describes the *classical* knower as "distinctly nonsocial"[105] in a way that feminist epistemology has attempted to remedy. On Pohlhaus' account, an agent's situatedness "refers to the situations in which the knower finds herself repeatedly over time due to the social relations that position her in the world."[106] This is consistent with at least the first two principles of situatedness under critical psychology: the epistemic agent is embodied, and that embodiment embeds them in certain spatial-temporal relation to their environment. Importantly for Pohlhaus and this thesis, situatedness means that an epistemic agent (1) develops habitual patterns of attention through experiencing repeated challenges as a result of their environment, and (2) is placed at particular junctures of social power hierarchies and structures as a result of embeddedness in their environment.[107]

We can now understand the consumer of fiction as a *situated* epistemic agent; this is crucial to explaining *why* we have the popularly disseminated fictions that we do, and *how* they may have the effects to which many attest. When engaging with a fiction, the consumer does so with a mind that is inextricably influenced by and concerned with the immediate environment that they occupy in the actual world. So, too, are creators of fictions enmeshed in their environment. As such, in theory we can trace a line from the concerns and interests an agent has owing to the conditions of their situatedness, to the fiction that they go on to create or engage with, and their subsequent reactions to them.

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104 Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing," 716.

105 Ibid, 716.

106 Ibid, 717.

107 Ibid, 716-7.

This macrolevel picture has a richness to its interpretive possibilities not offered by accounts wherein a single agent imaginatively entertains individual fictional propositions.

This immediately helps to unpack some of the disagreement between the CCV and the VIA. Creators and consumers who are differently situated in their environments will have both: different habituated patterns of attention and concern — they will mentally attend to different things in considering the same fiction — and different positions within overarching social hierarchies.

> "A socially situated account of a human practise is an account such that the participants are conceived not in abstraction from relations of social power (as they are in traditional epistemology, including most social epistemology) but as operating as social types who stand in relations of power to one another."[108]

As a result, perceived impacts of a single fiction will vary between the agents analysing them. Owing to situatedness, where Ireland is apt to notice the absence of Black girl characters in Young Adult (YA) novels, Shriver is not apt to notice the negative connotations of the sole Black female character in her novel, *The Mandibles*, being lead on a leash at one point in the narrative.[109]

Further, due to the situatedness of a creator — the patterns of attention cultivated in them by bodily existing in a specific sociopolitical and temporal context — elements of 'authorial intention' are not conscious or voluntary. What a creator chooses to do with a fiction is as subject to the habits engendered by situatedness, like biases, as other mental activity. Similarly, a situated consumer of fiction, with patterns of attention from specific contexts, potentially *cannot help but* interpret and engage with fictions in certain ways.

Situatedness is a crucial concept for this thesis as it necessitates that fictions, their

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[108] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* 3.

[109] Shriver received significant public criticism for this depiction which many see as the catalyst to her later claims of authorial freedom, as discussed pertaining to the VIA.

creators, and their consumers, be considered inextricably with their broader contexts. It is because I employ situatedness that I will be able to discuss the macrolevel concerns I identified in discussion of the philosophical background, namely, that fictions play a role in our knowledge practices. In the next section I will aim to show that fictions provide us with resources for knowledge.

4. FICTIONS AS EPISTEMIC RESOURCES

So far, I have offered a comparison of theories of fiction according to different disciplines. I have also described a key debate about fictions as comprising a Captive Consumer View (CCV) in opposition to a View of Increased Agency (VIA). I then gave an overview of Camp's perspectival engagement with fiction, and augmented the account with concepts of partial voluntariness, and perspectival stickiness. Importantly, I extended the framework to the macrolevel by establishing creators and consumers of fiction as situated agents. All this has been necessary to arrive at a point of asserting the central claim of this thesis: that we as epistemic agents use fictions to interpret and understand the world, because they provide us with *epistemic resources*. First, I will discuss what epistemic resources *are* or *can be*.

Epistemic Resources

According to Pohlhaus, epistemic resources at their most minimal description are resources with which we know and interpret the world. For resources to be things we use to know they must be used to facilitate the understanding, or interpretation of, the world. As epistemic agents we utilise them in our practices that aim at knowledge, but they are not the knowledge itself. Resources are a means to the end of epistemic activity, but they can be an end in themselves insofar as we all have a vested interest in ensuring we have 'good' resources that are adequate for interpreting whatever we encounter. Some epistemic resources are formal, others are informal.[110] Some resources are normative, others are non-normative. Pohlhaus specifically names language, concepts, and criteria as examples of *normative* epistemic resources; normative because they are systematic means of organising collective thought around a given subject.[111] This, however, (language, concepts, criteria) is nowhere near an exhaustive list of epistemic resources, and it is very much open for additions. As Pohlhaus acknowledges, there are "other sorts of epistemic activities such as

[110] Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing," 718.

[111] Ibid.

attending, perceiving, questioning, imagining, and acknowledging,"[112] which will involve other species of resources, so there is room to potentially assert fictions as a site of epistemic practice.

A 'good' epistemic resource helps us interpret the world *well*, with some correlation to experience. According to Pohlhaus, there are three key criteria of epistemic resources: (1) they are resources with which we know (2) they are collectively held and maintained, and (3) they must answer to experience.[113] If they do not properly reflect and put us in relation to experience, better resources are needed.[114] To establish that fictions provide epistemic resources, I will show that such resources fulfill the requirements Pohlhaus describes.

1) they are things with which we know

It is clear that epistemic activity is 'going on' in our consumption of fictions. We have seen this so far anecdotally, across academic disciplines, and from popular testimony. Many fictions are crafted from an authorial intent to reflect upon, critique, or educate consumers about the actual world. Orwell's *Animal Farm,* for example, is specifically aimed at generating particular interpretations of the actual world, as well as facilitating the learning of facts like revolutionary history. Of the novel, Orwell later wrote: "I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole."[115] Even though Harper Lee believed her novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* would be read by only a handful of people,[116] the story is nonetheless crafted in a way that cannot help but challenge the dominant perspectives on race and justice in the US at the time of its publication. Indeed, part of the novel's success has been attributed to its ability to indirectly explore pertinent political issues of the day.[117] These and many other fictions attempt to

[112] Gaile Pohlhaus Jr, "Varieties of Epistemic Injustice," in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice,* ed. James Kidd, Jos*é* Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017), 16.

[113] Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing," 718.

[114] Ibid, 718.

[115] George Orwell, "Why I Write," *Gangrel*, no. 4, (Summer 1946). https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/why-i-write.

[116] William Grimes, "Harper Lee, Author of 'To Kill a Mockingbird,' Die at 89," *The New York Times,* February 19, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/20/arts/harper-lee-dies.html.

[117] Ibid.

impart understanding about the actual world through fiction; they aim to make epistemic contributions.

It is worth noting that this function of literature as a teaching tool is not contingent on post-industrial approaches to education; it has been utilised for thousands of years. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was originally written in cuneiform on clay tablets in the 12th century BCE, but had existed in oral tradition since at least 2100 BCE. Archaeologists and linguists infer, from this painstaking effort to commit text to tablet, that the story had great cultural and social significance.[118] Its plot is both a sweeping adventure epic and a treatise on what makes life meaningful. So, storytelling in order to better understand the world has been a feature of humanity for millennia.

One aspect of experience that fictions may render particularly salient is our interactions with and relations to other people. As Barnes notes in psychology research:

> "There is a body of both correlational and experimental evidence consistent with the theory that engaging with fiction — particularly literary or award-winning fiction — may serve as practice for understanding the minds of others in the real world."[119]

Walton already attributes fictional games of make-believe, particularly daydreaming, as a sort of 'rehearsal' for living in the actual world.[120] I suggest that the imaginative 'trying on' of different perspectives under Camp's account, and the emotional responses it can elicit in us for fictional subjects, can be leveraged to improve understanding of other people in the actual world.

It is clear that the consumption of fictions contributes to epistemic activity. We create and interact with fictions with epistemic aims, and research supports that engagement with

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[118] Though admittedly it is unclear whether ancient Sumerian peoples took the myth to be describing actual events.

[119] Barnes, "Imaginary Engagement," 126.

[120] Walton, *Mimesis*, 34.

fiction is at least partly epistemic activity. I will note that the CCV and the VIA both have the general sense that fictions can impact our approach to the world *somehow*, but are agnostic about the nature of that impact. I am arguing that a significant part of the impact is that fictions contribute to our epistemic resources.

2) they are collectively held and maintained

For resources to be collectively held and maintained means that a community of knowers shares 'resources' — things we can use to get at knowledge — among themselves. Through the cumulative contributions of multiple individuals, the community also edits, updates, or persists in the use of those resources. As such, the way that one individual person thinks draws upon the systems and organisations of thinking which they have encountered from those around them. This social mutual reliance among epistemic agents is what Pohlhaus terms *interdependence.*[121] Interdependence is both a product and feature of situatedness: the epistemic agent is situated not only in time and place but also socially, in particular relation to other agents and whole communities.[122]

Fictional resources fulfil the requirement that epistemic resources be collectively held and maintained by an epistemic community. Firstly, fictions are distributed at a mass scale: the global distribution of televisual media like film and television shows, the international literary publishing industry, the global music industry wherein sung lyrics conjure imagined scenes, Broadway production companies, ballet companies, art galleries, and so on — these are all sites at which fictions are shared with a vast multitude of agents. Secondly, fictions are maintained by creators themselves, consumers, and consumers-turned-creators, all in their capacity as epistemic agents and within epistemic communities.

It is evident that fictional epistemic resources are collectively maintained by creators, since these industries persist in producing and disseminating fictions; and oftentimes, they

[121] In her paper, Pohlhaus dually discusses situatedness and interdependence, as equally important features of the epistemic agent. For this paper, the more relevant concept for macrolevel discussion of fictions is situatedness, and as such interdependence is discussed only insofar as it pertains to epistemic resources.

[122] Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing," 719.

produce fictions that build upon and extend the fictional worlds described by previously distributed texts, often in the form of franchises or series. For example, for the first few films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), in which the character of Natasha Romanoff appeared, her past was largely unknown to the audience and so her actions in the fiction were difficult to interpret. However, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, there are flashback scenes to her earlier life as a victim of abuse and brainwashing. This new insight to her character recontextualises how consumers might interpret her actions and character within the broader fictional world of the MCU. Thus, the creators of the fiction distributed new material to the epistemic community of consumers who engaged with that fiction, and in doing so edited, adjusted, and thereby 'maintained' the epistemic resources therein.

Epistemic communities also maintain the resources we get from fictions by revisiting them as consumers, reflecting upon them, critically engaging with them, and so on. Popular fictions, in particular, attract a lot of critical engagement from epistemic communities partially because they are so widely disseminated to a population. For example, the simultaneous 2023 release of feature films *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* — which are complete opposites in tone, theme, and aesthetic — saturated social and news media for months. The 'Barbenheimer' phenomenon is where elements of each fiction were cherry-picked by consumers to be contrasted or aligned with one another, producing new linguistic terms, symbols, and references that consumers used to discuss the world, and each other. For example, one image plotted respective Barbie and Oppenheimer viewers on an electoral map of the United States, implying interpretive links between preference for either film and political or ideological alignment.[123] Even if not directly engaging with the fictional texts themselves, many consumers did so through derivative content like memes; often, being an active member of one's society means engaging, however minutely, with the fictions that are that society's current fixation, thereby partaking in the sharing and maintenance of resources. Talking about fictions with other people, criticising or praising them, listening to the criticism or praise from other people, consuming other media about fictions like reviews — all this can be epistemic activity insofar as it consolidates the prevalence of that fiction in our repertoire of resources. Engaging in this activity can be the difference between

[123] Emmett Sandberg, "I humbly present my Barbie-Oppenheimer 2024 electoral map," *X* (formerly *Twitter*), June 29, 2023. https://twitter.com/SandbergEmmet/status/1674173810948419586/photo/1.

comprehending some situations in the actual world and having it remain obscure. For example, when one friend says another friend has "Kenergy," I need to have participated in this consolidatory activity to comprehend not only what they mean, but to judge for myself whether the second friend *really does* have "Kenergy."

So far in this thesis, the creator and consumer have been mutually exclusive. But, of course, people who create fictions also consume them, and sometimes, consumers transition to the creator role as part of the maintenance of fictional resources. Consumer engagement with fictions can mean consumers undertaking generative activity with the fiction as a basis; taking elements of the original text and producing another discrete text which the consumer intends will extend or even override the original. These 'transformative works' can be seen in the forms of fanfiction and fan art, but also in adaptations, works 'inspired by' other works, and so on. For example, Disney's *the Lion King* is a reworking of Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* and *Clueless* is a retelling of Jane Austen's *Emma.*

This transformative activity is not a function of modernity. Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, for example, features a fictionalised version of Virgil, and borrows themes and elements from history, myth, and pre-existing works (such as Cacus, the bestial son of Hephaestus killed by Hercules, in Ancient Greek myth — seen guarding thieves in the Inferno). In turn, Virgil's Roman work *The Aenid* has a titular character who is Trojan, and whose narrative journey mimics many of the features of Odysseus' journey in the Homeric poem *The Odyssey*. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, similarly, draw heavily from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Nor, it should be said, are transformative works uniquely European. For example, Park Chan-wook recontextualised the British novel *Fingersmith* into 1930s South Korea in his film *The Handmaiden.* Consumers interact with fictions by building upon them, almost as a mode of engagement.

The critical thing to note here is that in producing transformative works, elements of the original fiction are reproduced and disseminated anew among epistemic communities, allowing the persistently useful resources to be introduced to more knowers, in more

contexts. *The Lion King* was aimed at children as opposed to adults, *The Divine Comedy* introduced its medieval Christian audience to ancient myth, and *The Handmaiden* spoke to Korean history and culture rather than British. As such, the creation of transformative works is an ameliorative activity: it adds to the totality of resources of epistemic communities by transposing them from elsewhere.

Taking all this together, we can see that creators, consumers, and then consumer-creators alike undertake activity which serves to maintain the collective possession of epistemic resources from fiction. The CCV and VIA accept that creators and consumers interact with fictions in these various ways, but without the insight that it may constitute epistemic activity.

3) they must answer to experience

For an epistemic resource to answer to experience it must lead us to thinking in ways which represent the world aptly or accurately according to what we already know about it. Epistemic resources which seem to describe a world foreign to us likely cannot lead to thinking which helps us navigate this world. There is, in this, an element of recognition; matching up the content of the resource to what is true of one's experience. Many people when consuming a fiction, for example, have had an 'a-ha!' moment of seeing their experience well reflected in its content. They may even feel that they, themselves, are aptly portrayed by the fictional subject.

Answering to experience does not, however, mean that resources need only answer to the experience of the agent who utilises them. The situatedness and interdependence of the epistemic agent means the resources used and maintained by a community, must answer to what the community would judge as apt knowledge of collective experience.

> "The right standards for knowing the world well will be determined by what is salient in the experienced world itself, and what is salient in the experienced world itself will depend upon situatedness: what do I/we need

to know (or care to know) and why?"[124]

In this way, one's epistemic community can function as a 'sense check' on the resources we use to interpret the world. An epistemic agent using resources of some alien world would likely be summarily corrected by their epistemic community. As Pohlhaus notes: much like Wittgenstein's assertion that language usage is collectively regulated, so too do epistemic resources more broadly answer to the proverbial wisdom of the masses.[125] Hence the 'dependence' of interdependence: we, as knowers, rely upon this feedback to ensure our epistemic practices and behaviour are appropriate to the world. As for the 'inter-' of 'interdependence,' while we rely on the contributions of others, we also make contributions to collective resources, as members of the epistemic community which maintains them.

Importantly, one's epistemic community influences the habitual patterns of attention cultivated as a consequence of situatedness. While there are some non-profound reasons to pay attention to certain aspects of the world — like habitual concern over the weather because it can impact the enjoyment of the outdoors — others are socially loaded. Our reliance as epistemic agents on our broader community of knowers — when that community exists in a society stratified along lines of social power — means that often what our epistemic community judges as salient or worth paying attention to in the world reflects more the priorities and interests of those members of the epistemic community who hold more power.[126] Conversely, often those agents within an epistemic community who are afforded little social power in the world, are not afforded the means and opportunity to contribute resources which would render their own experiences particularly salient to the broader community. It should be said, as well, that the borders of an epistemic community can be drawn in various ways, often analogous to social group membership, and one epistemic agent can be member to multiple overlapping communities. For example, linguistic resources of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) are salient for many Black Americans, but as epistemic agents they also participate in spaces where AAVE is denigrated and they have to 'code-switch' to different resources in order to be

124 Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing," 718.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid, 718.

understood.[127]

That the resources from fiction can answer to experience is possible firstly because fiction is created by situated epistemic agents, and therefore fictions originate from minds that draw upon lived experience in their creation. Creators often use personal experience explicitly as inspiration; Kenneth Brannagh wrote the fictional story of the film *Belfast* based on his own childhood, for example. But the influence of lived experience can be more subtle. As noted in discussing situatedness, Shriver was surprised by criticisms of her depiction of a Black American character, and partial explanation for this is that her situated lived experience as a white woman did not predispose her to attend to concerns of Black American experience, such that she may have written the character differently. Owing to the fact that fictions are created by knowers in the world, fictions will inherit a minimal level of salience to experience that makes sense given the situatedness of their creator.

However, what is salient for a creator may not cohere with the experiences of a broader epistemic community; implicit in the feature that epistemic resources answer to experience is that they may be rejected if they are found wanting in this regard. And it certainly seems that epistemic agents reject fictions that misrepresent the world they have experienced, as we see from public criticism of certain fictions. The critiques of John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* as an educational tool are a prime example of epistemic agents saying to others in their epistemic community: this is not a good resource for knowing the world. Much like communities and whole industries disseminate fictions partially to contribute to resources, so too do we divest from the sharing and consumption of fictions that are deemed poor resources. For example, Disney no longer makes the film *Song of the South* available on disk or streaming services. Part of the criticism of the film is that it perpetuates racism, but another part is that it is an ahistorical, revisionist depiction of the lives of enslaved peoples known as the 'happy slave' myth[128] — it does not cohere with lived experience. To avoid the film leading to people in the world making faulty judgements, the

[127] Deric M. Green and Felicia R. Walker, "Recommendations to Public Speaking Instructors for the Negotiation of Code-switching Practices Among Black English-speaking African American Students," *The Journal of Negro Education* 73, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 435.

[128] John David Smith, "The Unveiling of Slave Folk Culture, 1865-1920," *Journal of Folklore Research* 21, no. 1 (April 1984): 51.

film and its contained resources are now inaccessible.

Importantly, though, a fiction does not need to answer to experience in its entirety to still be utilised as a resource. Fictions are often complex and will require the consumer to make many characterisations in the course of consumption. Some of the resources that may be gained in this process will be salient, others will not. *Remote* fictions whose content seems very foreign to a consumer still yield epistemic resources useful to navigating the world. Ann Leckie's *Ancillary* novel series, for example, is notable for its ubiquitous use of female pronouns for every character. The fictional world of the series is very remote from the actual world; it is science fiction, involving fictional societies and cultures unique to the series. In consuming the *Ancillary* series' fiction, the consumer adopts a perspective wherein female pronouns are used as a default, in contrast to much of the actual world. The take-away impact of this is the consumer perceiving an elasticity to pronoun usage in general. Even though the fictional world of the series is very far removed from the actual world, it still provides an epistemic resource.

"The good writers touch life often." - Fahrenheit 451

In conclusion, fictions display impacts or interactions with the actual world that are consistent with the three criteria of an epistemic resource, evident especially in the ways that people seem to undertake epistemic activity around and about fictions. The question remains, however, *what* the resource is, if it is not the fiction itself as a whole and if, as I have just implied, a single work of fiction may contain many resources. Some may contend that whatever resources we gain from fiction could be described under Pohlhaus' established list of language, concepts, or criteria. However, I suggest that these — taken separately or together — are not sufficient descriptions of the kind of resource fictions offer.

The resources we gain from fiction are not merely language. Firstly, it is not the language in which something is expressed that makes it fictional, but whether it is expressing something about the actual world or a nonactual one. So there is, on that count

alone, 'more going on' in fiction. Secondly, as we have seen from Camp's account of perspectival engagement, a knower's engagement with fiction cannot be adequately summarised as engagement with language. Language, in the sense of written or spoken word, is most often involved but is not all that is going on. Further, there are some fictions which do not include language in the traditional sense at all, such as a ballet, or a painting.[129] So, though it may be true that consuming fictions helps us to learn and consolidate language skills, language is not *the* fictional epistemic resource.[130]

Fictions provide epistemic resources that are not only concepts, either. Camp's account shows that the deployment of perspectives — and the characterisations they make us reflexively apply — is not only the use of concepts, but dispositional and structured ways of thinking. Concepts are involved, at the very least in the sense that the epistemic agent needs to grasp the properties that are being assigned to the subject of a characterisation. But, the structural setup of those properties relative to the subject and one another is also of critical importance to *understanding* the fiction.

The epistemic resources from fictions are also not criteria, where criteria form a principle for determining an object's membership to a set or category. Fictional resources, when utilised, may aid in this type of categorising activity, insofar as they increase understanding of things the knower encounters. Particularly as, according to Camp, the features which are structurally arranged in a characterisation can be diagnostic in nature, helping knowers classify the object in question as one type of thing or another.[131] However, it does not seem that the primary epistemic activity from our engagement with fictions is to accumulate criteria; there is a lot of content and phenomenological qualities to perspectival engagement which serves no purpose if our goal is criteria. Nor is categorisation the activity that we typically see consumers in the world perform in relation to fictions. We may encounter criteria in our engagement with fictions much like we do in engaging with the actual world, but criteria is not the primary epistemic resource from fiction.

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[129] Though various art forms have genre-specific semiotics used to interpret meaning.

[130] Disambiguation: I use "fictional epistemic resource" to mean an epistemic resource gained from the consumption of a fiction, and not an epistemic resource that is a fiction.

[131] Camp, "Frames," 20.

So, the epistemic resources from fictions cannot be reduced to language, concepts, or criteria; though they may involve each of these, none are adequate descriptors. As such, returning to Camp's framework, I suggest that the fictional resource is of a unique kind: the perspective and its consequent characterisations.

Where is the fictional resource?

Camp's framework of perspectival imaginative engagement with fiction depicts the crafting and consumption of fiction as cognitively generative activity: in undertaking such activity an agent is engaging perspectives and generating subsequent characterisations. That *production* occurs is obvious in the case of the creator — they are creating — but consumers, too, produce reflexive judgements in the form of characterisations. Epistemic resources, on Pohlhaus' account, are something gained, shared, and held. As such, I argue that the product of creating and consuming fictions which can undergo this custodial treatment, is a characterisation generated from its appropriate perspective: characterisation-via-perspective.

An immediate response to this may be that the epistemic resource ought to be only one or the other; either the characterisation or the perspective. Let us revisit for a moment what perspectives and characterisations are, and how they facilitate engagement with fiction. Perspectives are open-ended dispositions to interpret, attend to, and respond to encountered stimuli in certain ways (whether encountered in the actual world or in a fictional world). They 'prime' the agent to make reflexive, intuitive characterisations.[132] A characterisation, is turn, is an holistic, affectively rich, complex arrangement of properties around a subject structured by provisional judgements of fittingness, prominence, and centrality.[133] Recalling earlier mention of *Ethan Frome*, Wharton utilised stylistic and creative choices in the novel which aimed at getting readers to adopt a perspective within

[132] Camp, "Perspectives," 81.

[133] Ibid.

which the reader is much more disposed to attend to Ethan and Mattie and judge them favourably, and much less disposed to be concerned for Zeena in any way other than as an antagonist. For example, Wharton emphasises Zeena's fixation on her health, and desire to attain 'snake oil' cures. This primes readers to characterise her with properties like 'hypochondriac,' 'self-centred,' or 'irrational' fittingly structured as prominent to her as the subject. One effect of which comes later when Mattie breaks Zeena's prized pickle dish: the reader is by now primed to immediately interpret Zeena's demand that Mattie no longer stay with them as a function of her irrationality and selfishness; as *characteristic*. Such interpretation is one of many intuitive responses generated by the perspective in the course of navigating the fiction.

Characterisations seem to have particular epistemic value and are a good candidate for being *the* resource because with sufficient effort, characterisations are able to be articulated and described, conveying how certain features of a given subject are prioritised against others. Characterisations may be intuitively deployed but their logical structures are schematic. As such, it is possible to identify the particulars of a characterisation, and compare them to the particulars of another characterisation, which allows us to perform a differential analysis of alternate characterisations in relation to our cognitive goals. That is, we can point to and name the parts of a characterisation with which we do not agree, and those with which we do.

By contrast, perspectives are a more complicated and difficult to articulate part of cognition. To describe a perspective entails describing dispositional habits of attention, emotional response, contextual aspects like the way in which the perspective was tried on, and an agent's aptness to deploy a similar perspective in other scenarios. This is due to perspectives' essentially open-ended nature. Camp says that, "it is often more accurate to speak only of relative overlap and stability"[134] when contrasting perspectives, rather than absolute similarity and difference. But characterisations allow clearer comparison. We might understand this as perspectives being open-ended, quite fluid and changing, and therefore harder to pin down. Whereas characterisations, although they can be amended

[134] Camp, "Frames," 26.

and edited, can be identified from their static arrangement of features at any one time, making them particularly useful when reflecting upon epistemic impacts.

Yet, I suggest, we cannot get away from the importance of perspectives in arriving at characterisations. In a chronology of the cognition that occurs when consuming a fiction, the perspective is the precedent that *must* be adopted prior to accessing the characterisation of a given subject. That is, as the consumer, we *first* adopt a perspective and *then* deploy characterisations. Epistemic agents typically begin consuming a fiction already with tendencies to pay attention to certain things, and prioritise certain features of an subject over others, owing to their situatedness; that is, they will already make characterisations.[135] In consuming the fiction they are introduced to perspectives that the author has crafted. This is a crucial 'sharing' stage in the collective holding of epistemic resources. The consumer utilising these resources amounts to an expansion of — as Camp terms it — their imaginative repertoire, but also of their epistemic repertoire.

A characterisation deployed to a fictional subject without the crafted perspective means the consumer has likely engaged with the fiction with an alternate perspective. Recall, for example, my tendency to characterise Zeena Frome favourably — that is the result of a perspective which I have brought to the fiction from elsewhere in my experience and habit. In that scenario, the imported perspective is not a resource from the fiction itself, the fictional resource available has been missed because it was not generated by the appropriate means. There is a small chance that I may engage with a fiction with an alternate perspective and yet generate a characterisation as the fiction would have otherwise primed me to do, but that would be accidental and not due to the fiction. If the characterisation from an imported perspective aligns with the fiction's perspective, it is not because of the fiction, and if it does not align, it constitutes imaginative resistance. So, it seems incorrect to call the characterisation on its own the epistemic resource gained from fiction, as the only way to arrive at a characterisation because of the fiction and under conditions of 'proper' engagement, is *with* the crafted perspective that the fiction itself makes available for adoption.

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[135] Ibid, 24.

In fiction, the creator does not explicitly prescribe a certain characterisation for the consumer to imagine; they craft a perspective the uptake of which is a necessary condition of consuming the fiction 'well,' and that perspective should lead the consumer to make the appropriate characterisation. While a creator can certainly specify relevant features of a fiction for the consumer's attention, when offered in an artfully crafted fiction, perspectives facilitate the intuitive 'click' necessary to make the arranging of certain features in prominence and centrality into the reflexive, intuitively deployed characterisation.[136] That is, it is not enough to entertain on principle the structure of a characterisation, it must be deployed intuitively, like a reflex, for it to have full efficacy. Efficacious intuitive deployment of a characterisation is achieved through having adopted a perspective. For example, Orwell simply telling readers that Napoleon the pig was a dictator, was probably less useful for understanding than readers being coaxed towards this conclusion on their own as a result of the perspective.

Taking all this together, I suggest we can have no success with characterisations as resources without the appropriate perspective as its progenitor. A certain perspective must be adopted, indeed is crucial, for an agent to be able to access that characterisation and have the resultant resource be one *from fiction*. Elsewhere in experience, characterisations on their own may be resources, and perspectives on their own may be resources. But the type of resource gained *from consuming fiction* is a certain characterisation-via-perspective.

Making the 'leap'

A response to my account, thus far, may be that despite apparent cases of people criticising fictions for not cohering with experience, fictions cannot *really* answer to experience because they fundamentally do not describe the actual world. Nor is it their role to do so. Recall the discussion of transgressive fiction in the VIA: some fictions are crafted with the explicit goal of deviating from experience. It would be absurd to criticise some

[136] Ibid, 24-5.

fictions — such as high fantasy, science fiction, or transgressive works — for not answering to experience, when they *need* to diverge from experience in order to be the kind of fiction that they are. This reiterates a core problem that has been a constant thread in this thesis: how does fiction make the leap to the actual world when it is 'not real'?

As we have seen from testimony, fictions frequently seem to represent people and their experiences. Representing (sometimes also called reflecting) experience does not mean that fictions are a documentation of experience - a record-keeping journal entry - but that the epistemic resources in the fiction are *salient* to the community of knowers *given* their experiences of the actual world: that a fiction makes sense against the backdrop of what we go through day-to-day. [137] The resource coheres to elements of what we have lived. And it certainly seems that fictions are able to provide resources which do this.

Resemblance

Even though fictions describe the nonactual, fictions contain enough which is recognisable to a consumer that we can comprehend its contents. When a consumer engages with a fiction, they are mentally drawing lines of similarity between the imagined world the fiction describes and the actual world in which the consumer lives. This is what I will be calling a fiction's *resemblance.* It aids the consumer in the 'gap-filling' activity of making a fiction coherent, because what the consumer inserts to the fiction based on the actual world is reasonable given the other points of resemblance between them. Conversely, when a consumer encounters a description for which they have no corollary in their lived experience, they may be 'stumped,' and benefit from the author taking pains to describe this foreign thing in more accessible ways. For example, reading that a character 'walked through the fogou' may immediately conjure an image for some, but many would better understand that they 'walked through an underground, stone passageway.'

Gendler argues that storytelling makes "use of standard assumptions about common

[137] Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing," 718.

knowledge and presupposition."[138] That, in what we might recognise as gap-filling activity, consumers of fiction 'import' propositions from the actual world to interpret and make sense of the fiction. The rules around appropriate importation depend on the fiction and how crucial the proposition is to the sense-making of it. For Gendler, the inverse is also true: depending on the fiction and the proposition in question, a consumer may *export* a fictional proposition to the actual world that they: "take to be not merely truths in the story."[139] Gendler's is a propositional account, but we can utilise the concepts of import/export whilst adopting Camp's perspectival framework. I suggest that resemblance precedes importation in the process of imaginative engagement; what is imported is justified on the basis of noted points of resemblance.

Aggregated points of resemblance are part of the way a fiction is crafted and serve as sort-of context clues for the reflexive judgements consumers make. Where a creator establishes fictional context like when and where a fiction takes place, if we have acquaintance with such contexts from the actual world, this sets up expectations for what to imagine of the fiction. For example, actress Anya Taylor-Joy was praised for changing the way her character in the *The Menu* reacted to discovering that her date for the night had co-signed her murder. Originally the character was meant to have a rather sedate reaction, which Taylor-Joy found implausible for the average woman. "I have a thing about feminine rage… We get mad, and angry…the only way for me to play this truthfully is for me to attack him."[140] For Taylor-Joy, it did not *make sense* for her character to behave passively. Underneath this is the fact that elsewhere in the fiction there is so much resemblance to the actual world as to create that impression of inconsistency between the world of the fiction and the character's behaviour. The world of fine-dining and its extreme elitism depicted in *The Menu* is familiar to us from the actual world, and the production took great pains to resemble it, as part of crafting the fiction.[141] The character is a modern young woman in a fictional world *which resembles our own*, and on that basis Taylor-Joy changed

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138 Gendler, "Puzzle," 75-6.

139 Ibid.

140 BBC Radio 1, "'WITNESS ME!!!' Anya Taylor Joy and Nicholas Hoult on Mad Max: Fury Road, tiny cooking and The Menu," YouTube, November 18, 2022, 13:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwHOqEvr6m4

141 Mae Abdulbaki, "The Menu Ending Explained (In Detail)," *Screen Rant*, August 26, 2023. https://screenrant.com/the-menu-ending-explained/

the fiction to preserve its congruity.

This is somewhat related to imaginative resistance. Imaginative resistance can describe a broad category of behaviour, as it is where a fiction conflicts with any of several value systems in the consumer: moral, ideological, linguistic, and more.[142] As such, a consumer may also resist full uptake of a fiction because the fiction contains elements that do not resemble the actual world where the consumer judges that it ought to do so, based on a standard that the fiction establishes in resembling the world on particular other counts. For example, I would struggle to accept mobile phones in a Jane Austen novel, but the crafting of the transformative work *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* took particular pains to make the undead more plausible.

Resemblance is therefore one feature of fictions that I suggest makes the fiction-reality 'leap' possible. It is where the content of a fiction bears recognisable similarity to elements of the actual world, such that a consumer can cognitively associate them. I suggest that owing to an initial basis of resemblance between fiction and the actual world, consumers not only import but also export structural content of a characterisation made for the fiction, to characterisations of objects in the actual world. This phenomenon is what I will term *isomorphism*. Exportation perhaps describes the activity generally of taking from fiction into actual, and isomorphism is the mechanism of that activity under Camp's framework.

Isomorphism

Isomorphism on my account refers to the exported structural arrangement of properties (characterisation) to the actual world from fictions. With isomorphic exportation, characterisations from fictions are mapped onto objects in the actual world in a way that preserves judgement of fittingness, prominence, centrality, but which also extends these judgements to give the exported properties integral placement in the holistic structure of the 'landing' characterisation. To illustrate the process of exportation and isomorphism, I will use a case study.

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[142] Camp, "Perspectives," 87.

What might this look like in a fiction? Case Study: Black Panther (2018)

The 2018 release of *Black Panther* is a noteworthy example of a fiction whose perspectives and characterisations updated epistemic resources where they were insufficient. The film was released to a climate of growing global consciousness around Black American disenfranchisement. In 2013, particularly, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was founded to counteract endemic racially motivated police violence against Black Americans. The movement would crescendo in 2020 with nationwide protests, and be adapted in other countries like Australia that also have systemic marginalisation of Black people. Contemporaneous to this was the #OscarsSoWhite and public attention to the racial inequality of Hollywood. To this climate, the Black-created, Black-led, Black-centred film was released, and grossed $1.8 billion at the box office. All this to say, the fiction of *Black Panther* had popular dissemination at a massive scale, and to epistemic communities which had already identified a lack of salient resources around Blackness and Black peoples' experiences. As such, it had widespread impact on the epistemic activity surrounding these issues at the time.

To demonstrate resemblance and isomorphism using *Black Panther*, let us compare the characterisation of T'Challa offered in *Black Panther*'s fictional world, with the stereotypical characterisation of Black men in modern America. Two notes on this exercise: the characterisation of 'Black men' is reductive because racial stereotypes are reductive, and this harmful simplicity is ideally challenged by non-stereotypical characterisations such as that of T'Challa. Some theorists may argue that a cognitive link between T'Challa as a singular entity, and Black men as a population, should not be made or encouraged, as it is necessarily a generalisation. This portion of the thesis is not yet concerned with the ethical implications of such cognitive processes; it takes as given from anecdotal evidence that it does happen, regardless of ethical principle, and aims to describe the mechanisms of how it happens.

Secondly, the taxonomy of the characterisations explored in this exercise is not exhaustive; indeed, the 'constellation' of features in a characterisation could be a potentially infinite map of features, subject to how deep the analysis goes. Although Camp's account of characterisations states that they are, by nature, holistic and complete, for the purposes of discussion we need only highlight a portion of their features. This exercise is not infinitely deep, so the charted constellation of features is limited.

To identify the features the perspective primes us to associate with T'Challa as its subject I looked for descriptive language used in reference to the character from relevant creators and commentators. Co-writer of the film Joe Robert Cole reflected on the legacy of lead actor, Chadwick Boseman, after the actor's death in 2020: "Everything he brought to the character, he was. He was noble, he was kind, he was generous, he was just, he was courageous. All of those and intelligent, all of those qualities he embodied himself..."[143] So, we can add these features to the characterisation the viewer would ideally deploy to the character T'Challa: noble, kind, generous, just, courageous, intelligent. Properties of a subject, however, are not only descriptors or adjectives. The fiction also primes us to assign a property of physical strength to T'Challa, as per the lore of the heart-shaped herb from which he gets his superhuman power. There are also the basic facts of the character, that he is a king, a son, a brother, a lover. He is mourning the recent death of his father. He is male, approximately 30 years old, Wakandan, and Black. Taking these properties together we can begin to speculatively map what characterisation of T'Challa consumers would make had they adopted the creators' intended perspective.[144] For readability, I have only illustrated the centrality relations between the property 'courageous' and others.

[143] Rachel Paige, "'Black Panther: Wakanda Forever': How Wakanda Moves Forward without T'Challa and Chadwick Boseman," *Marvel,* November 7, 2022. https://www.marvel.com/articles/movies/marvel-studios-black-panther-wakanda-forever-how-wakanda-moves-forward-without-t-challa-and-chadwick-boseman.

[144] Bearing in mind that this will be just one of many possible ways to visualise the characterisations.

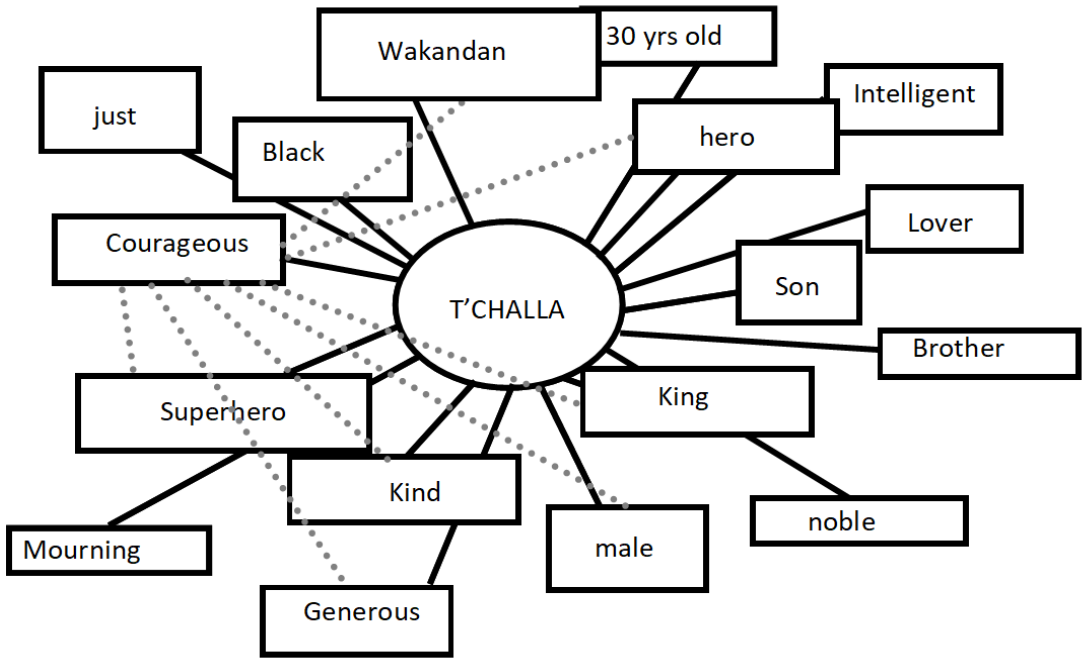


Fig. 4: Possible diagrammatic structure of a characterisation of T'Challa from 'Black Panther'

Of note is the prominence of 'Wakandan,' as the character's cultural identity and sense of nationhood are key aspects within the fiction. I chose the centrality of 'courageous' to illustrate that relations of centrality can be based on simple associated definitions (it is a central feature of a superhero that they be courageous) but can also be related in unexpected ways. For example, I have shown 'courageous' as related to 'male' because of the common gendered expectation that males be courageous. It is also related to 'Wakandan' as being courageous appears a key cultural value in the fictional country of Wakanda.

Considering now a dominant characterisation of Black men in America, as depicted in media and from self-reporting of Black men. Leoandra Onnie Rogers and Niobe Way researched into the effects of media on Black male self-identity in the US, and located prevalent stereotypes that Black men are aggressive, hypersexual, violent, and delinquent.[145] "They are gang members, criminals, or professional athletes."[146] Black males

[145] Leoandra Onnie Rogers and Niobe Way, "'I Have Goals to Prove All Those People Wrong and Not Fit Into Any One of Those Boxes': Paths of Resistance to Stereotypes Among Black Adolescent Males," *Journal of*

are also stereotyped as unstudious, unsuccessful, troublemakers, and intellectually inferior.[147] Owing to an intersection of Blackness and maleness, there are also stereotypes that Black men are emotionally aloof, stoic, autonomous, and lacking deep social relations.[148] These stereotypes, which are reified in media representations of Black males, we can map as properties arranged in the common characterisation of Black men utilised in many epistemic communities, and speculate as to their structural arrangement.

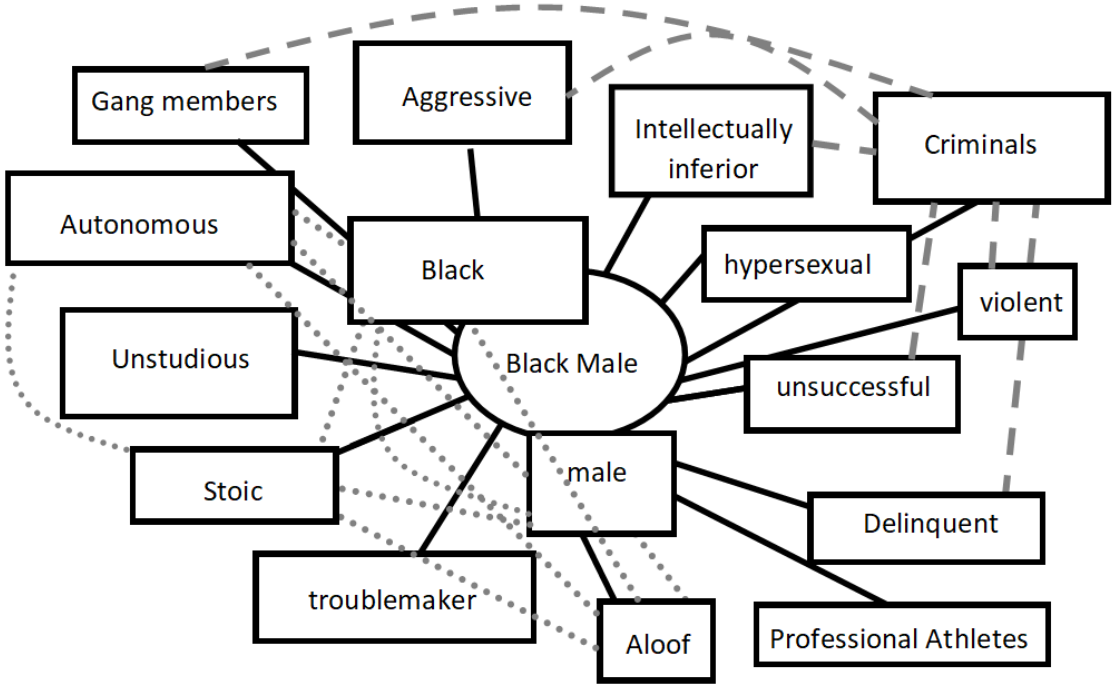


Fig. 5: Possible diagrammatic structure of stereotyping characterisation of Black males in the US

Of particular note, here, are the feedback loops around Blackness and maleness, which goes some way to illustrating the intersectionality of these properties, but may also illustrate a limitation of this model; perhaps intersectionality implies inextricability such that 'Blackmaleness' should be its own property. Important, also, is that 'professional athletes'

Adolescent Research 31, no.3 (2015): 264. DOI: 10.1177/0743558415600071.

146 Ibid.

147 Ibid, 264.

148 Ibid, 265-6.

appears in the same characterisation as 'unsuccessful' — but this apparent contradiction is not a problem for the holistic structure of the characterisation. Indeed, it needs to be there, as it is a stereotyping characterisation, and stereotypes often appear to have internal contradictions. The same is true of 'stoic' and 'aloof' juxtaposed with 'aggressive' and 'violent.'

In the first instance, a consumer understands there to be resemblance between the fiction and the actual world. This can occur very generally, in the association of concepts, descriptions of objects, and so on. But one way we can visualise the notation of resemblance, taking *Black Panther* as our example, would be as follows:

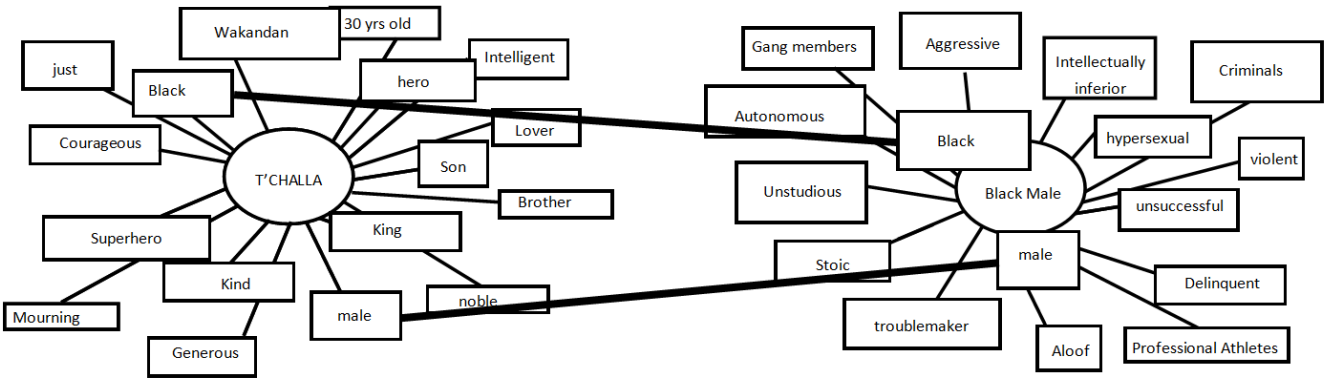


Fig. 6: Properties linked via resemblance across fiction and actuality

Here the points of resemblance are Blackness and maleness. As such, the consumer associates (however subconsciously) the fictional character of 'T'Challa' with the broad category of 'Black men'[149] in the actual world. Given these points of resemblance to the actual world we can hypothesise that a consumer of the fiction may export elements of the characterisation and alter the reflexive characterisations they may make in the actual world. We can visually depict the isomorphism imposed as follows:

[149] Worth noting: Blackness in the fiction is a characteristic not only specified by creators but visually represented by the actors. As such, some lines of resemblance may be drawn between actors and people in the world based on physical, observable similarities. This is true of fictions presented in visual formats.

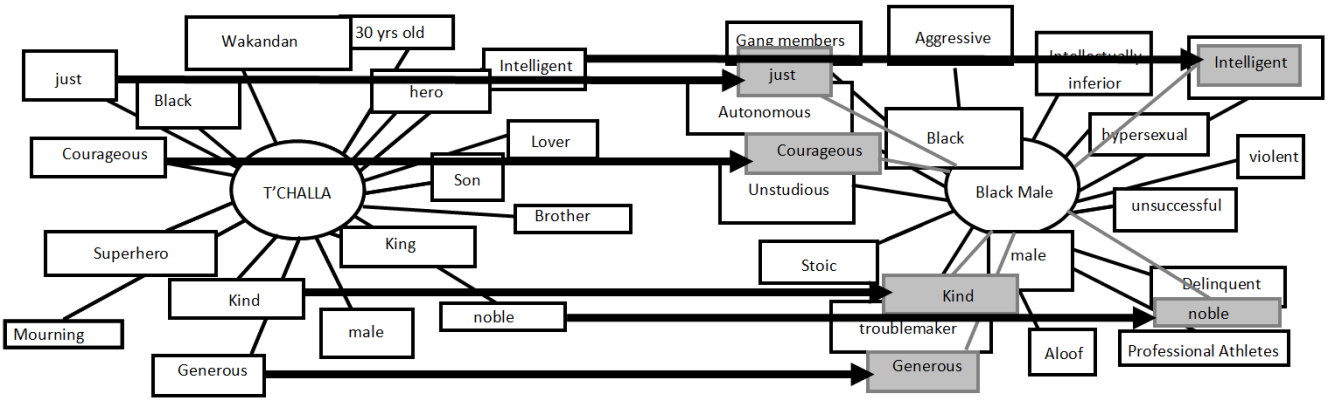


Fig. 7: Properties in a fictional characterisation being applied to actual-world characterisation via isomorphism

In this illustration the arrows are indicating the 'leap' from fiction to reality that constitutes exportation. The structural arrangement of those properties onto the subject in the world is *isomorphism*. It is important to note that, as well as the isomorphism of these properties once introduced to the characterisation of the actual-world subject, equally important in the epistemic resource is that these properties contribute to the intuitive holism of this characterisation in its new iteration, and the progenitor perspective which disposed the agent to make these judgements may continue to generate similar judgement in future. While resemblance opens the door, part of this process is that partial involuntariness and stickiness of perspectives that makes it difficult for consumers to rationally quarantine the fictional from the actual. Difficult to remove once 'tried-on,' the perspective from fiction is provisionally deployed to access and characterise the actual-world subject (and, perhaps, hybridised with the agent's ordinary perspective which would have previously guided their characterisation), resulting in isomorphic characterisations.

In this way, fictions provide epistemic resources for interpreting the actual world and, as will be important later, may reinforce or displace features in the actual-world characterisations that epistemic agents tend to otherwise generate. For example, that 'Intelligent' can be structured as a property more prominent to the subject 'Black male' than 'Intellectually inferior'. It must be said as well that a consumer needs to have adopted the right attendant perspective to perform this isomorphic exportation; that is what

generates the judgement of fittingness that these properties be applied in the first place. The exportation of these properties to understandings of Black maleness are what Rogers and Way would call 'stereotype resistant,'[150] and there are numerous instances of *Black Panther* having had that effect for agents in the world. For example:

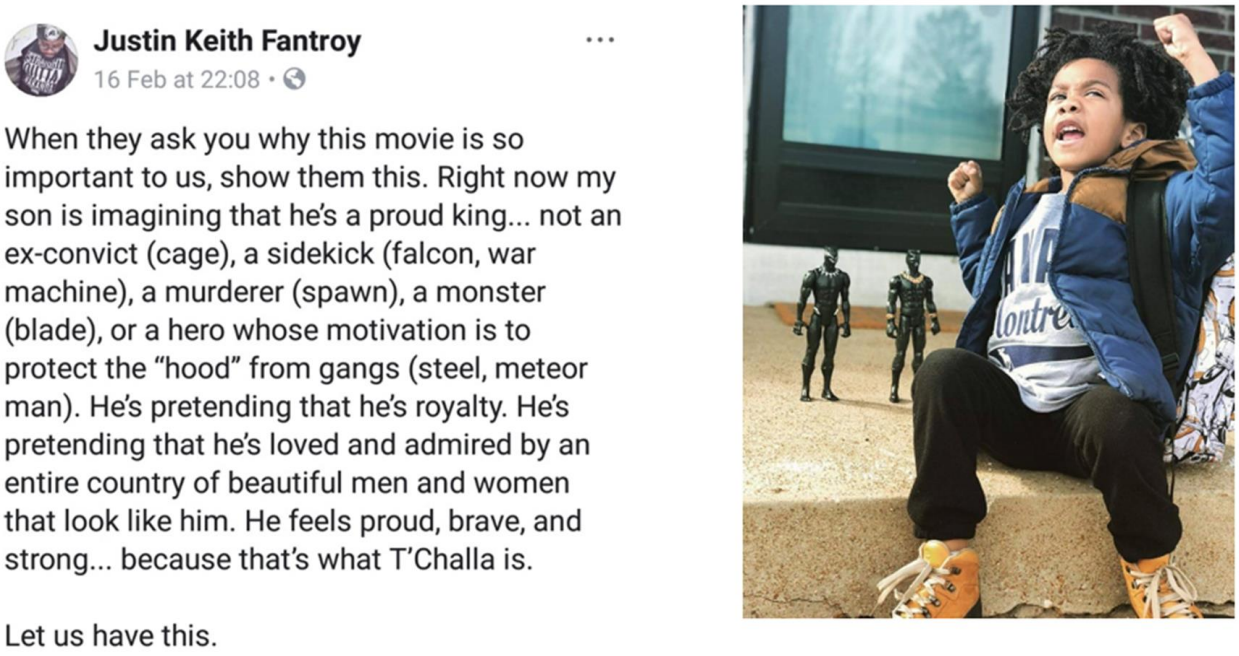


Fig. 8: Tweet depicting a Black male child raising his fists, mid-speech appearing to make a triumphant sound. Action figurines of the Black Panther superhero character are stood behind him.[151]

The young boy is noticing points of resemblance between himself and characters "that look like him" and is therefore able to transpose features of those characters onto himself. The nature of our engagement with fictions being imaginative and perspectival enables this activity. A key benefit of imaginative practices in general is that they allow us as agents to imagine counterfactual possibilities, which in turn facilitates a range of agential practises like decision-making.[152] As such, resources gained from imaginative engagement with fiction

[150] Rogers and Way, "I Have Goals," 264.

[151] Justin Keith Fantroy, "When they ask you why this movie is so important to us, show them this," *X* (formerly *Twitter*), February 16, 2018. URL no longer available. Image used with permission of the creator.

[152] Catriona Mackenzie, "Imagining Oneself Otherwise," in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self,* ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (Oxford University Press, 2000), 132.

inherently contain the element of possibility — the 'what if' — that fictional worlds provide. At the same time that a Black child in America may transpose elements of T'Challa's characterisation onto themselves and their peers, leading to judgements like that they can be heroes, too, the ability to make this transposition implies a wealth of other options and configurations for how they and their peers *may be* characterised. The resources from fiction are resources not only for understanding the way things in the world are, but also for understanding how they *could* be.

'Lesser epistemic contribution' criticism

Even accepting that fictions provide epistemic resources, a significant rebuttal to my account may be that the species of resource they provide is of negligible significance; that resources from fiction will be usurped in the preferences of an epistemic community by more 'robust' resources like concepts.

Firstly, I believe that the wealth of examples, testimony, and research discussed herein has at least shown fictions' eventual impact to be epistemically significant. We see cases in the actual world of resources from fiction altering understanding. Secondly, I suspect that part of this criticism comes from continuing to privilege the kind of resources we expect the 'classical knower' uses; as discussed earlier, epistemology is still reckoning with the potential legitimacy of alternate forms of knowing.

However, this criticism may be a point about logistics. That in our knowledge practices, fictional resources are simply inadequate when compared with other kinds of resource. Camp, in her account of perspectives and frames, phrases the criticism like this:

> "If we understand characterizations and perspectives as at best intuitive proxies for, and as at worst antagonistic to rational, conceptual thought, it is difficult to see how they could make any genuine epistemic contribution."[153]

[153] Camp, "Frames," 28.

This would especially be a problem because we know that the adequacy of a resource for rendering experience salient is a key criterion for whether an epistemic community maintains that resource and keeps it in circulation. The epistemic resources from fiction that I have described are two-part: a perspective and its characterisation, inextricably linked. As such, for clarity I will attend to each in addressing this concern of lesser epistemic contribution.

Perspectives

Perspectives — being open-ended dispositions to reflexively attend to and characterise — seem "messy"[154] and more likely to add to the epistemic "noise"[155] around a subject than improve clarity of understanding. Camp cites the case of machine systems being initially framed as 'organisms,' which lead to the perspective of machine systems being oriented around this metaphor.[156] While in some instances it clearly aided understanding of machine systems, in others it could occlude alternative ways of understanding. As such, the criticism suggests, at some point the guidance of the perspective must be left behind in favour of more specifying and selective inquiry. In short, we eventually abandon getting the general *sense* of a subject for more reliable *detail* about it.

One critical point within Camp's more extensive reply to this criticism is that the sort of understanding which is functionally useful to agents involves approaching subjects in the world with a context-sensitive mediation of all the knowledge we have regarding that subject, and perspectives can do this. The end point of that understanding is not a complete collection of facts laid out on a table, all flattened in the sense of all being equally important and equally central to understanding. Rather, the end point is determined by the epistemic goal of understanding that particular subject in that particular context, and different goals will necessitate that some facts or conceptual tools are given more focus than others. That is, a *perspective* that is appropriate to the epistemic goal

154 Ibid, 24.

155 Ibid, 28.

156 Ibid, 34.

directs the agent's attention to an appropriate *characterisation* of the subject, in which some elements of that understanding will be placed in greater prominence, others in greater centrality, *according to the goal*: In Camp's words:

> "perspectives can contribute to understanding even at the (nominal) end of inquiry, by implementing characterizations that accurately reflect the structure of the world."[157]

Where a goal of understanding is that it correlates to the way things literally are in the world, perspectives can help us get there. Thus, perspectives are not an initial step towards understanding that we retire later, but a persisting arbiter of all known features of a given subject. In this sense they have a "research-orienting"[158] role in our epistemic pursuits, and do not add to noise, but help us to filter it.

Characterisations

Key to the critique is that perspectives are very context sensitive; they function to generate intuitive judgements to stimuli *as they appear* — whereas 'good knowledge,' by contrast, is assumed to reach conclusions about things which can be reapplied across multiple contexts. As such, according to the critique, perspectives will be trumped by context-defying concepts. For our purposes, countless fictions may employ perspectives which prime the reader to be more empathetic or attentive to a certain community, but that dispositional empathy could be overshadowed by prejudicial 'knowledge' about the community that is presented elsewhere as fact. Which sort of understanding wins out is not a matter of their actual consistency with the world, but an assumption that conceptual understanding is better suited to describe the world because of its nature and structure. As the critique poses, perspectives and their resultant characterisations are too intuitive, inchoate, and "messy" [159] by traditional epistemic standards.

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157 Ibid, 18

158 Ibid.

159 Ibid, 36.

This however, would be to misunderstand characterisations. As we saw in the previous section, characterisations are articulable; diagrammatically as I have done, or potentially in other ways. This is because they are holistic structures of properties around subjects; what at first appears messy is actually deeply ordered. And as we have seen from resemblance and isomorphism, characterisations are not limited to the contextual circumstances in which they are generated, but can be transposed to aid understanding in other contexts. Particularly where a characterisation is deployed cross-contextually from a perspective which has some version of truth-seeking among its goals, the characterisation has a good chance of reflecting the way things actually are in the world. It therefore seems they can do the job of 'good knowledge,' being redeployed in different contexts. As Camp analogises:

> "Just as a map is a reliable tool for navigating through the world because it represents spatial relationships between represented objects by directly instantiating those very spatial relationships… so too is an apt characterization a reliable tool for navigating the explanatory structure of the world because it directly instantiates those very relations."[160]

For our purposes, although perspectives and their subsequent characterisations give the initial *impression* of being epistemically deficient in some way, they are crucial to attaining nuanced understanding that answers to the agent's situation at the time. As such, if fictions are able to introduce agents to alternate perspectives, and this allows them to deploy characterisations which prioritise features of subjects in a way more reflective of reality, then fictions are indeed a significant source of epistemic improvement and growth.

In this chapter I have shown that 1) we gain epistemic resources from fiction, 2) the resource itself is a characterisation begot of a certain perspective, through perspectival imaginative engagement with fiction as per Camp's account, and 3) we use these resources by isomorphically exporting the characterising content to the actual world owing to resemblance and involuntariness. The *Black Panther* case study illustrates the machinations of fictional epistemic practice from the point of view of a single agent, at the microlevel.

[160] Ibid, 41.

But, as mentioned in that example and elsewhere in this thesis, there are also macrolevel concerns. Fictions, in their capacity to provide epistemic resources, considered with broader sociopolitical contexts, can be a site of harm done to agents in those contexts.

5. FICTIONAL INJUSTICE

In the previous chapter I argued that our engagement with fictions provides us, as knowers, with epistemic resources. I suggested that the primary type of resource gained is characterisation-via-perspective encountered through fiction, and aimed to show that this species of resource is robust and significant in our everyday epistemic practices. As I have suggested earlier, these everyday epistemic practices are performed by situated knowers, within complex sociopolitical contexts. As such, this chapter will explore how these resources are used and how they affect people in those broader contexts. Namely, I will suggest that our engagement with fictions can be a site of injustice, insofar as those fictions affect our approaches to, understanding of, and interpretations of the actual world.

Fictions in the world.

That fictions can constitute a site of injustice is already present in the popular views. Where proponents of the CCV charge that creators are capable of harm through the fictions they choose to create, the supporters of the VIA contend that consumers of fiction overemphasise fiction's impact and ability to comment on social issues. The suspected inequities in popular fictions are sometimes borne out in data research.

For example, the 2016 *Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment* (CARDE) analysed 109 motion pictures and 305 broadcast, cable, and digital release television series from 2014 for the rates of diverse representation they offered.[161] Some notable findings include an average ratio across the sample of two male speaking characters to every one female speaking character.[162] Of the 11,194 speaking characters analysed, identifiably (that is, given sufficient narrative or visual cues), 158 were gay, 49 were lesbian, 17 were bisexual, and 7 were transgender, with a more dramatic gender ratio of 3 male LGBT+ characters to every one female LGBT+ character. This is disproportional to ratios

[161] Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper, "Inclusion," 1-25.

[162] Ibid, 1.

among the LGBT+ population in the actual world, which comprised 3.7% of the US population at the time of the study.[163] It also found that only 28.3% of all speaking characters were from an under-represented racial or ethnic group, a rate 9.6 percentage points lower than the proportion of the US population for that year, according to the Census Bureau.[164] Further, only 12% of the media analysed represented racial diversity that was proportional to within 10% of the US population.[165] Moreover, the study analysed intersections of underrepresentation, finding that, among other results, women of colour were less likely to be given speaking roles than both men of colour and white women.[166] The researchers concluded: "The hashtag #OscarsSoWhite should be changed to #HollywoodSoWhite, as our findings show that an epidemic of invisibility runs throughout popular storytelling."[167]

Of course, not every piece of media aims to depict society in the US during 2014, but the study does indicate that marginalised people have less to choose from out of the totality of the media analysed if they want a fiction with which they can personally identify through the inclusion of characters like themselves. Conversely, it also shows that dominantly situated viewers have a disproportionately large amount of fictions with which they can choose to identify and engage. Further longitudinal research published for the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative in 2022 showed minimal improvement in the amount of on-screen representation for marginalised persons between 2007 and 2022, and also emphasised the ongoing disparities in creator roles, like screenwriters, directors, and casting directors.[168] The data shows that, in Hollywood at least, these inequities in fiction are persistent and endemic.

The researchers behind the report criticise the production companies involved for their failure to represent minorities in a way that is proportional to the US population, claiming

163 Ibid, 11.

164 Ibid, 7.

165 Ibid.

166 Ibid, 8.

167 Ibid, 9.

168 Stacy L. Smith, Katherine Pieper, and Sam Wheeler, "Inequality in 1,600 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ+ & Disability from 2007 to 2022," *USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative* (August 2023): 1.

that they opt instead to offer narratives that in the vast majority perpetuate dominant populations' supremacy. "The film industry still functions as a straight, White, boy's club."[169] The suggestion is that entertainment industries ought to be more proportional in their representation as a matter of ethics, implying that morally objectionable outcomes result from the current state of underrepresentation. And indeed, recalling Ireland's account of literary apartheid, amongst other examples, there seems to be ample testimony from marginalised individuals as to how the lack of representation catered to them in the landscape of fictions we consume has negatively affected them.

A large part of the CARDE research is about institutional inequalities — pragmatic concerns about employment and access — but another large part is the suggestion that the general public consuming media which so significantly overlooks marginalised groups has further effects on popular conceptions of those groups. This data focuses on televisual media produced in the US, but the dissemination of fictions in other forms of media (books, music, etc.) often reproduces these disparities, for reasons which will become clear. It is apparent from these examples and the CCV that many consumers and communities already have a conception of fiction as capable of harm. The task, then, is to give some explanation for what this harm is, considered with the account of fictions I have provided.

The primary claim of this thesis is that fictions provide us, as knowers, with epistemic resources. As such, I hypothesise that at least some of the harms and injustices enacted by fictions in the world will be epistemic in nature. This will be borne out once we understand more about what constitutes *epistemic injustice.*

Epistemic Injustice

Miranda Fricker codified the phenomenon of epistemic injustice in 2007 and characterises it as a type of injustice done to someone in their capacity as a knower, owing

[169] Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper, "Inclusion," 17.

to identity prejudice.[170] There are two kinds that she describes: testimonial and hermeneutical. Testimonial injustice involves awarding a "deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word"[171] due to identity prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice is: "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalisation,"[172] where hermeneutical marginalisation is the exclusion of agents from the collective meaning-making practices of their epistemic community. Hermeneutical injustice, on Fricker's account, is an injustice which occurs earlier in our communicative practices than testimonial, as testimony even when not afforded credibility means a knower has been able to articulate experience, whereas if that knower suffers hermeneutical injustice, the means by which to articulate that experience are unavailable to them at the outset.[173] This unavailability of hermeneutical resources is what Fricker calls a 'lacuna' - a gap in the epistemic community's collective resources of meaning and interpretation.[174] Knowers still have the experiences, but are unable to express them.

Fricker uses the example of Marge in *The Talented Mr Ripley* to illustrate a case of testimonial injustice; Marge's justified suspicion of Ripley is dismissed by Herbert Greenleaf, who cites 'female intuition' as the origin of Marge's concern, thereby dismissing it. Fricker interprets this exchange as an instance where Greenleaf, whose maleness affords him greater social power than Marge in a patriarchal society, grants Marge a deflated level of credibility; that her knowledge, or herself as a knower, is insufficient.[175] In the "credibility economy"[176] knowers are attributed a certain amount of credibility and, Fricker argues, identity-based prejudice can result in deficits of credibility for marginalised knowers, and excesses of credibility for dominantly situated knowers (the latter constituting *epistemic privilege*).[177]

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170 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 1.

171 Ibid.

172 Ibid.

173 Ibid, 7.

174 Miranda Fricker, "Powerlessness and Social Interpretation," *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 3, no. 1-2 (2006): 97.

175 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 14.

176 Ibid, 30.

177 Ibid, 17.

For hermeneutical injustice Fricker cites the case of the term 'sexual harassment' as an example. In 1975 New York, the newly-formed group Working Women United developed the phrase 'sexual harassment' in preparation for a protest demonstration. The demonstration aimed to publicise the case of Carmita Wood who, having quit her job after 8 years of (what we today can call) sexual harassment, was unable to claim unemployment benefit as society lacked a descriptor for the reason she had quit. Karen Sauvigné, who was present at the inception of the term, described the event of the room of women realising they had all lived this inarticulable experience: "It was one of those click, aha! moments, a profound revelation."[178] On Fricker's account, this *aha!* moment is the identification of a hermeneutical lacuna in the resources of an epistemic community. The subsequent creation of the phrase "sexual harassment," and importantly its later uptake in media and law, constitutes epistemic activity of remedying this lacuna. It is remedied insofar as there is now a term which identifies and describes a particular experience, allowing those that have experienced it to name it, and those that have not to know of it and to be informed of it.

Fricker's work focuses on testimonial and hermeneutical injustice due to particular interest in injustices surrounding "conveying knowledge to others by telling them, and making sense of our own social experiences."[179] But, they are certainly not the only kinds of epistemic injustice. Much like Pohlhaus' minimal description of *epistemic resources* leaving room for additional particular kinds to be added to the list, the minimal description of an *epistemic injustice* leaves room for future types of injustices that are specifically epistemic in nature to be identified. As Fricker notes, "there are a number of phenomena that might be brought under the general head of epistemic injustice."[180]

It seems to be the case that creators, especially, often use fictions as lateral means of giving testimony or contributing to hermeneutical resources. For example, when Greta Gerwig wrote and directed an adaptation of *Little Women*, some of the dialogue which was not lifted from the source material expressed elements of her own lived experience. For

178 Ibid, 150.

179 Ibid, 1.

180 Ibid, 1.

example, when the protagonist Jo March insists to Mr Dashwood that a female character in a story she has written does not want to marry, and has said in the text that she does not want to marry, Mr Dashwood says: "No. No. No. No. That won't work at all." Of Jo March in that scene, Gerwig says:

> "Yes. That's me. That's me in there… I have had conversations like that where I am trying to say, people want something different than you think they want. You think they want sort of a narrative arc that they've already had, and they don't. They are actually hungry for something else."[181]

We can understand this as Gerwig perhaps testifying, via the fiction, to her experiences of frustration as a female creator. I claimed earlier that fictions inherit some level of salience from having been created by a situated agent; we can now extend that to say that sometimes creators are *intending* to represent their own experiences, in a manner similar to more 'traditional' testimony where one uses language to describes experience.

Fictions sometimes seem to contribute to hermeneutical resources, as well, even unintentionally. 'Gaslighting,' for example, is the term for a type of psychological manipulation in which the manipulator denies and distorts facts of the victim's experience and knowledge, in order to induce the victim to doubt their own ability to interpret and know what is going on. The term is derived from the 1944 film *Gaslight* in which the fictional character Paula is gradually convinced she is going 'mad,' due to the manipulations of her husband Gregory. Unbeknownst to Paula, Gregory murdered her aunt 10 years earlier, and their marriage and his abuse of her are part of an enduring plan to locate the aunt's fortune-worth of jewels. Among Gregory's methods of inducing Paula's self-doubt is secretly dimming the gaslit lamps of their house so it appears they dim without cause. This term 'gaslighting' gained enormous popular usage in 2014, often in testimony of emotional abuse experienced in the actual world, and has since been codified in psychology journals. Though experience of such abuse was undoubtedly had much earlier in human history than the film, when popular discourse aimed to describe it in the absence of pre-existing

[181] Michel Martin, "Greta Gerwig On Her 'Little Women' Film Adaptation," *NPR,* December 22, 2019. https://www.npr.org/2019/12/22/790631863/greta-gerwig-on-her-little-women-film-adaptation.

terminology, 'gaslighting' was identified by knowers as particularly apt. Thus, it is clear that fictions can contribute to hermeneutical practices.

These two examples show that at least in some circumstances, fictions are used for testimony and the expansion of hermeneutical resources and, as such, there is the possibility that testimonial and hermeneutical *injustices* can be enacted through fictions, as well. But — much like how even though language, concepts, and criteria can be encountered through fiction, yet those are not the primary fictional epistemic resource of interest in this thesis — there appear to also be other forms of epistemic injustice surrounding engagement with fiction. Already evident, however, is that these injustices are occurring on a complex background of social relations (racial hierarchies, gender inequality, and so on). As such, I first wish to say more about the macrolevel context in which fictions operate, before proceeding to further description of specific fictional epistemic injustice,[182] as this will be crucial.

Kyriarchy and Fictions

In this thesis I have often referred to the presence of a macrolevel 'big picture' to the discussion of fictions and injustice; references have been made to social power relations like racism and sexism, and a consistent aim of this thesis is to view fictions not in a vacuum, but situated in the world at this macrolevel. These macrolevel considerations reveal how fictions are distinctly social. To unpack the macrolevel, I must discuss overarching structures of power and hierarchy, and their role in how we are to interpret the ethical status of different fictions. To that end, I introduce the concept of *kyriarchy* to our discussion of fictions and injustice.

The term *kyriarchy* was coined by theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in 1992[183] and, as Irene Monroe explains, the term denotes: "a complex pyramidal system of

[182] Injustice which is actual, but which comes from engagement with fiction.

[183] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 115–17, 122–25.

intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression."[184] Kyriarchy comes from the ancient Greek term 'kyrgios' (master or ruler) and the suffix '-archy' (denoting rule or governance) which approximately translates to "king rule". The apparent tautology is not a problem of the name, but a feature, reflecting dominant structures' work to consolidate power as a very function of being dominant. Kyriarchy refers to the collusion and interaction of multiple overarching power hierarchies which generate oppression as a function of their maintaining power. The 'bottom line' of a kyriarchal society is to produce stratification of the population along hierarchies, thereby creating — to expand on the pyramid metaphor — a majority subjugated class and a ruling class at the apex that is exclusive and holds concentrated power.[185] Patriarchy, for example, will generate this pyramidal stratification along lines of gender. Racism will do so along racial lines. Where these systems' independent goals overlap, they consolidate their efforts together.

Part of the idea of kyriarchy is recognising that, often, the overarching power hierarchies which shape our world have a vested interest in working together. Different power hierarchies will operate in the actual world to reproduce and reinforce one another, to the extent that it remains beneficial to themselves to do so. An example of this cooperation is the cosmetic industry, in which capitalism aids patriarchy in making makeup for women socioculturally necessary, thus securing both gender normativity for patriarchy and ongoing consumerism for capitalism. The beauty standards pushed in the cosmetic industry additionally aids racial, imperial, and colonial hierarchies by standardising typically white European features and aesthetics as the desired expectation. An example where this cooperation came apart would be during World War II in which nationalism and imperialism were reinforced in many countries by the conscription of men to military service, but patriarchy — while being reinforced in much government propaganda to do with the masculine bravery of soldiers — was undermined by the practical reality of requiring women (particularly married women) to work in traditionally male positions of labour, and

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[184] Irene Monroe, "Taking Theology to the Community," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Special Issue: In Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* 25, no. 1 (Spring, 2009): 184.

[185] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 119.

literally sending men to likely die. For some historians this was a 'watershed' moment after which capitalism protected its own interest by continuing to see women as labourers contrary to the interests of patriarchy.[186] For others, that many women were then removed from such positions shows the cooperation of patriarchy and capitalism in the reassertion of status quo in the post-war period.[187] (Speaking particularly of European and colonial countries, and bearing in mind that class intersected here, as well, as financially insecure families have historically always required women to work).

Kyriarchy is also a useful companion concept to *intersectionality*. Some may even contend that these two concepts appear interchangeable, however I suggest they are more like two sides of a coin. Intersectionality as a concept was developed particularly by Kimberlé Crenshaw to highlight the ways the feminist movement did not attend to the unique experiences and concerns of Black women.[188] It is the proposal that where identities overlap, that *intersection* shapes a subject's lived experience in ways that cannot be understood by considering each identity in isolation. Intersectional feminism, for example, acknowledges that experiences of being a woman in the world are additionally impacted if subjects also occupy marginalised identities like Blackness, queerness, disability, and so on. Kyriarchy, by contrast, locates the interdependent structural hierarchies which generate these intersectional experiences by organising the world in certain ways. Where intersectionality locates subject-centric identities and their overlap, kyriarchy locates the structure-centric machinations and their interdependence.

Intersectionality is valuable in considering the impact of fictions. Ireland's disappointment in the young adult fantasy genre is felt not only as a Black person or as a woman, but in unity as a Black woman.[189] Intersectionality is also useful in questions of creator intent; that the intersections of identity a creator inhabits may influence their aims for fictions they produce, perhaps even limiting the perspectives which they can credibly

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[186] Claudia Goldin, "The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women's Work," *NBER Working Paper Series* 3203 (December 1989): 4.

[187] Ibid, 4.

[188] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Standard Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1242.

[189] Ireland, "Apartheid of the Imagination."

craft. Such cases will, I believe, be clear in proceeding discussion. The concept of kyriarchy, however, will be crucial to my account of fictional epistemic injustices, due to its explanatory power around our practices of creating, sharing, and maintaining of fictional epistemic resources in our communities.

As I showed earlier, consumers and creators of fictions are socially situated beings, whose engagement with fictions and epistemic practices are inextricable from the social contexts they inhabit. Kyriarchal relations of power are, in turn, inextricable from our social contexts, as they operate to structure and maintain the actual world in its current state, to the benefit of certain dominant powers and the disadvantage of the subordinated. As such, kyriarchy is inextricable from our engagement with fiction. As Pohlhaus states:

> "One lens with which to think about varieties of epistemic injustice is to consider how persons may be systematically subject to injustice generally speaking and to understand epistemic injustices as intertwined with (and reinforcing) relations of dominance and oppression."[190]

The point being that I, for example, cannot sit down to read a novel without all these overarching machinations of kyriarchy being relevant to my experience of the novel, how I behave as a result of it afterwards, and how the novel came to be in my hands in the first place.

Globalisation and Western hegemony make it impossible for me — as one situated in that context — to cite instances where such kyriarchal influence would *not* be at play in our interaction with fiction, as my very interaction with such instances would entail that they had been exposed to such influence. But we can suppose that, where an epistemic community exists outside of or isolated from global kyriarchal structures their interactions with fictions will be shaped more by inter-community dynamics. The existence of such a community is suggested but not guaranteed by things like the Brazilian government's 1987 'no-contact' policy regarding outside intervention to geographically and culturally isolated

[190] Pohlhaus, "Varieties of Epistemic Injustice," 16.

Indigenous peoples.[191]

At a metalevel, I am aware this thesis analyses fiction from within institutions of Western scholarship and epistemologies, which have always struggled to reckon with epistemologies outside of this tradition, and which instead has sometimes reduced and forced knowledge foreign to it into existing theory and terminology. For example, Brenda Machosky argues that popular and academic understanding of Dreaming as 'the Australian Aboriginal creation myth' fails firstly by collapsing the many distinct Aboriginal peoples into one "Pan-aboriginality,"[192] and second by reducing Dreaming to a mythos analogous to Ancient-world and Abrahamic religions.[193] These mistakes result from a failure to consider both the situatedness of researchers and the kyriarchal structures in which research is conducted.

Kyriarchal considerations therefore also serve my analysis of fictions in a 'setting the stage' way, limiting the set of potential fictions that I can discuss in a manner that I believe is advantageous to the project, rather than disadvantageous. As such, the fictions I consider here are the ones that I can access as a knower who inhabits globalised, Western-centric systems of creating and disseminating fictions.

Fictions as sites of epistemic injustice.

We have considered testimonial and hermeneutical injustice as Fricker describes them, determining that while these can be enacted through fictions, these are not the only kinds of fictional epistemic injustice. Looking elsewhere for possibilities, Pohlhaus provides description of three ways in which epistemic injustices are epistemic, specifically:

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[191] Luara Ferracioli, "Liberal Citizenship and the Isolated Tribes of Brazil," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (October 2018), 289.

[192] Brenda Machosky, "Allegory and the Work of Aboriginal Dreaming/Law/Lore," in *Allegory Studies: Contemporary Perspectives,* ed. Vladimir Brljak (Routledge, 2021), 193.

[193] Ibid.

> "First, they wrong particular knowers *as* knowers, for example by suppressing a knower's testimony (Dotson 2011) or by making it difficult for particular knowers to know what it is in their interest to know (Fricker 2007: 147-175). Second, they cause epistemic dysfunction, for example by distorting understanding or stymieing inquiry. Third, they accomplish the aforementioned two harms from within, and sometimes through the use of, our epistemic practises and institutions."[194]

I will take these three points as guiding principles for identifying where epistemic injustices occur, and how they are enacted, through fiction. As such, the following points of discussion will describe instances where 1) fictions enact injustices via our practices and institutions, 2) fictional epistemic injustices wrong knowers as knowers, and 3) fictional injustices cause epistemic dysfunction.

1. Institutionalised injustice

Now that we understand fictions as providing epistemic resources, the societal institutions involved in the creation and dissemination of fictions should also be understood as epistemic institutions insofar as they operate to supply fictional epistemic resources to communities of knowers. Production companies, publishing houses, record companies, Broadway and theatre companies, and the various organisations attached to these, provide fictions to the public in a manner analogous to schools providing facts to students.

We can now understand these institutions as operating within complex kyriarchal structures of power hierarchies. These hierarchies necessitate that institutions prioritise certain aims in their operations, aims conducive to the reproduction and perpetuation of the hierarchy. These kyriarchal pressures mean that certain creators and consumers are preferenced within the institutions that disseminate fictions and their contained epistemic resources, thereby leading to epistemic injustice. Pohlhaus, regarding situatedness, states

[194] Pohlhaus, "Varieties," 13.

that: "In a socially stratified society, some persons are situated in positions that allow their experiences to count more in the development and circulation of epistemic resources."[195] For example, the CARDE researchers criticised Hollywood as an institution which prioritises narratives from dominant persons in power hierarchies, centring creators who are white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and so on. The CARDE, in locating this problem, by association locates the coordinated efforts of overlapping hierarchical power structures — capitalism and racism in particular — operating through the institutions of Hollywood and the media of fictional works to benefit one another.

This holistic picture of fictions in our society, enmeshed with overarching power structures, is a far cry from the microlevel picture of one fiction and one imaginer to which we are accustomed in classical epistemology. But, I suggest, we cannot understand fictions' impact without it. It is because of these structural arrangements that fictions enact epistemic injustices via our practices and institutions.

2. Absence and abundance

That some species of fiction are privileged under kyriarchal conditions, and some disadvantaged, will be a running thread in this section. Much of the epistemic injustice that is enacted through fiction is either harmful in the first place, by reproducing preexisting harmful epistemic activity, or compounded in its harmfulness, by an *abundance* of that type of fiction and an *absence* of contrary, counterfactual fiction.

In talking about the deficit and stereotyping of Black representation in literature, Ireland states that, "white children grow up without the ability to even imagine black people as the hero in a story unless it's about slavery or civil rights."[196] This locates the point that without exposure to fictions which represent marginalised persons in a kaleidoscope of ways, consumers only access perspectives in fiction which predispose them to characterise marginalised subjects in ways that benefit kyriarchy, namely through stereotype. We can

[195] Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing," 718.

[196] Ireland, "Apartheid of the Imagination."

understand this as fictions perpetuating epistemic lacunas about marginalised subjects. Thus, the senses of abundance and absence are two-fold: firstly, abundance or absence of particular types of available fictions, and secondly, abundance or absence of particular epistemic resources for a given, marginalised subject. Where these two occur in tandem, an epistemic injustice has occurred through fictions. This is an outcome of kyriarchal arrangements attending more to dominant knowers than marginal knowers. As Pohlhaus puts it:

> "When one is marginally positioned, the epistemic resources used by most knowers in one's society for knowing the world will be less suited to those situations in which marginally situated knowers find themselves on account of being marginal."[197]

Abundance in this case is really *over*abundance, a proliferation of fictions and their resources over and above the needs of the community to whose experience the resources attend. Many lament, for example, the overuse of young, attractive, financially secure, white heterosexual couples as the basis for a romantic comedy or a love interest subplot.[198] The critique fundamentally claims that there are enough of this one type of depiction in fiction, and thereby enough of the type of epistemic resource which is derived from it.

By contrast, areas of marginalised lived experience remain obscure in the gamut of popularly disseminated fictions, because the fictions (and resources) which attend to them are simply not there. The CARDE researchers discuss *invisibility* versus *inclusion* in a similar way.[199] When analysed, most popularly disseminated televisual fictions lack racial and gender diversity in the subjects they depict.[200] This absence of diversity in fiction prevents knowers from developing complex and nuanced understanding of marginalised persons, beyond stereotype or monolithic thinking. For example, Donald Glover was the subject of an internet movement to have him cast as Spiderman/Peter Parker in the *Marvel* reboot of

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197 Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing," 717.

198 Ewan Kirkland, "Romantic Comedy and the Construction of Heterosexuality," *Scope* 9, (October 2014): 1-2. https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2007/october-2007/kirkland.pdf.

199 Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper, "Inclusion," 1-25.

200 Ibid.

the character. Many believed Glover's involvement, as a Black man, could refresh the character which had only ever been played by white actors. Naysayers to this proposal were often overtly racist, but Glover found himself most frustrated by subtle, pernicious racism that made it inconceivable to the public that Spiderman could be Black. Reflecting on being told in one letter:

> "there's no Black kids like Peter Parker," Glover said: "That infuriated me… it's 2011 and you don't think there's a Black kid who lives with his aunt in Queens, who likes science, who like— who takes photography… There's kids out there who feel …who feel like they don't exist."[201]

This example highlights the absence of media which represents Black youth in a variety of ways, as a variety of characters, and the way such an absence perpetuates reductive thinking about marginalised peoples.

Epistemic lacunas, perpetuated by the imbalance of abundant and absent fictions, wrongs knowers and leads to epistemic dysfunction. Marginalised knowers are precluded from contributing to the totality of epistemic resources which would render their experiences salient to others. And knowers generally are thereby prevented from attaining this understanding of marginalised persons. This is a distinctly kyriarchal system of privileging dominantly situated knowers. In some, if not most, cases the dominantly situated consumers of fictions will not even be aware of the ignorance their consumption of fictions perpetuates. Kyriarchy on this point lends itself well to Charles Mills' account of epistemologies of ignorance (which Pohlhaus related to her discussion of epistemic dysfunction).[202] In *the Racial Contract*, Mills asserts that whiteness as a dominant hierarchy builds the world in such a way as to obscure from white knowers that, and how, they benefit from it.[203] This results in an "inverted epistemology,"[204] in which the benefactors of

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201 Nick Huff Barili, "Childish Gambino AKA Donald Glover Talks Black Spiderman, Asian Girls, Nerds, Community + More," YouTube, November 22, 2011, video, 12:36, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lgko-xReFSs.

202 Pohlhaus, "Varieties," 16.

203 Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract,* (Cornell University Press, 1977), pg18.

204 Ibid.

dominant systems are made, by that system, unable to understand the world where they live, and are therefore epistemically disadvantaged by such an arrangement where they otherwise benefit. Much of the popularisation and dissemination of fictions done in our modern society is left to institutions whose role in patterns of kyriarchal oppression are largely obscured from the general public until some catalysing moment like the #MeToo movement or #OscarsSoWhite. Many dominantly situated knowers who benefit from the unequal dissemination of fictions are not even privy to the process of this inequality: the ignorance is generated *for* them.

3. "Show me the money!" - Jerry Maguire

Inescapable in our understanding of epistemic injustice enacted through fiction is the influence of capitalism; one of many differential power hierarchies operating in kyriarchal relations to others. A global capitalist economy that justifies action based on what will produce profit for private entities necessarily treats fictional texts as commodities to be bought and sold. Under capitalism, fictions are financially valuable first and foremost, before their epistemic, aesthetic, or any other value. Public outcry for better or more diverse representation in fictional media is often met with the capitalist rejoinder that such fictions are not profitable enough. Setting aside the various pragmatic arguments against that claim, this shows that sometimes epistemic injustices enacted through fictions occur not solely because of identity prejudice, but also because of intersecting aims and interests in the institutions responsible for the dissemination of resources.

Of course, one way these institutions go about guaranteeing profit is aligning their product — the fiction — with dominant epistemologies up to and including identity prejudice. As we can see from the CARDE results, capitalism thereby reinforces and reproduces dominant power hierarchies by disseminating dominant narratives through fictions sold as commodities. Heteronormativity, gender essentialism, classism, white supremacy, patriarchy, ableism, and more besides, are frequently either core themes or the 'default setting' of the most widely distributed and consumed fictions. Viewing this through Camp's framework, average consumers are — more often than not according to the CARDE

statistics — given fictions to consume which prime them to deploy characterisations favourable to the dominant powers in these hierarchical structures.

Oftentimes, fictions that provide epistemic resources for marginalised experience are only popularly disseminated where the institution has identified that it is profitable to do so. As such, it is rarely the case that the institution's primary aim is to provide fictions to marginalised peoples. For example, Disney's *Coco* (2017) is a fictional animated film set in Mexico, with Mexican culture — particularly Dia' de los Muertos — its central feature. The film grossed more than US$800 million at the box office and featured an all-Latinx voice cast. However, the film's writing team was lead by a white, Jewish, Californian man with no personal connection to Mexico or Latinx culture. The team made frequent trips to Mexico for research and drew heavily on a real-life Mexican family for inspiration. However, no Mexican person was financially compensated for the work they did educating the writing team, and the Disney corporation pre-emptively tried to trademark the phrase 'Dia' de los Muertos' for merchandising purposes, despite its apparent public domain usage.[205] This example shows that while particular fictions may themselves contain epistemic resources which do answer to marginalised experience, and are beloved for it, the institutions which produce and disseminate them may do so with something like bad faith. The institution is not committed to producing a justice where previously there was an injustice; it intends to further strengthen itself in the system of domination and oppression, through profiting upon the fictions offering these ameliorative epistemic resources.

4. Compounding Stereotype and Harmful Salience

When, for example, procedural 'cop dramas' cast Black Americans in the role of a criminal, and this happens repeatedly to the point where this type of representation is the most common one, specific things are happening for the consumer of those fictional texts. They are being primed for a perspective in which it is coherent that the Black character's

[205] Jason Guerrasio, "How a harsh criticism turned 'Coco' into Pixar's most uniquely made movie yet," *Insider,* November 16, 2017. https://www.businessinsider.com/coco-authenticity-director-did-something-never-done-before-on-pixar-movie-2017-11.

primary properties are (speculatively) criminality or moral wrongdoing. That is, that in the constellatory arrangement of properties around the subject character, 'Blackness' is given prominence and centrality, and 'criminality' is given prominence and centrality. Thus, as constituent parts of an holistic structure, an association is implied between these two properties.

This would be uncontroversial in a vacuum. A single character in a single fictional world having both Blackness and criminality as primary properties seems low-risk. However, the resemblance of a Black character to real Black people in the world, opens the door for this characterisation to be deployed in the world. If that world were one in which racialised beliefs did not exist, this again would not seem like much of a problem. But, fictions exist within macrolevel kyriarchal structures, so this characterisation is being exported to our actual world where it instantiates negative *stereotypes* of Black persons. The effect is magnified if, firstly, the consumer of the fiction does not consume any text with an alternative characterisation, and secondly, if this characterisation is also deployed in the majority of fictions available to the consumer. For Camp, stereotypes are "culturally ubiquitous"[206] species of characterisation; intuitive ways of thinking about subjects, as complex structures of properties arranged around a subject.

This is similar to Ella Whiteley's account of *harmful salience perspectives* - where the most prominent and central properties of a subject that a perspective leads someone to deploy, yields actual harm for the subject itself. Whiteley states: "we can harm someone simply in virtue of making certain things salient about them."[207] Except, in fiction the characterisation was originally intended for a fictional subject, and is now being deployed to know the actual world. Importantly, the injustice with stereotype, harmful salience, and prejudice is not necessarily that they manifest as negatively-valenced beliefs about a subject (though it can be that, as well). Rather, the harm is that people in the real world are perceived in a way reductive to their subjectivity, because certain properties associated

[206] Camp, "Frames," 19.

[207] Ella Whiteley, "Harmful Salience Perspectives," in *Salience: A Philosophical Inquiry,* ed. Sophie Archer (Routledge, 2021), Chapter 11, 1.

with them are repeatedly overshadowing others.[208] It is a dehumanising effect. For example, many would say that being nurturing as a personal trait is a good thing. Yet, when this is persistently deployed as a central and prominent property of women subjects, it can constitute widespread prejudicial beliefs that women are *fundamentally* nurturing, and this is a disservice to persons who are women.

The CARDE shows that there are significant absences of marginalised representation in the gamut of popularly disseminated fictions, but there is an issue of quality as well as quantity. As Justin Keith Fantroy showed in the tweet about his son, marginalised knowers note when fictional works generate characterisations which prominently and centrally arrange negatively-valenced properties. There may be abundant representation of marginalised subjects, but where that representation consistently emphasises negative properties and goes without challenge from alternative fictions (which characterise those subjects differently,) such representation perpetuates epistemic stereotype and bias. This is because the epistemic community consuming this set of fictions about marginalised subjects, despite there perhaps being many such fictions in the set, are only receiving the same type of epistemic resources with which to know and understand, only allowing for a finite variety of understandings. As such, marginalised subjects are still not understood, and epistemic dysfunction occurs.

5. Access issues

It is worth noting that because fictions provide epistemic resources via material goods there are barriers to consumers sharing and accessing those goods. Consumers have access to fictions impeded through their situated and hierarchical positions in the world. Some members of the public cannot financially afford to access fictions which would epistemically benefit them. The shift to subscription-based streaming or borrowing services and away from DVDs, CDs, physical books, and so on, meant many consumers rationed their expense on accessing fictions — password sharing, piracy, and exploiting free-trials became adaptations. Accessing fictions in these digital formats, too, often requires initial expense

[208] Ibid, 16.

for equipment like televisions or phones.

These financial hurdles are true for creators, as well, either in the initial creation of fictions or in disseminating them. For example, self-published authors whose books are on Amazon lost money when a TikTok trend recommended people read and return ebooks within the 2-weeks free return period.[209] Critics attributed this to Amazon offsetting the risk of profit loss to the small-business creators that use their platform.[210] The revenue loss meant creators were less able to fund future sharing of fictions.

Access issues go beyond financial, however. English as the dominant language under Western hegemony, paired with classist and colonial values around 'proper' English usage, make it difficult for non-native speakers to disseminate fictions with epistemic resources valuable for them. The long-standing denigration of languages like AAVE makes it rare for fictions presented in such language to hit the mainstream. Where it does occur, the use of vernacular English is seen as especially novel due to the absence of other fictions like it, as was seen in the popularity of fictions like Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, or Guy Ritchie's *Snatch.* (That the vernacular English in these films is that of predominantly white persons is also at play in their success.) There are access issues besides this, like geography, education, physical ability, and so on.

Access issues, where they are the result of kyriarchal conditions, lead to epistemic injustice insofar as they prevent epistemic agents from, 1) producing epistemic resources, 2) sharing or disseminating those resources, and 3) attaining resources. Access issues tend to coincide with conditions of marginalisation; for example, persistent gender and racial (among other) pay gaps which impoverish marginalised persons at higher rates than dominantly situated persons. Through such conditions, marginalised knowers are precluded from being able to disseminate fictions — and thereby contribute to their communities' epistemic resources which attend to their own concerns and experience. Much like the way

[209] Deanna Schwartz, "Authors are protesting Amazon's e-book policy that allows users to read and return," *NPR,* June 27, 2022. https://www.npr.org/2022/06/27/1107109243/amazon-kindle-ebook-return-policy.

[210] Ibid.

knowers are precluded from contributing hermeneutical resources on Fricker's account. This prevents even dominantly situated knowers from being able to access the epistemic resources needed for understanding of the marginalised subject, leading to epistemic dysfunction.

6. Censorship

Sometimes for the sake of profit, sometimes in support of particular ideologies or political movements, often both, institutions involved in fictions will employ a practice of censorship. In the context of fictions censorship is a practice where institutions, or powerful persons involved therein, dictate either the content of a fiction or the extent of its dissemination. I have already mentioned censorship that occurs once a fiction is finalised, like book bans in US schools or the *Barbie* film being banned in four countries — those affect the extent of dissemination. Here, I am particularly interested in the way institutions intervene in the creation process.

The Hays Code, a set of ethical guidelines for fictional content self-imposed in Hollywood between 1934 and 1968, saw creators pushed out of the industry unless they adhered to depiction of conservative values of dominant society. It began practices like third-party script censorship, through which the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) protected particularly the interests of Judeo-Christian morality.[211] These censorship measures belie a version of the CCV that I have not yet addressed: the belief that fictions do influence against consumer will, but that their ability to do so is dangerous to the stability of dominant culture and power hierarchies. The advent of film lead to one of the earliest moral panics around advancing technology, couched in language of saving the children from corruptive influence. As Alice Miller Mitchell wrote in 1929, demonstrating the sentiment that lead to the Hays Code: "Everywhere, all about, is the movie, flashing shadows of life on a screen, shadows which Youth thinks are real because

[211] Stephen Vaughn, "Morality and Entertainment: The Origins of the Motion Picture Production Code," *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (June 1990): 41.

they tell him what he wants to know."[212] Though, it is worth noting that the Hays Code and other regulatory measures were likely the MPPDA's effort to avoid more restrictive censorship that would have otherwise likely been handed down directly from the US government.[213] The Hays Code not only lead to fictions misrepresenting the conditions of the actual world — for example, the depiction of married couples always sleeping in separate beds — it explicitly prevented the depiction of marginalised experience, leading to gaps in epistemic resources and subsequent epistemic dysfunction.

In film and television, censorship remains endemic and persistent today. For example, Alex Hirsch, creator of the animated series *Gravity Falls* (2012) publicly shared quotes from the Disney censorship board, advising changes they had wanted made to the series during its production. *Gravity Falls* is aimed at children and young adults; it includes absurdist humour, impossible realities and physics, and on the whole relies on a premise that the ridiculous is plausible. The censors desired such changes as rewriting the line 'poopface' because they worried it sounded too much like 'shitface' and that some viewers might find it offensive.[214] They also desired the complete removal of the word 'Lucifer' from a joke that was intended as a play on parochial Southern American sayings – again, the change was to avoid the possibility of complaint from viewers. Hirsch's frustration with this process was that the recommendations seemed largely inane and founded primarily on *anticipating* negative feedback from viewers and *potential* loss of consumers of their product. "Why should we be held hostage to whatever imaginary knee-jerk career complainers who would conceivably go out of their way to pretend to be offended by this?"[215]

This example shows three things. Firstly, censorship remains a pernicious, often hidden, practice within epistemic institutions responsible for fictions. Secondly, institutions that disseminate fictions preference the desires of dominantly situated knowers in the resources they distribute via fictions, to the disadvantage of marginally situated knowers, based on

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212 Alice Miller Mitchell, *Children and Movies*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1929), 147.

213 Vaughn, "Morality," 42.

214 Alex Hirsch, "Gravity Falls? I probably shouldn't share this buttttt here are some REAL NOTES from DISNEY S&P and my REAL REPLIES. You are not prepared #10YearsOfGravityFalls," *X* (formerly *Twitter*), June 16, 2022, video, 4:43. https://twitter.com/_AlexHirsch/status/1537314312926003201?lang=en.

215 Ibid.

assumptions that the dominantly situated are more profitable consumers. Thirdly, the practice of institutional censorship frequently disrupts the process by which, recalling Camp's account, creators craft fictions according to their intention. This might seem low-risk in the case of 'poopface' and 'Lucifer,' but Disney also said of Gravity Falls' two male county police officers: "Please revise the action of Blubs putting his arm around Durland. As noted in previous concerns, their affectionate relationship should remain comical versus flirtatious."[216] That is, the normalisation of censorship as part of the process of creators getting their fictions distributed, allows institutions to intervene with overtly sociopolitical, prejudicial aims to deny certain epistemic resources to communities of knowers. This complicates our analysis of popular fictions, as the idea of 'authorial intent' becomes muddied amongst the influence of so many parties and their aims upon the fiction, before it is ever distributed.

Censorship of fictional media often leads creators to make adaptive workarounds so they can produce a fiction according to their intent. An example of this leads me to another way institutions can enact epistemic injustice: tropes.

7. Tropism

Adapted from biological tropism wherein organisms respond to environmental stimuli — like a sunflower turning to constantly face the sun — Nathalie Sarraute defines tropes as "interior movements that precede and prepare our words and actions, at the limits of our consciousness."[217] Tropism in fiction is any plot device or creative choice used so commonly in the particular genre as to become almost hackneyed. Creators accustomed to creating certain species of fiction may employ and re-employ tropes in their creative process, and this can be intentional or not. Some tropes are begun and entrenched in a genre as an evasive manoeuvre to censorship.

The 'bury your gays' trope in queer fiction originated as an adaptation to early 20th

[216] Ibid.

[217] Shusha Guppy and Jason Weiss, "Nathalie Sarraute, The Art of Fiction," *The Paris Review* 114, no.115 (Spring 1990). https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2341/the-art-of-fiction-no-115-nathalie-sarraute.

Century literary publishing codes which prohibited any positively-valenced or endorsing depiction of same-sex relationships. To circumvent the code, creators would create fiction in which same-sex relationships occurred but in which, ultimately, one party died and the other renounced homosexuality. The 'bury your gays' approach was widely adopted: "to allow LGBTQ+ authors to tell stories which featured characters like them without risking social backlash, breaking laws regarding 'promoting' homosexuality, or the loss of their career and that of their publisher."[218] As such, the gamut of queer media available when homosexuality was illegal aimed to show that homosexuality ended in tragedy. This dominated the market of available fictions where the consumer could imagine narratives of same-sex attraction, leaving little to no 'counterfactual' fictions to challenge it. The practice became established as a trope of the queer fiction genre which persists today, exceeding the lifetime of the censorship that necessitated it.

Another often cited trope is that the Black character in an ensemble horror movie cast is the one to die first (or very early). As Robin R. Means Coleman and Mark H. Harris explain:

> "In an informal and soul-crushing survey of almost one thousand horror movies containing more than fifteen hundred appearances by Black characters, we found their mortality rate to be about 45%."[219]

The statistical aggregation of the trope's usage highlights the way we know epistemic resources are used by communities; not always in isolation but often cumulatively, the apparent salience of resources only strengthened by our encounters with other resources that reinforce the understanding it engenders. That is, tropes impact epistemic practices by 'stacking up' — a single instance of a Black character or a gay character dying may not be cause for concern, but in the context of a broad trend, we can understand it as epistemically dysfunctional.

Tropism enacts epistemic injustice by entrenching creative practices to fiction genres

[218] Haley Hulan, "Bury Your Gays: History, Usage, and Context," *McNair Scholars Journal* 21, no. 1 (2017): 17. https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair/vol21/iss1/6.

[219] Robin R. Means Coleman and Mark H. Harris, *The Black Guy Dies First: Black Horror Cinema From Fodder To Oscar*, (Gallery/Saga Press, February 2023), 9.

which cumulatively produce a limited scope of epistemic resources for consumers. An overabundance of one type of resource and a lack — or lacuna — of counterfactual resources. The epistemic resource from fictional tropes like 'bury your gays' and 'the Black guy dies first' is a perspective which disposes the agent to see Black and gay peoples as (I speculate) temporary, expendable, less important — or perhaps to not pay them much attention in the first place — and characterise them with this disregard. When modern media depicting homosexuality also includes the same-sex attracted character being 'killed-off', consumers — particularly queer consumers — are exasperated. For queer consumers, there is already enough of this type of epistemic resource, and not enough of alternative epistemic resources about queer people in popularly disseminated fictions.

8. Archetype

Epistemic injustice can also be enacted via fictions — closely related to and often coinciding with tropism — through the use of fictional archetypes. Though 'archetype' has the colloquial meaning of 'perfect example' (approximately), it denotes a particular concept for fiction. As Daniel Russell Brown puts it: "there are some motifs in literature which satisfy readers and listeners in quite dissimilar societies, no matter what the origin of the motifs."[220] The universal appeal of these motifs is attributed to their reflection of experiences common to consumers *qua* being human. Creators think of archetypes as species of person-figures: the hero, the villain, the herald, the sage, and so on. Archetypal literary analysis traces the use of archetypes back to ancient fictions, and argues their persistent, context-defying resonance today.[221]

In terms of epistemic injustice from fictions, archetype is closely related to stereotype, whereby certain properties are centred in our interpretive activity. For creators and consumers, archetypes are guiding tools for creating and interpreting fiction, and as such I suggest they operate like Camp and Carolina Flores' account of *frames*, as: "representations that function to express a focal interpretive principle which organizes an agent's overall

[220] Daniel Russell Brown, "A Look at Archetypal Criticism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28, no. 4, (June 1970): 465.

[221] Ibid.

thinking about a topic."[222] An important feature is that operating from an archetype as an interpretive principle means anticipating the association of certain properties to certain subjects. For example, a hero is expected to triumph, a sage is meant to be helpful.

Epistemic harms can be enacted through fictional archetypes where that archetype sets a principle to associate actual-world subjects, which resemble the archetypal subject, with properties of the archetype in a way that misrepresents reality. The term 'manic pixie dream girl' (MPDG), for example, was coined by Nathan Rabin in 2007 in response to a trend he observed in fictional works like the films *Elizabethtown* and *Garden State*, where existentially lost male protagonists are guided on their hero's journey by charming but erratic (and white) female love interests.[223] The MPDG described a female character archetype. Even Zach Braff, in reflecting on writing the character Sam for *Garden State*, acknowledges the historicity of the archetype: "I was just copying Diane Keaton in 'Annie Hall' and Ruth Gordon in 'Harold and Maude."[224] Rabin was arguing that, in echoes of the Bechdel Test, the narrative choice of a prominent female character who seemed to exist solely to be instrumental to the male lead, was politically charged. "I coined the phrase to call out cultural sexism and to make it harder for male writers to posit reductive, condescending male fantasies of ideal women as realistic characters."[225]

Though Rabin later apologised for the term, believing its overuse in film critique bred a new sort of reductive thinking, the early intention reveals how archetype can generate epistemic injustice. It is the cumulative association of subjects with particular properties, reinforcing and perhaps creating stereotypes. But, importantly, the stereotype involved is a sort of positively-valenced idealisation, and digression from it is a 'bad thing' for the subject. This is an injustice whereby an example is set for how members of a group 'ought' to be;

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[222] Elisabeth Camp and Carolina Flores, "'That's All You Really Are': Centering Identities without Essentialist Belief," (Rutgers University) 5. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c17834dc258b4dac072be23/t/644c3b5862ae2860d5f1201f/1682717528526/CampFlores_ThatsAllYouReallyAre_July2022.pdf

[223] Nathan Rabin, "I'm sorry for coining the phrase 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl,'" *Salon,* July 15, 2014. https://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im_sorry_for_coining_the_phrase_manic_pixie_dream_girl.

[224] Zack Sharf, "Zach Braff Reacts to Critics Turning Against 'Garden State,' Plus Manic Pixie Dream Girl Backlash: 'I Can't Really Dwell on It," *Variety,* March 21, 2023. https://variety.com/2023/film/news/zach-braff-garden-state-hatred-manic-pixie-dream-girl-backlash-1235560324/

[225] Rabin, "I'm sorry."

fictions which prescribe archetypes as interpretive frames can engender in knowers an open-ended expectation that resemblant subjects in the world will adhere to or 'fit' that archetype. This is epistemically dysfunctional as, in the case of the MPDG, for example, women in the world rarely do fit the archetype, and thus cannot be understood well by epistemic activity which proceeds from it. Screenwriter Charlie Kaufman described the frustration of not living up to an archetype when he wrote the character Clementine for *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004).[226] Clementine says to the male lead:

> "I'm not a concept. Too many guys think I'm a concept or I complete them or I'm going to 'make them alive'… but I'm just a fucked up girl who's looking for my own peace of mind. Don't assign me yours."[227]

9. Wilful Ignorance

Much of these sites of injustice have been at the macrolevel, but the final site I would like to discuss is much more concerned with the knower-to-knower exchange that can happen between individuals, through fiction. Namely, where individual consumers fail to acquire new epistemic resources which attend to obscured subjects because they are unaware of the ignorance, or they choose to opt-out of fictions which would add to their epistemic repertoires in ways they find undesirable, owing to prejudice. I suggest this is an instance of Pohlhaus' account of wilful ignorance being played out in the realm of fiction.

When dominantly situated knowers unconsciously or knowingly fail to consume fictions which attend to marginalised persons, they perpetuate the kind of structurally embedded ignorance described in Mills' inverted epistemologies (mentioned earlier). Part of the problem is that dominantly situated knowers do not have the lived experience of marginalised knowers to identify and know what resources are necessary, nor is there much need under kyriarchal conditions for dominant knowers to have marginalised experiences

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[226] Ironically, the character of Clementine predates Rubin's coining of the term, and was often later cited as an example of an MPDG despite her textual protestations.

[227] *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind,* directed by Michel Gondry, screenplay by Charlie Kaufman, performances by Kate Winslet and Jim Carrey (March 19, 2004: Focus Features), DVD.

rendered salient to themselves. As Pohlhaus says, "there is nothing about the dominant knower's situation that requires her to investigate parts of the world in light of others' concerns."[228]

Wilful ignorance takes on an aspect of imaginative resistance in the context of fictions, as just like consumers don't want certain content in their *imaginative* repertoires, I suggest they can also not want the resulting epistemic resources within their own *epistemic* repertoires and that of their communities. Different to classic imaginative resistance, however, consumers can resist uptake of the fiction before imaginative engagement has even commenced; fictions can be rejected under wilful ignorance based on consumers' prior expectations and associations with the work. For example, white knowers refusing to watch *Black Panther*, or male knowers refusing to watch *Barbie*. Prejudicial thinking that is usually deployed toward marginalised persons, is here being deployed to reject fictions suspected of attending to them. An admittedly extreme example is right-wing conservative Ben Shapiro burning a Barbie doll in response to the *Barbie* film's release, urging his followers to boycott the movie.

In other cases, consumers may engage with the fiction in bad faith, resisting the prescription of the fiction's perspectives and with determination to not be moved by it. The phenomenon of 'hate-watching' audiovisual media is where imaginative resistance is not incidental, but is intentionally set as a mode of engagement with the fiction from the outset. Part of the intention in hate-watching (or general hate-*consuming*) is to pre-emptively invalidate the epistemic resources that a fiction may generate, owing to prejudice, and is thereby a site of epistemic injustice.

> *"Let me explain. No, there is too much. Let me sum up." - Inigo Montoya, 'The Princess Bride'.*

In this section I have considered nine avenues by which epistemic injustice is enacted through fictions. These are not all 'types' of injustice, some describe practices and

[228] Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing," 721.

conditions around our engagement with fictions that lead to injustice. The resultant epistemic injustices are institutional, either directly or indirectly, they harm knowers as knowers, usually in ways that overlap with marginalisation under kyriarchal power structures, and they cause epistemic dysfunction, namely that marginal knowers are misunderstood or not understood at all, and that dominantly situated knowers do not understand the world well.

"You and what army?" or, Resisting Injustice

The role of fictions in knowledge is not all doom and gloom, though. Just as fictions are the medium and site at which epistemic dysfunction — up to and including injustice — occurs, so too are they the medium and site of ameliorative practices which can improve epistemic functioning and result in just outcomes. Again, the following is not a taxonomy of all possible species of these practices, but a discussion of some notable cases.

That kyriarchal structures are generative of epistemic dysfunction through fiction, owing to the way they structure the world in preference to some and disadvantage to others, means a large part of mitigating epistemic injustice done through fictions must occur at the macrolevel. Many make the point that structural issues require structural change, and the same will be true when it comes to fictions. Interventions aimed at epistemic justice will be band-aid-like whilst the overarching structures remain in place. Which is to say, institutional and individual adaptations to the way we create and share fictions, counteract but do not eliminate the way fictions are utilised to reinforce dominant hierarchies. Fictions are still treated under capitalism as commodities for profit, and fictions are still used as tools for influencing ideology in schools, media, and popular culture in ways conducive to patriarchal, colonial, and other value systems.

Insofar as fictions can play a role in dominant hierarchies consolidating their power in society, they will be used for this, so their presence in our lives cannot *simply* be for imaginative engagement and epistemic activity, but will continue to be a site at which epistemic outcomes go wrong. As such, I believe a key measure of political resistance on

this front, which will support the need for ameliorative practices in fiction, is research like the kind undertaken for the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. Quantifying and therefore being able to realise and analyse the objective inequities in available fictions will help set goals for improvement. This data also supports the testimony of marginalised persons who claim injustice is done to them via fictions, and does so in a manner that is more credible under dominant power structures. That is, such research constitutes an epistemically privileged institution — a university — deliberately attending to marginalised experience in their provision of resources, in a way contrary to the usual kyriarchal machinations that privilege such institutions. Initiatives like this, with institutional backing that can access the resources of being more dominantly positioned, are crucial to improvement.

Nonetheless, individual knowers and institutions can take some measures to resist the kyriarchal practices around fiction that generate epistemic injustices. Fricker argues that part of redressing epistemic injustice is the cultivation of *epistemic virtue* in knowers.[229] As with Aristotelian virtue ethics, the virtuous knower is, for most, an aspirational ideal, the realisation of which requires cultivation of virtuous character through repeated, deliberative virtuous responses to situations. For this account, we might speculate that virtue epistemology occurs at the site of one's perspectival engagement with a fiction, that being the site of resource acquisition. In an ideal scenario, perhaps, the virtuous knower would have especial openness to priming by the perspective the creator has crafted, such that they make the attending reflexive judgements from the perspective with minimal imaginative resistance. When the virtuous knower encounters a fiction containing epistemic resources salient to marginalised knowers, they will therefore gain those resources. The problem, of course, is that generalised openness to influence means openness to unjust influence, as well. Because, to be open to only the 'just' resources would mean a sort of reflective deliberation on the part of the knower *during* the adoption of a perspective, which contravenes exactly the reflexive, intuitive deployment of interpretation that is constitutive of a perspective in the first place. For Fricker, the virtuous epistemic agent cultivates a "disposition to remain aware of and compensate for your prejudices."[230] But if

[229] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* 2.

[230] John Turri, Mark Alfano, and John Greco, "Virtue Epistemology," *The Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Winter 2021 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-

this were deployed during the time of engagement with fiction, the epistemic agent would be operating from competing dispositions: the virtuous disposition, and the disposition the fiction's perspective is trying to induce.

As such, I suggest the virtue-approximating action must come outside the time of imaginative engagement: firstly, in the consumer choosing the fictions with which they engage, and secondly, in reflecting upon the cognitive impact of the fictions they have consumed. It involves a consumer being mindful of their situatedness and its impact on their habitual patterns of concern and attention, such that they seek out fictions which might be ameliorative to their epistemic repertoire of resources. It also involves critically reflecting upon whether consumed fictions served this purpose or instead reified dominant, dysfunctional patterns of interpretation. This is a different picture than virtue epistemology, as while they have epistemic goals, these practices describe modes of engagement with fictions, specifically, and so I suggest they are more like *conscientiousness* in our consumption of fiction.

Conscientiousness can also be an operative principle for the creation and distribution of fiction. Some of these measures are the inverse of unjust conditions; particularly, where there is absence of fictions for some communities, and abundance for others, knowers can aim to balance the metaphorical scales. The attention of the gamut of popularly disseminated fictions trends towards dominantly situated experience. As such, by creating and disseminating ever more fictions which attend to marginalised experience, epistemic communities can expand the total catalogue of epistemic resources available in a manner that increases understanding of marginalised experience and decreases the dominance of resources which reinforce and reflect power hierarchies. Creators, in exercising conscientiousness, may ask themselves crucial methodological questions. Questions that bear in mind broader contexts, like for whom they are creating the fiction, what sort of actual-world judgements consumers might be induced to make from it and whether they are just, what is being excluded from the fiction, and so on. Self-reflectively, creators may ask themselves if they occupy a situated position appropriate for contributing resources

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virtue.

about a given subject, and if not, how they could best account for those limitations, perhaps with self-education and the compensated contribution of knowers better positioned to contribute those resources.

On a more qualitative note, agents can also employ conscientious, resistant practices in fiction by creating fictions which defy and complicate stereotypes of marginalised subjects. As noted in the previous section, some fictions even where they attend to marginalised experience can reify stereotypical characterisations of marginalised subjects. With this in mind, resistant fictions would include perspectives which generate stereotype-defying characterisations, thereby adding such resources to the gamut of fictions and the epistemic resources available from them. We saw an iteration of this in *Black Panther*, where T'challa's positively-valenced properties meant potential association of those properties with Black peoples in the world, in a way that potentially displaces stereotypical characterisations of Black subjects.

The conscientiousness of individual consumers and creators will usually need to be supported by institutional and industrial choices. For example, industries related to fictions may adopt affirmative action in their hiring processes, particularly for those directly crafting the fiction. Affirmative action measures can impact the content of the fiction directly. For example, the casting choices of actors in audiovisual media alter the characterisations consumers make within the fiction by adding observable characteristics to characters — hence the public support for Donald Glover as Spiderman. Beyond cast, conscientiously seeking to place marginalised persons as *creators* of fiction can, owing to their situatedness and its impact on creating fictions, result in fictions whose resources attend more to marginalised experience than fictions produced by dominantly situated knowers — even if the dominantly situated were expressly trying to attend to marginalised experience. For example, the HBOMax show *Our Flag Means Death* reimagines actual historical pirates Blackbeard and Stede Bonnet as lovers in an irreverent romcom narrative. The story includes multiple other queer relationships, actors of varying racial identities, and one character who is explicitly nonbinary (played by actual nonbinary actor, Vico Ortiz). That the showrunner who conceived of the show, David Jenkins, is a straight white man initially raised red flags for consumers. Except the show took pains to deliberately populate the

writing staff with creators of diverse identities. Jenkins stated:

> "it's not checking off a diversity list with a golf pencil but really being honest with yourself and asking, 'Do I have the perspectives in terms of race, gender, sexuality to create a shared sociological imagination?'"[231]

While capitalist incentive for this kind of practice is still present — public demand for diversity can, at times, make it more profitable — what Jenkins and other creators note is that the fiction itself inherits a sort of legitimacy or plausibility in its content, from the lived experience its creators bring to the crafting process. This coheres with what I have suggested elsewhere in this thesis: that situatedness of creators leads to an inherent positionality in the fictions produced from the situated mind.

There is also the outlier possibility that some fictions are created without any intent to provide epistemic resources for marginalised experience, but which marginalised knowers nonetheless take up as particularly salient to them. Disney's film *Luca* (2021) is about the bond between two male sea monster children who, passing as human when on land and wanting to run away together, join with a human girl to win a Vespa in a coastal Italian town. Many LGBTQIA+ audience members interpreted the boys' narrative as allegorical of their own experiences: same-sex childhood crushes, hiding their true selves, fraught parental relationships, impending danger of being found out, the desire to run away from home, and so on. Luca became, for many, a means to talk about growing up as a queer person, despite the film's director explicitly stating that the boys' relationship is platonic and that, actually: "The inspiration is my best friend and I, and our friendship."[232] As this example suggests, some works of fiction can be beneficial to marginalised persons despite no intent to be so on the part of the creator.

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[231] Charles Pulliam-Moore, "How Our flag Means Death's creator made a period romance disguised as a pirate comedy," *The Verge,* April 16, 2022. https://www.theverge.com/2022/4/15/23024365/our-flag-means-death-david-jenkins-interview.

[232] Kevin Polowy, "Pixar's 'Luca' debuts trailer: Director says coming-of-age adventure influenced by Miyazaki, Fellini and 'Stand by Me,'" *Yahoo Entertainment,* February 26, 2021. https://sports.yahoo.com/luca-trailer-pixar-coming-of-age-miyazaki-fellini-stand-by-me-call-me-by-your-name-143451999.html?

Part of this may be consumer desire to retrofit a fiction into something salient to themselves. We can see this quite often in the phenomenon of *headcanoning.* What is *canon* in fiction is what is true of the fiction by explicit stipulation of the creator(s). Headcanoning is the practice of a consumer imagining something to be true of the fiction, in addition to the creator's stipulations: it is the canon not in the work, but in the head. This seems, I suggest, to be a form of imaginative resistance, but not one where the consumer refuses to imagine what they are primed to imagine, so much as a particularly deliberate form of gap-filling; the creator did not say otherwise, so it is fair game. Often this additional imagined content reflects particular desires or values of the consumer. Some headcanons are innocuous and mostly for fun, but some are deployed specifically to make the fiction more resemblant to marginalised experience. For example, the character Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* franchise has long held the affection of queer fans who headcanon[233] — in addition to the canon and in the absence of mitigating content — that the character is gay. In 2016, the actor who portrayed Skywalker, Mark Hamill, said:

> "fans are writing and asking all these questions: 'I'm bullied in school … I'm afraid to come out.' They say to me: 'Could Luke be gay?' I'd say it is meant to be interpreted by the viewer. If you think Luke is gay, of course he is."[234]

Headcanoning, it seems, is closely associated with the sort of transformative works discussed earlier in this thesis, where consumers take an established fiction and, taking on the role of creator, modify, expand, and alter it. Indeed, in many cases headcanons are likely the starting point to creating a transformative work. Transformative reworkings of established fictions are another way that creators (and consumers-as-creators) can resist a sociocultural climate in which most fictions do not attend to them, by creating for themselves fictions which do, and sharing them in their epistemic communities.

Importantly, though, marginalised communities often do not agree amongst themselves

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[233] It is used both as a verb and a noun.

[234] Benjamin Lee, "Mark Hamill: Luke Skywalker could be gay," *The Guardian,* March 5, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/mar/04/mark-hamill-luke-skywalker-gay-jj-abrams-star-wars-episode-viii.

what fictions are 'good' or 'bad' for them. *Our Flag Means Death* has queer detractors who argue the show is irresponsibly reticent to the fact actual-world Stede Bonnet was a slave owner, and Blackbeard committed many atrocities; they claim re-packaging these historical figures as fun, quirky comedy may lead to other harms.[235] *Black Panther*, too, was criticised by some Black commentators for its hero's passivity, suggesting that T'Challa is more likely to reinforce 'model minority' stereotypes of Black peoples than yield better understanding.[236] Where there is *absence*, in-group disagreement often treats what fictions do exist with high-stakes; because there are so few fictions which attend to that marginalised group, therefore each individual fiction has greater significance. Further, discussion of whether a fiction is providing ameliorative resources depends much on what a knower prioritises as the harm to be mitigated. That is, a consumer interested in counteracting prejudicial beliefs that Black people are subservient, may find T'Challa's depiction too passive, whereas a consumer interested in challenging stereotypes of Black men as aggressive, may find T'Challa adequately resistant.

Disagreement within epistemic communities about which fictions best serve them, and how, are instructive for conscientious approaches to engaging with fiction. Because, although we as individual knowers can try to engage with fictions conscientiously, there is no objective standard for what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' ameliorative fiction. Fiction's epistemic value — like Pohlhaus has said of epistemic resources generally — comes from its salience for marginalised knowers, given their lived experience. Because this experience varies (though there are traceable commonalities in the experience of living in the margins) the same fictional resources will be salient for some and less so for others. For this reason, conscientiousness in our engagement with fiction — paired with awareness of kyriarchal structures and the constraints therein — is aspirational and highly context dependent; a persistent effort to make things better in response to changing demands.

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[235] I. J., "The Shoddy Ethics of 'Our Flag Means Death,'" *Medium,* April 24, 2022. https://genderqueered.medium.com/the-shoddy-ethics-of-our-flag-means-death-7d171696457b.

[236] Steven Thrasher, "There Is Much To Celebrate — And Much To Question — About Marvel's *Black Panther*," *Esquire,* February 21, 2018. https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a18241993/black-panther-review-politics-killmonger.

Conclusion

This thesis aims to address a gap in philosophical literature to give an account of fiction's apparent role in our understandings and interpretations of the actual world, despite not directly describing that world. Academic work in philosophy, neuroscience, and psychology investigates iterations of this problem with varying levels of success. It is clear from these disciplines that the mental faculty which engages with fictions is the imagination, and there are likely developmental benefits to engaging with fictions. Psychology posits fiction's utility as a dress rehearsal for life, in a vein with Walton's propositional accounts in aesthetic philosophy. Further, neuroscience provides evidence that engaging with fiction involves multiple brain centres at once, suggesting complexity in the cognitive mechanisms involved. Importantly, the academic background has a tendency to separate fictional works along elitist lines, and to examine fictions at a microlevel, as an interplay between a singular fiction and a singular imaginer. Yet fictions, regardless of their prestige, seem to have effects beyond the minds of individual imaginers, impacting the actual world.

In considering popular discourse about fictions and their role, I laid out two distinct camps of thought: the Captive Consumer View (CCV) and the View of Increased Agency (VIA). These two views summarily describe the two major species of popular discourse that occurs concerning fictions; such discussions are plentiful, and often motivated by personal interest, yet there are notable commonalities. The CCV claims that we know fictions do not describe the actual world, yet they deeply affect us, and those personal impacts of fiction are not under our control, plus fictions have extending secondary consequences in the actual world. Contrast this with the core claims of the VIA: it agrees that we know fictions are nonactual, but asserts that their actual-world effects are subject to a combination of the creator's intention and the consumer's agential choices for how to approach a fiction. Everyday creators and consumers of fiction testify to having experiences due to fiction which are not adequately explained by prior philosophical inquiry.

In negotiating this conflict, I build upon Camp's account of perspectival imaginative engagement to show that fictions are a source of epistemic resources of a unique kind, which knowers use to interpret and understand the actual world. Engagement with fictions is, at least partially, epistemic activity. The epistemic resources gained from fiction are, on this account, characterisations-via-perspectives that are accessed through engagement with fiction. The partial voluntariness of perspectives and their 'stickiness' make it even easier for knowers to perform processes of resemblance and isomorphism, which see us deploying fictional resources to the actual world. The situatedness of creators and consumers alike — knowers who interact with fiction — contextualises fictions and their impact into broader sociopolitical backgrounds. Of particular concern are kyriarchal arrangements of multiple power hierarchies which shape the world in ways consolidating to their own power. Where these kyriarchal arrangements extend to our epistemic practices of fiction, epistemic injustices occur. The creation, dissemination, and consumption of fiction along kyriarchal lines compounds knowers' marginalisation by failing to produce and disseminate epistemic resources attendant to marginalised experience, and privileging fictional resources which instantiate dominant power hierarchies.

With these conclusions, the conflict in popular views can be reevaluated. That fictions do not directly describe the actual world remains true on my account, the sole point on which both the CCV and the VIA are agreed. The CCV's claim that fictions nonetheless reflect or represent the actual world, however, is coherent, as the fictional content influences actual-world judgement through resemblance and isomorphism. That is, fictions do not aim to say 'the world is like this', rather, they give us as knowers tools to interact with the world and judge that 'the world is like this' for ourselves. That fictions move us is enabled by the affectively rich nature of characterisations and their role in the normative triangle, impacting and influencing our emotional reactions and moral sensibilities. This is also part of the explanation for the CCV's claim that this effect is somewhat unavoidable, as the adoption of the perspectives which generate such affectively rich characterisations involve a partial voluntariness, owing to the intuitive, reflexive, reactionary mode of navigating fictions that perspectives engender. Yet, this account also satisfies the VIA's claim that consumers can avoid undesirable impact if they wish, as imaginative resistance is

built into the account. So it is both true that in some cases consumers may be helpless to avoid the cognitive impact of a fiction, and in others that they exercise agency to resist the imaginative uptake of a fiction. But it is not the case that consumers are entirely captive to the influence of fictions, nor that authorial intent and consumer agency can totally override fictions' influence. Further, perspectival imaginative engagement builds in the notion of authorial intent, crucial to the crafting of a fiction and the successful uptake of a perspective in the fiction. This satisfies the VIA's desire to acknolwedge the intent of creators, but in light of the insight about partial voluntariness, the extent of authorial control over fiction's effect is limited.

We can now understand CCV-based claims that a fiction contains 'inappropriate representation' as locating how fictions can reify identity-based stereotypes through the epistemic resources they generate, the effect being that consumers apply stereotyping perspectives and characterisations to subjects in the world. 'Insufficient representation' is similarly revealed to be a critique that an absence of fictions which attend to marginalised experiences has resulted in lacunas in our epistemic resources, leaving marginalised subjects poorly or simply not understood. The CCV is also correct to highlight that negative impacts of fiction can be cumulative, and we can now understand this to be abundance of a particular type of resource from fiction which, in the absence of complicating or counterfactual resources, produce and reproduce harmful characterisations of marginalised subjects in the world. That lack of access to fiction curtails imaginative possibilities for consumers is shown in the discussion of perspectives' affectivity and fiction's ability to posit counterfactual possibilities. Further, popular preoccupation with the way fictions impact politics may be justified, because as I have shown, fictions can impact agents' interpretation and understanding of the actual world through the epistemic resources they provide. As such, it is possible for fictions to generate poor understanding of the actual world which is then utilised in political participation.

We can understand the VIA's interest in authorial intent as resulting from frustration over perceived instances of imaginative resistance. That is, Shriver and others who do not consciously intend to harm see accusations that they have done so as the result of consumers refusing to engage with their fictions in the way they want to them to do.

However, where some proponents of the VIA sees this as 'bad faith' engagement with fiction, this thesis explains it in two ways. Firstly, the account of perspectival imaginative engagement shows imaginative resistance is often involuntary, based on conflict between fiction and tacitly but deeply held values. Secondly, it is possible for fiction's to be consumed entirely according to creator intent and yet *still* be harmful when considered in macrolevel contexts. The mechanisms by which fictional resources are applied to the actual world mean that the epistemic harms from fiction cannot be eliminated by creator stipulation; in a sense, once the fiction is shared it is out of their hands.

Importantly, in this thesis I have shown that the macrolevel concerns of proponents of the CCV are legitimate, while the increased consumer agency and creator control perceived under the VIA are minimal, because actual-world contexts have causal relations to the crafting, dissemination, and consumption of fictions, owing to the situatedness of creators and consumers. Fictions are, via situated minds, both the products of, and contributions to, macrolevel (frequently kyriarchal) conditions in the world. For the CCV, this means that claims of secondary harms from fiction are reasonable; a fiction that generates a perspective and characterisation which reifies racial stereotype, for example, may be used as an epistemic resource to prejudicially judge subjects in the actual world, contributing to experiences of marginalisation for the subject, and understandings that maintain oppressive systems disadvantageous to the subject. The inextricability of fictions from macrolevel conditions presents the first real denial of a claim under either popular view; contrary to what some VIA proponents would suggest, the knock-on consequences of fictions' influence are not avoidable through sheer force of will on the part of either creator or consumer. Part of the VIA is the claim that consumers of fiction find victimhood where there need not be any, especially where harm was not intended by the creator. But where a fiction instantiates prejudicial understandings of subjects marginalised in our society, this constitutes *further* marginalisation. A marginalised subject can no more opt-out of a fiction generating poor understanding of them, than they can opt-out of the practical prejudicial treatment they receive in the world.

We have also seen, at various points in this thesis, that the dichotomy of creator/consumer is not strict: knowers can occupy each role, sometimes both, depending

on their relationship to the fiction. Thus, some extent of the adversarial setup of the conflict is false, as the same person can have interests which motivate alignment with both the CCV and the VIA. Respectively, desire to have fictions attend to you and your experience as a consumer, and also, desire for creative freedom in fiction up to and including disregarding and even transgressing experiential understanding. In light of the conclusions of this thesis, the central conflict in public discourse of fictions is illuminated. It is a conflict of a population who wish to avoid being the subject of injustice, while another denies that such injustice is even possible in order to protect their own interests. It is often really the conflict of marginalised epistemic agents who want better resources, resources which attend to their lived experiences, and dominantly situated knowers failing to perceive or acknowledge the need for them. Our engagement with fictions is more than just imaginative entertainment, it is a form of epistemic practice that impacts our interactions with the world and with one another.

The End.

Words: 35926 including footnotes

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