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Telling the Stories of Others

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Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Critiques of the ways in which artists depict cultures and social identities other than their own are increasingly ubiquitous. Some have argued that J. R. R Tolkien's depiction of the orcs in *The Lord of the Rings* reveals belief in white racial superiority (Yatt 2002), whilst others have argued that Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* has "an inherent potential for harm . . . [as a] symbol of Jewish vindictiveness, malice and hatred" (B'nai B'rith quoted in Sebag-Montefiore 2017). More recently, John Boyne's novel *My Brother's Name Is Jessica,* has been reproached for transphobia, a lack of authenticity, and repeatedly misgendering its protagonist (Yossman 2019); the film *Me Before You* has been accused of peddling an age-old 'better-dead-than-disabled' stereotype (Gilbey 2016); and Jeannie Cummins has come under fire for appropriating the border-crossing immigrant experience in her novel, *American Dirt*, with critics arguing she has produced a work of inaccurate trauma porn (Zaragoza 2020). In the world of young adult fiction books are routinely pulled prior to release due to problematic portrayals of marginalised identities (Vartan 2019).

The novelist Lionel Shriver (2016) has claimed that fiction writers are increasingly beholden to a double bind: political correctness, she argues, demands that works are diverse, containing characters from a multitude of backgrounds, yet when artists create diverse works, they are accused of appropriating the lives of Others. She writes:

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> taken to their logical conclusion, ideologies recently come into vogue challenge our right to write fiction at all. Meanwhile, the kind of fiction we are "allowed" to write is in danger of becoming so hedged, so circumscribed, so tippy-toe, that we'd indeed be better off not writing the anodyne drivel to begin with.

In other words, artists are increasingly being charged with what James O. Young terms *subject appropriation,* the representation of a culture (or its individuals or institutions) by an artist from another culture (2010: 8).[1] Shriver concludes that this line of questioning about what artists can represent ends in the abolition of fiction, in favour of memoir.[2]

Questioning whether artists can depict Others undeniably produces worries. Fictions depicting only the personal experiences of their creators would be little more than stylised autobiographies, and prohibiting writing beyond this would amount to a denial of the worlds of difference we inhabit, as well as our shared (albeit differentially experienced) encounters with social injustice. As Young puts it, "when outsiders refrain from representing insiders and their cultures, the result can be a misrepresentation of reality" (2010: 109). The representation of a variety of experiences and identities is important, their omission akin to social eradication: "representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation" (Gerbner & Gross 1976: 182). Indeed, fiction is often praised for its ability to evoke empathy for and understanding of those unlike ourselves. It explores human experiences such as love and loss, and present and past systemic wrongs, and can inspire people to reach across what are taken to be intractable differences, and influence the social imagination for the better (Cunliffe 2019).

That artists are obliged to write beyond their own lives, however, does not entail that no questions remain regarding *how* the experiences and subjectivities of Others ought to be rendered, especially in instances where otherness figures as a category with significant social implications. Here, flippant demands that artists ought to be able to create whatever works they please ignore legitimate worries held by the oppressed regarding their representation. It is not a coincidence that the criticisms above all stem from oppressed groups: black people, Jewish people, transgender people, the disabled, migrants.

1. Subject appropriation is different from other forms of cultural appropriation since in most instances it is not obvious that something is *taken* from cultural insiders (as in the case of an artefact or musical motif), yet the representation of other cultures, as James O. Young notes, is nevertheless often discussed in the same contexts as cultural appropriation (2010: 8).

2. Some authors have become incredibly trepidatious in the face of such criticism. For instance, the novelist Jonathan Franzen has remarked that he could never write a black woman character since he has never been in love with one (Samuelson 2016), and admitted to having considered adopting an Iraqi war orphan in order to understand younger generations (Flood 2015).

Like other cultural appropriation debates, the examination of subject appropriation is often unhelpfully presented in binary terms in popular discourse, polarised around claims of *universal entitlement* and *universal restrictiveness* to the cultural goods and worlds of others (Nguyen & Strohl 2019). In the context of subject appropriation the claim unfolds as write anything you please with abandon, or write nothing beyond what you know. Yet the tools of philosophy can trouble this binary. In this paper, I will determine *when* subject appropriation is of moral concern and *why* that is. I will pay particular attention to the problem of misrepresentation, perhaps the most prevalent worry raised by minorities regarding subject appropriation, albeit one not yet fully spelt out. Following Erich Matthes, who argues that "the wrong of appropriation is rooted in imbalances of power" (2019: 1003), and that what must ground our objections of appropriation "is the way in which they manifest and/or exacerbate inequality or marginalisation" (2019: 1004), I will argue that subject appropriation is of moral concern when dominantly situated artists misrepresent the experiences and subjectivities of the oppressed, given that misrepresentations of these groups exacerbate and perpetuate their oppression and/or marginalisation both materially and discursively.[3]

The claim that subject appropriation exacerbates and perpetuates oppressive relations is not an entirely novel contention. Indeed, traces of the claim that misrepresentation worsens oppression are littered throughout (mostly non-academic) treatises against culturally appropriative misrepresentation written by members of marginalised groups. However, key premises of the argument against misrepresentation await a robust defence, which I provide in this paper. In particular, I articulate what exactly a misrepresentation is, how it is possible to misrepresent what is ultimately a fictional experience, and how it is possible to learn poor epistemic habits and deficient understandings of the social world from fictitious sources.

In the first section I will provide an overview of what misrepresentations of the experiences and subjectivities of the oppressed entail. In the second section I will detail the ways in which these misrepresentations uphold oppression at both the material and ideological level. In the third section I will argue that misrepresentation by dominantly positioned artists is not inevitable, although I will

3. Of course, there very well may be further, often connected, ways in which subject appropriation is morally impermissible, whether misrepresentative or not, not necessarily best captured by the paradigm of worsening oppressive relations; instances may count as theft (Keeshig-Tobias, 2017), contribute to patterns of epistemic injustice (Matthes 2016), remove opportunities for the oppressed to create works about themselves (Hurka 1994), constitute the disinheritance of one's culture or otherwise undermine one's rightful cultural authority and/or autonomy (Browning 1992; Todd 1990), or impermissibly transgress on relations of shared intimacy amongst members of a cultural or social group (Nguyen & Strohl 2019). Additionally, there are likely instances in which subject appropriation is not at all morally impermissible.

outline epistemic mechanisms increasing its likelihood, along with epistemic and material incentives that motivate the dominantly situated to (re)produce misrepresentations. There will not be space here to explore the extent to which artists hold responsibility for the effects of their work. However, given the disastrous results of misrepresentations, I conclude by gesturing towards suggestions to facilitate their avoidance. My focus will be on realist narrative fiction (or those that resemble the real world and its social relations, albeit for a bracketed fantastical element). This genre both enjoys higher levels of commercial success, and almost always requires the envisioning of alterity, although I suspect my arguments may apply elsewhere in the representative arts.

1. Misrepresentations

Misrepresentation is a common charge in the subject appropriation debate (see Browning 1992; Hurka 1994; Todd 1990), although a unified account of what misrepresentation involves is still required. The very notion of misrepresentation alludes to the possibility of an accurate representation, yet often these works are fictitious, lacking real-world correlates. Moreover, the possibility of accurate representation seems to presuppose an essentialised understanding of the experience and subjectivity of the oppressed. As Zadie Smith (2019) puts it, "What does it mean, after all, to say 'A gay man would never feel that!' or 'A black woman would never do that!'? How can such things possibly be claimed absolutely, unless we already have some form of fixed caricature in our minds?". I will first outline what we might take to be misrepresentations of the experience and subjectivity of the oppressed, before dispelling the worries discussed above in the next section in order to establish that worries over misrepresentation are well founded.

Oppression is a complex system of social relations that privileges one group whilst simultaneously and necessarily subjugating another group. These relations are often not transparent and in many cases those who are members of the oppressing class do not realise their complicity in the systems of oppression. Ann Cudd defines oppression as "the existence of unequal and unjust institutional constraints" (2006: 52). These institutional constraints involve harm to one social group whilst benefitting another and include "legal rights, obligations and burdens, stereotypical expectations, wealth, income, social status, conventions, norms, and practices" (2006: 50), permeating both the civic and private sphere. Elsewhere, Iris Marion Young (2005) famously characterises oppression as possessing five faces; *exploitation* uses the labour of others to produce profit; *marginalisation* relegates a certain group to a lower social standing or the outskirts of society; *powerlessness* refers to the ways in which a lack of power inhibits one's

individual capacities and engagement with the political community; *cultural imperialism* refers to the normalisation of the culture of the dominant group; and *violence*, which is the most obvious and visible face of oppression. Given my concern with narratives that reflect our actual or historical social relations, the groups with which I am concerned here are what Cudd terms "non-voluntary social groups" (2006: 44), groups predicated on socially salient identity features such as race, gender, sexuality and class that generate group-based social constraints. As such, the systems of oppression I am correlatively concerned with are white supremacy, the heteropatriarchy, ableism, classism and so on.[4]

Most simply then, we might say that misrepresentations of the subjectivity and experiences of the oppressed and marginalised represent the experience of oppression and the subjectivity of the oppressed incorrectly. This abridged, common-sense understanding is what critics of subject appropriation have previously relied upon. For instance, whilst arguing that whites in Canada should refrain from writing about racial minorities, Thomas Hurka writes simply that one reason to support such a proposal is that "whites don't understand the experience of racial minorities and will therefore misrepresent it" (1994: 51). Similarly, Janisse Browning (1992) expounds on the harms of misrepresentative subject appropriation, but focusses on the *source* of the misrepresentation, as opposed to offering up a definition of such misrepresentations. She writes, "any representation of ourselves and our cultural experiences done by an outsider would be from a comparatively superficial perspective, simply because he/she hasn't had the experience of surviving racial oppression" (1992: 33).

However, in order to establish misrepresentation as a serious problem for dominantly situated artists and allow an alternative mode of representation to be articulated, we must first establish the sense in which it makes sense for oppression(s) to be rendered incorrectly. What follows is a tentative, non-exhaustive and interrelated initial account. With that in mind, we might say that misrepresentations include:

a) Representations of oppressed groups or their members wholly or mostly reliant on positive and/or negative stereotypes about or simplifications of one or more parts of their subjugated social identity and/or experience.

This mode of misrepresentation involves instances in which a character's identity is the most significant thing about them, where there would be

4. I reject single issue framings of these systems given they fail to serve those who are multiply oppressed, by, for instance, racism *and* sexism. Moreover, such framings hide the ways in which one can be oppressed by one system yet oppress in other.

little left to the character if this element were removed. More often than not these representations involve stereotypes, defined by Paul Taylor as "archetypal personifications of . . . prejudices, defined by single, characteristic traits . . . rather than by complex configurations that make for unique personalities" (2016: 52). Unfortunately such depictions have been extremely common in the history of representing the oppressed; gay men are overwhelmingly represented in fictions as camp, gay women as butch, black men as violent, Native Americans as backwards, east Asians as good at maths and so on.

This mode of misrepresentation also involves simplifications of oppressed identities. These habitually misconstrue and reduce the complexity of the lived experience of oppression or living with an oppressed identity, eschewing richly drawn characters in favour of depictions of oppression as an all-encompassing negative experience devoid of any and all pleasure, or making the possession of an oppressed social identity a character's only remarkable feature.

b) Representations that downplay the harms, existence or enveloping nature of living under oppression, including effects to one's material life, psyche and so on.

By this I am referring to stories that aim to be true to life but in which peoples who are oppressed in our world appear untouched by oppression in the fictive world, in any realm of their life. Examples include instances in which a character supposedly possesses some oppressed identity but where this receives no explication nor explanation; instances in which a character's identity appears to have made no impact on her achieving that which is difficult for the oppressed in the real world; and instances in which a character acts in a way that suggests oppression does not exist, specifically in instances in which it would be dangerous to act that way in the real world.

The extent to which this counts as misrepresentation will, of course, depend on the story. Not all works will be able to provide concrete backstories of structurally inflected hardship for every character and demonstrate that systems of oppression entail the rarity of a woman's appointment as CEO, or a black man's appointment as a chief of police for instance. Yet, perhaps where protagonists hold a subjugated identity, we can say that where oppression is ignored, this is misrepresentation. Even where the oppressed gain privilege in one realm such as class, there still exist stereotypical expectations, conventions, norms and so on that align with oppression based

on, for instance, gender and race, and works which do not capture this are in some sense misrepresentative.[5]

c) Representations that ignore, blur or get wrong the historically relevant facts about the group and their marginalisation, or that include falsities about how the group came to be oppressed, or that represent characters as deserving of their subjugation.

This mode of representation tends to involve what the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti characterises as starting stories with 'secondly':

> It is easy to blur the truth with a simple linguistic trick: start your story from 'Secondly.' . . . Start your story with 'Secondly,' and the arrows of the Red Indians are the original criminals and the guns of the white men are entirely the victims . . . start with 'Secondly,' for the anger of the black man against the white to be barbarous. (2004: 178)

This mode of representation inverts key facts about why a group is oppressed by making it appear that they are deserving of structural disadvantages, lower social status, violence and so on. Often this occurs via the mystification of certain histories, or via the appearance of oppression as a natural and inevitable course of action given the way oppressed groups simply are. For instance, representations of sexual violence as a justified punishment for women's actions, representations of minorities as deserving of poverty and social segregation and representations of the sexually diverse as deserving of AIDs.

5. Of course, this leads to a tension between the desire to not misrepresent, and the desire to represent alternative non-oppressive but otherwise seemingly realist worlds in which someone currently oppressed in our world can live free of oppression fictively. The latter is especially important given arguments that fictional representations create possibilities for us to see ourselves differently, to follow other paths than the one that appears to be set out before us. The latter kinds of representations, however, are perhaps best thought of as existing in near possible worlds to ours in which oppression does not so significantly prohibit one's possibilities. The problem is that it is often difficult for audiences who are unknowledgeable about oppression to understand that such stories exist in near possible worlds, as opposed to our world, and, as such, stories which make oppression appear to be a non-issue for folks with oppressed identities are treated in the same way as misrepresentations, which is to say, as I shall argue below, treated dangerously. This tension may simply be irresolvable until there is more awareness of the reality of oppression, given the importance of the latter kind of representation to oppressed groups (and perhaps even resistance to our non-ideal oppressive reality). Thanks in particular to Cheryl Frazier, Kate Wojtkiewicz, Zoe Cunliffe and Irina Schumski for fruitful discussion on this point.

d) Representations that exaggerate the ease with which oppression can be resisted or confronted, or representations that individualise the ways in which marginalisation and oppression occurs, casting it as the result of a few bad actors rather than a vast system of institutions and social relations.

This mode of representation tendentially depicts both the experience of and resistance to oppression as synonymous to the experience of bullying, individualising oppressive relations, blurring the unequal and unjust institutional constraints and social structures organising social life. They also fail to highlight the interest the privileged have in maintaining the current social order, instead depicting oppressors as coming to their senses, often due to the actions of a kind-hearted ally rather than those of a member of an oppressed group, a simple triumph of the good over a few bad eggs. Often, this mode of misrepresentation lurks in the past, rendering the overcoming of oppression as something that has, for the most part, already happened, lingering on mid-twentieth-century civil rights struggles or the advancement of women from the home to the workplace, rather than on the ways in which racism or sexism still persist today.

e) Representations that purport to signify, or will reliably be taken to signify, the single story of a group or a people, either by depicting their experiences as more or less homogenous and their subjectivities as more or less uniform, and/or by filling a dearth of knowledge in the collective understanding of an experience or subjectivity in a given context.

The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) has stressed that fiction has the power to create a single story of marginalised experience. This can happen when either all stories of that experience, or the subjectivities of those who live it, are depicted more or less homogenously but also, if it is the only story which exists at any prominence regarding that experience or identity. In such instances, the fiction becomes a single story by the omission of other stories of such peoples from our popular fictional landscapes (and more general understanding). When these stories do appear, and especially when they receive popular acclaim, they might be thought to be and/or present themselves as the definitive story of an experience, social positionality, subjectivity and so on, given that there are few other stories to compare them to regarding the subject matter they represent. As such, almost by accident, such fictions can misrepresent by flattening and homogenising the experiences and subjectivities of others into

> a single story, failing to articulate the fullness of marginalised lives, their interconnectedness with those different to them and the variety of worldviews possessed amongst them as they are only telling a single story of that experience. For instance, Jeannie Cummins's American Dirt might be taken as the definitive story of crossing the US/Mexico border.

Crucially, none of these suggestions entail there is one way to get the representation right. We might expect that for every way that one can misrepresent oppression, there is another way that one can represent it more accurately. Despite commonalities in the experience of oppression, there are not defining features that lead to a homogenous experience. No two women will have the exact same experience of oppression, nor will two transgender men, nor will there be synonymous experiences of oppression shared across oppressed groups. Moreover, at this juncture we must acknowledge that there is nothing to prevent artists from oppressed groups from misrepresenting the experience of being oppressed. James O. Young even argues that the equal capacity from above and below for misrepresentations means that misrepresentation cannot explain the wrong of subject appropriation qua cultural appropriation (2010: 108). However, for reasons that will become clearer in the next section, I propose that instances of insider misrepresentation deserve a separate analysis, and do not undermine, nor ameliorate the wrong of dominant artists making misrepresentative works.

2. 'Learning' From Fiction

It would be easy to write off misrepresentations as trivial, or perhaps offensive. Given their fictional status why should we care about them? Are criticisms rooted merely in a millennial snowflake sensibility? I answer, no. Misrepresentations of the experiences and subjectivities of the oppressed lead to the exacerbation and perpetuation of oppression, despite their fictional status. This is due to their ability to epistemically corrupt. Audiences gain false beliefs regarding the oppressed from misrepresentative fictions that they take to be true.[6] Note that this claim circumvents worries regarding whether it is possible to learn *facts* from fiction, a question which has spawned its own extensive literature.[7] All that we need establish here is that these narratives perpetuate and strengthen a web of morally reprehensible false beliefs that already exist in the social imagination,

6. James O. Young argues that works which distort and misrepresent suffer from an aesthetic flaw (2010: 56) but here I will be focussing on the moral dimensions of misrepresentation.

7. See Friend (2014) for a summary.

functioning as knowledge-that and knowledge-of-what-it-is-like regarding the oppressed.

Much of our layperson's understanding of that which stands outside our direct experience, our impressions of other worlds and lives, is acquired from fictional sources. Often, we seek out fictional works explicitly to learn about these things. Audiences gain propositional beliefs about how to administer cardiopulmonary resuscitation and courtroom etiquette from fiction, but also what oppression is, how it functions, and what it is like to live with a subjugated identity. Sometimes we may even seek out fictions exploring the latter set of themes to aid in making sense of our own experiences. There is evidence in the psychological literature that artworks shape and cause beliefs in their audiences.[8] Importantly, these exported beliefs need not be true. Tamar Gendler argues that where fictional narratives resemble the actual world, then readers will export that which they take to be true in both the narrative world and the actual world into their personal stock of beliefs (2000: 76). A study by Marsh, Meade and Roediger (2003) echoes this. They establish that we gain facts *and* misinformation that we take to be fact from fictional sources, and we use both sets of information in our lives as if they are knowledge. As such, misrepresentations of the oppressed can be epistemically corruptive, leading to the exportation of false beliefs from fiction that function as knowledge-that; for instance, false beliefs (which the audience take to be knowledge) that oppression occurs predominantly amongst individuals, that Native Americans are responsible for their subordinate status, or that black men are prone to sexual violence.

Narrative fictions are also well placed to lead to the exportation of beliefs that masquerade as knowledge-of-what-it-is-like due to their ability to get inside of us, appearing to offer experiential and subjective understanding of others. George Poulet (1969) argues that fictions open themselves to their reader. He writes, "the extraordinary fact . . . is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside" (1969: 54). Immersed inside the work we become aware of

> a rational being, of a consciousness; the consciousness of another, no different from the one I automatically assume in every human being I encounter, except that in this case the consciousness is open to me, welcomes me, lets me look deep inside itself, and even allows me, with unheard-of license to think what it thinks and feel what it feels. (1969: 54)

Narratives often offer us intimate portraits of the subjectivity of an other. Poulet argues we think of these thoughts as our very own, we are on loan, as it were,

8. See J. O. Young (2017) for a summary.

whilst "this other thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within me" (1969: 57). For Poulet, this is the only way in which fiction's ability to make us *feel* becomes explicable. It is also reflected in the language we use to talk about fictions, good and bad; they "grip us", they "immerse" us, we "get into" them. We think and feel as their characters think and feel; we cry, laugh, gasp. Whilst fictions, by definition, are unreal, we often experience them as real. When we enter into fictions, we are given intimate glances of other consciousnesses that are embroiled in worlds often vastly different to our own, and we take ourselves to gain understanding of the lives of these others.

Max van Manen (1985) echoes Poulet's analysis, emphasising fiction's pedagogical abilities. He writes that "what fictional literature reveals to us is a knowing that is more like a living. We indirectly come to know what we cannot grasp, see, hear or feel in a direct or conceptual way" (1985: 178). Van Manen is referring here to fiction's ability to impart an understanding of the subjectivities and experiences of others. Reflecting on Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, van Manen writes that through the eyes of Ruth he learns what-it-is-like for a sensitive girl to grow up in her grandmother's care, having been left by her mother. His and Ruth's consciousness become intertwined. He begins to feel an aloneness, "a feeling of missing something, a waiting for something" (1985: 179) that is shortly after confirmed by Ruth. Van Manen writes that he has been given a life experience, "a living understanding of what it is like to grow up in the haunting presence of an absence. . . . It leaves me, the reader, shaken with a *knowledge which is like a living*" (1985: 180, emphasis added).

Fiction furnishes us with beliefs that we understand this or that experience, an understanding based outside of language, in an imagined experience. This is the second way in which fictional narratives have the scope to be epistemically corruptive, imparting beliefs based on a presumed empathetic understanding of the lifeworlds of Others, that masquerade as knowledge-of-what-it-is-like. For instance, audiences may come to believe on the basis of misrepresentations that disability is a hardship not worth enduring, or that certain genders do not precipitate any structural disadvantages.

But how does the perpetuation of false beliefs about the oppressed constitute a contribution to and perpetuation of oppression? In the first instance we might argue that misrepresentations feasibly lead to a slew of harms to the oppressed. That the currency of false beliefs about oppressed groups and their experiences is harmful is well documented. Multiple studies point to the damaging effects on marginalised groups themselves via mechanisms such as stereotype internalisation (Speight 2007), stereotype threat (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn 1999; Steele & Arsonson 1995), and adverse effects on self-esteem (Crocker & Major 1989). Moreover, some philosophers have pointed to the ways in which marginalised groups can be misunderstood or silenced by dominant groups who hold false

and stereotypical beliefs about them (Fricker 2007; Langton & West 1999; Maitra 2009), and Kristie Dotson (2011) has argued that being aware that dominant groups hold these perceptions may even encourage marginalised peoples to smother their own testimonies.[9]

Yet this is only part of the picture. Misrepresentations contribute to and perpetuate oppression through their influence on the social imagination and the manner in which it structures our social world in ways that we are often not consciously aware. The social imagination is comprised of common conceptions, interpretations, or understandings shared amongst a given population, but which tend to serve the dominantly situated. This store of meanings and scripts constitutes the shared background for our social interactions. The influence of this imagination and the cultural representations it produces entails that those under its sway, those who are dominantly situated, "are likely to develop epistemic habits that protect established cultural expectations and make them relatively blind and deaf to these things that seem to defy those expectations" (Medina 2013: 68).

Discourses contribute to the social imagination, even when fictional, constructing and maintaining a particular vision of social reality. In the world we live in this vision privileges certain interpretations of the social world over others, those visions which justify the existence of oppression, making the oppressed seem worthy of their lower social standing, marginalisation and abuse. For instance, with regards to race, Charles Mills (1997) has famously argued that a tacit (albeit at times explicit) agreement—the racial contract—exists amongst white people to promote and maintain the ideal of white supremacy. As such, racism functions as a dominant ideology which entails that only those visions which further this agreement can exist in the social imagination. Interpretations that attempt to lay bare the functioning of oppression as a complex system of social relations that privileges one group, whilst simultaneously and necessarily subjugating another group, do not achieve a dominant status due to their contents being fundamentally at odds with our oppressive social reality, and the social imagination it has spawned. Mills writes, that under this ideology "one has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority" (1997: 18). An epistemology of ignorance is prescribed in which "whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made . . . [they] will live in an invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland, a 'consensual hallucination'" (1997: 18). In other words, the continued existence of oppression is reliant on the ignoring of reality and a subsequent continual proliferation of misrepre-

9. Erich Matthes has drawn clear links between cultural appropriation that harmfully misrepresents and epistemic injustice. See Matthes (2016).

sentations of oppression as not particularly oppressive. This occurs in our news media—for instance, the characterisation of black protest as looting—but it also occurs in our fictive worlds.

Patricia Hill Collins calls attention to the power of what I have been calling misrepresentations in relation to stereotypical images of black women:

> Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression. As part of a generalised ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols or creating new ones (2009: 76).

Collins terms these symbols *controlling images,* contending further that they "are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (2009: 77). By extension we can see that representations which downplay the harms of oppression, misconstrue the reasons for oppression, and exaggerate the ease with which oppression can be resisted all perform similar functions in the social imagination: they blur the objective facts behind oppressive realities, instead making injustices appear to be inevitable.

Moreover, misrepresentations, repeated by dominantly situated artists in fictions, serve ideological purposes. They perpetuate and exacerbate oppressive social schemas through their contribution to socially sanctioned ignorance. José Medina characterises socially situated ignorance as epistemic laziness, a "socially produced and carefully orchestrated lack of curiosity" (2013: 33). Medina argues that the mechanisms of oppression that create marginalisation are often placed outside of the cognitive reach of the powerful such that their understanding of the social world is often severely limited. The dominant have a vested interest in seeing the world wrongly. Ignorance is a near-codified epistemic practice amongst dominant groups, resulting in countervailing evidence suggesting the norms of one's society are not basically just or fair being routinely dismissed, and maintaining a general level of ignorance amongst a population about the objective nature of social relations.

The misrepresentation of the experiences and subjectivities of the oppressed is integral to the functioning of oppressive ideologies. In order to create, perpetuate and justify domination and inequality, misleading views about social groups need to circulate, and be afforded a prevalent status within a given society's

social imagination.[10] Fictional sources, then, perpetuate and exacerbate oppression by acting as vehicles for the further proliferation of the misrepresentations on which oppression relies. They furnish or reconfirm in audiences beliefs that masquerade as knowledge regarding oppression, but which actually distort oppressive realities. Single stories of what it is like to be oppressed are repeated, whilst those that trouble this narrative are disregarded, and stories are filled with misinformation about the causes of oppression, stereotypes about peoples, and depictions of both lives that are relentlessly miserable and situations that are inaccurately easy to overcome.

Of course, audiences, like oppressed groups, are not homogenous and there will be conditions under which audiences are more or less likely to export false beliefs about oppressed groups. Overall, we might assume that where an audience is more informed about the history and experience of the oppressed group in question, they will be less likely to export falsities from the work. Yet, whilst there are indeed exceptions, audiences who are not members of oppressed groups tend to rely on dominant understandings of the identities and experiences of marginalised groups present in the social imagination and these are often misleading if not plain wrong. As such, where misrepresentations align with dominant (false) understandings of the subjectivities and experiences of the oppressed, we can expect those misrepresentations might bolster the dominant (false) understandings, and lead to the harms outlined above. Importantly, the oppressed are not immune to coming to believe the pernicious lies that misrepresentations express about their experiences, resulting in a double harm. Those that come to hold the dominant understanding of their experience must both live with the harmful effects of misrepresentations held in the minds of others, and have their own experiences and self-perception shrouded in confusion, internalising, for instance, racist and sexist discourses that make one's very existence feel mistaken in some sense.

Misrepresentations then plausibly facilitate both the acquisition and reconfirmation of false beliefs and understandings of oppressed groups. When fictional misrepresentations are in line with dominant cultural conceptions of oppression, and where audiences have little to no contradictory beliefs regarding the identity or experience in question, they are more likely to export or reconfirm the potentially harmful false beliefs regarding the group in question. There exist large gaps in our explanatory resources. More often than not, whilst the dominantly situated possess all that they need to make sense of their social experiences, the oppressed are, as Miranda Fricker writes, "more likely to find themselves having

10. Again, there is no space here to fully discuss the moral relationship between artists and the effects of their creations but any account attempting to do so will need to acknowledge that in most instances they will likely be drawing on the problematic social imaginary unconsciously (although this should not be exculpatory).

some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible" (2007: 148). There is much discussion regarding the extent to which explanatory resources are lacking *amongst* the oppressed or whether, in most instances, they do possess the interpretive resources they need to make sense of their experiences, but that the oppressive social forces prevent these from attaining a collective status in the social imagination (Mason 2011; Polhaus 2012; Romdenh-Romluc 2017). But it is not a leap to suggest that these interpretive gaps, and an overreliance on the interpretation of reality present in the (dominantly structured) social imagination, is common amongst dominantly situated artists. If it is the case that power functions to keep these meanings 'from below' suppressed, preventing them from attaining social recognition, then it seems that the dominantly situated author will most likely be progressing with a hermeneutical gap in their understanding of the experiences and subjectivities of the oppressed. Moreover, they may find it hard to truly rid themselves of previous understandings.

We can return finally to Smith's worries, introduced at the outset of the previous section. What does it mean to say "a gay man would never feel that", or "a black woman would never do that"? I suggest that the contents of these statements is more akin to *stop showing gay men as feeling that and only that, the prevalence of this misrepresentative narrative confuses both ourselves and others regarding the multifaceted nature of homosexuality in deeply harmful ways*; or *in the context of the oppressive relations that we live under, for a black woman to act in this way would be vanishingly unlikely, either because of the repercussions that might befall her, or because this action is all but prohibited to her to begin with, and to suggest otherwise, in a realist context, perpetuates these oppressive relations through a denial of their existence*. As noted above, there of course needs to be room in our fictional worlds for optimistic representations of worlds in which it is possible for people to be free from oppression, but, where these appear to mimic reality, then they pose an oppressive danger.

Resolving Smith's worry also allows us to return to my suggestion that misrepresentations of marginalised groups that come from artists in the groups themselves require a separate analysis, (beyond the simple fact that they are not cases of subject appropriation). I do not deny that insider misrepresentations are concerning. In fact, they might be more likely to result in the exportation of noxious false beliefs due to unwarranted credibility excesses in which audiences take the social position of the creator to mean that there is a higher level of veracity in the works' contents (see for instance Davis 2016; Matthes 2016).

However, I contend that both the phenomenon of insider misrepresentation and the harms that it leads to deserve to be partitioned for two reasons. Firstly, as I have argued, one of the key worries regarding misrepresentations of the marginalised concerns the propensity of misrepresentations to epistemically cor-

rupt audiences via the acquisition and reconfirmation of false beliefs and understandings of the experiences of oppressed groups. Whilst, in some instances, the marginalised will possess resources to resist narratives that uphold oppressive ideologies and social structures, this will not always be the case. This is something that James O. Young also acknowledges with regards to subject appropriation. He writes, "most insidiously, insiders could begin to see themselves as others see them and their culture can be distorted [in their own eyes]" (Young 2010: 25). In fact, the mechanisms of oppression systematically seek to prevent the attainment of alternate hermeneutical resources and alternative frameworks, of accurate accounts of history and relations of domination. Oppression, in order to maintain itself, must not appear to be very oppressive. Cultural imperialism, as a face of oppression, takes the culture of the dominant and forcibly establishes it as the norm, seeking to control how a given population interprets the social world around them (I. M. Young 2005). Pedagogical apparatuses are introduced to strip minorities of their culture and forcibly assimilate them, such as the Canadian Indian residential school system which sought to (sometimes literally) "kill the Indian in the child" (B. Young 2015), or the United Kingdom's Section 28 law which made learning about homosexuality in schools illegal (Sanders & Spraggs 1989). The dominant seek to eliminate counter hermeneutical frameworks and resources and reassert their deficient explanatory frameworks. As such, members of marginalised groups sometimes come to internalise negative images of themselves that circulate in the dominant social imagination as I demonstrated above and, without a strong counter community, we might suppose that this leads to insider misrepresentations where one is stripped of their culture and turned from their history. Whilst these misrepresentations may lead to similar consequences, the fact that they stem from an internalisation of oppressive social norms and discourses that seek to corrupt one's sense of self, or separate them from their culture, seems reason enough to grant them a separate treatment.

Yet, in instances where marginalised creators have resisted the picture of their experiences present in the social imagination, there is reason to believe that their misrepresentations still warrant separate treatment due to the compromised opportunities they are often offered. As Nesrine Malik articulates the problem, publishers are mostly interested in stories where "the protagonists are flat-pack characters that can be assembled quickly into a neat stereotype that fits comfortably into the white, mainstream readers' worldview" (Malik 2020), that don't disrupt the single story of hardship and alienation already told about such peoples. They often require stories of marginalised experience to be reductive, unnuanced, uninterested in the social structures that are productive of marginalisation and oppression. Thus, Malik continues, stories "about Mexicans must be about cartels and migrants and tortured brown faces on the lookout for the deliverance of a border. A story about Muslim women must be one of escape from

'behind the veil'" (Malik 2020). The act of representation in the cultural industries is predicated on audience reception and narratives with reach, narratives that do not unsettle the social imagination, are ultimately commodities**.** Narratives that confusingly resist the shared context of the dominant social imagination are deemed not worth investing in and numerous marginalised creators report being asked to alter their works to appeal to mainstream audiences. The director Lulu Wang has revealed that in the process to find funding for her fantastic Asian-American family drama The Farewell, both American and Chinese financiers consistently pushed her to introduce prominent white characters (Kohn 2019), whilst in the publishing industry the novelist Marie Mutsuki Mockett has shared that her novel was rejected after she refused a publisher's request to make her half-Japanese protagonist 'more white' (Cain 2015). The act of misrepresenting in accordance with pressure from gatekeepers in the cultural industries then, of being asked to create cultural products which express the dominant group's interpretations and views of the world, societal events, and social groups (I. M. Young 2005), is surely a different act when performed by insiders and outsiders. The former, when undertaken knowingly, is a negotiation with oneself, a potential compromise or sacrifice of integrity or authenticity,[11] in exchange for a chance to make one's work in a hostile world and industry and be paid for it. The latter, on the other hand, appears more straightforwardly to be an act which perpetuates the oppression of Others whilst protecting one's own privilege.

3. The (Non)Inevitability of Misrepresentation

I will now address whether dominantly situated artists will inevitably misrepresent oppressed groups, as argued by some. If so, dominantly situated artists may be obliged to refrain from appropriating the subjectivities and experiences of the oppressed in their works. Ultimately, however, I will establish that it is merely a prevalent phenomenon that occurs due to the diminished capacities of the dominantly situated to know and/or imagine what the lives of others are like, alongside incentives that motivate the dominantly situated to (re)produce misrepresentations.

Thomas Hurka (1994) argues that whilst marginalisation and oppression exist, dominant writers will inevitably misrepresent minority experiences due to a lack of understanding, and as such, they should refrain from attempting to do so because their works will be taken by other members of a dominant culture as getting it right. He proposes that misrepresentations stem from the lack of pub-

11. See Paul C. Taylor's comments in *Black Is Beautiful* (2016) for a fruitful discussion that complicates the notion of authenticity implied here.

lished minority voices which, were they present, could both educate dominant groups and be used as a yardstick against which misrepresentations by outsiders could be judged. Yet it is not clear why a lack of published marginalised and minority self-representation would necessitate misrepresentations. Whilst the biases of the cultural industries that prevent parity of production discussed earlier are indeed a problem, a lack of works is not a complete absence, and so it seems that authors do have resources to draw on in order to create non-misrepresentative works.

Janisse Browning makes a similar argument and also recommends dominantly positioned artists refrain from representing the oppressed, citing the dominant's lack of lived experience in surviving oppression and a tendential failure "to acknowledge, challenge and thus change their positions of privilege" (1992: 33) as reasons for this. But, whilst relatively uncommon, there exist instances in which dominantly positioned artists have engaged in subject appropriation and not misrepresented the subjectivities and experiences of the oppressed: there appears to be a positive consensus amongst the oppressed groups in question[12] that Andre Aciman depicted a queer summer romance well in *Call Me By Your Name,* that Leo Tolstoy depicted women well in *Anna Karenina* and that Carson McCullers has depicted well across abilities and sexualities, and, perhaps most famously, race in *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter*.

James O. Young and Susan Haley term Hurka and Browning's position the "privileged knowledge argument" (2009: 275). They contend that this argument falsely supposes that group "insiders" will necessarily possess knowledge regarding their group's experiences that an "outsider" could not gain, and they strongly deny that a lack of access would necessarily result in problematic misrepresentation. Appealing to Tony Hillerman's detective novels about the Navajo they argue that there are instances in which an "outsider" has successfully represented less privileged "insiders". Moreover, they argue that the "privileged knowledge argument" must be symmetrical such that the marginalised misrepresent the dominant in equal measure, yet they take the success of writers such as Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan-born Canadian, as evidence that the "privileged knowledge argument" does not hold whatsoever. They instead propose what we might term the "privileged outsider argument", arguing that the distanced perspectives of "outsiders" enhances their understanding of the subjectivities and experiences of other groups (2009: 276). As such, they suppose that misrepresentation of others is not inevitable, but further, that an "outsider" position will lead to insightful representation, irrespective of social positionality:

12. See Jeremy Fried (2019) for a proposal regarding what makes an artwork a successful case of *ally aesthetics.*

> we can learn something about ourselves from seeing how others see us. . . . The superstructure of a culture is not necessarily apparent to those who live inside it. Outsiders do have some limitations. They may be ignorant of certain aspects of a culture simply because they have not lived as a member of the culture and do not have another source of knowledge. It does not follow from the existence of such limitations that outsiders cannot accurately represent many aspects of a foreign culture in valuable ways (2009: 276).

As I have already granted, it is not the case that misrepresentations will necessarily occur when writing the Other from a dominant social position. Yet a vast range of hugely popular examples exist to disrupt Young and Haley's contention that dominant outsider status is a representational advantage. For instance, *Pocahontas,* Apu from *The Simpsons,* and Jim from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* all embody racial stereotypes whilst *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *Basic Instinct* contain homophobic stereotypes. The oft inadequate depiction of women by men, exemplified by Charles Bukowski and Jack Kerouac, was alluded to by Jane Austen as far back as 1818 when *Persuasion's* Captain Harville says, "I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon women's inconstancy. Songs and proverbs, all talk to women's fickleness. But perhaps you will say these were all written by men" (1984: 209)**.** These serve to demonstrate that dominantly positioned artists often get it wrong. In fact, the prevalence and continued success of such artworks that so drastically misrepresent the experiences of the oppressed, even in the face of an increasing number of popular counter-representations from marginalised artists, lends credence to Hurka's contention that they are "taken by [dominant audiences] as getting it right" (1994: 52).

Moreover, Young and Haley's appeal to Tony Hillerman is complicated. Ward Churchill argues that whilst Hillerman's protagonists do not rely on the standard supply of harmful stereotypes of Native Americans, and in fact are provided the "dimensionality, motivation and nuance necessary to establish them as bona fide people rather than mere props in the popular mind" (1998: 81), they nevertheless portray certain aspects of Navajo culture as irrational or ridiculous (1998: 83), and Hillerman frequently treats Native resistance to American occupation of land as worthy of the harshest disciplinary punishments (1998: 88).[13]

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13. Young and Haley do note that Hillerman was awarded the Special Friend of the Dineh (Navajo) Award (2009: 275). Yet, rather than undermine Churchill's comments, this seems to merely highlight that representations from sympathetic allies that do get some things right are often welcomed by marginalised groups in the context of an onslaught of offensive misrepresentations that flatten and homogenise. As Bill Donovan writes in *The Navajo Times*'s obituary of Tony Hillerman, the Navajo welcomed Hillerman's novels "at a time when Navajos were almost

We might suppose, then, that dominant outsider status is a hindrance when it comes to comprehending and representing the experiences of marginalised others. This premise is gaining traction in other disciplines. Anthropology, for instance, was founded on the premise that Westerners were well placed as objective outsiders to interpret and study cultures encountered 'overseas.' Yet Lila Abu-Lughod argues that the 'discovery', articulation and representation of cultures in anthropological discourse has historically functioned "to enforce separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy" (1991: 138). In other words, anthropologists tended to falsely presume that their outsider status gives them a unidirectional ability to know and interpret the behaviour of non-Western Others. Historically, this involved analysing and examining in line with Western standpoints that othered those encountered, representing alternative belief systems as irrational and practices as primitive, and imposing and interpreting in accordance with inappropriate schemas, concepts and categories. The self of the anthropologist was a presumed objective arbiter with a zero-point epistemology as opposed to just another constructed self, embroiled in a culture which impacted their perceptual capacities.

I contend that Young and Haley's "privileged outsider argument" seeks to provide artists with a status similar to that of the classical anthropologist. They appear to suppose that an artist standing outside of a community they seek to represent will be able to 'discover' insiders and represent them accurately. Yet, as critical anthropologists have argued, representation necessarily involves the *construction* of subjects. A similar point is made by Linda Alcoff who writes that the act of representation cannot be understood "as founded on an act of discovery wherein I discover their true selves and then simply relate my discovery . . . representations in every case are mediated and the product of interpretation" (1991: 9). In representing others, their situations, needs and goals, who they really are, dominantly situated artists cannot easily escape mediating their perception through a standpoint, and an easy reliance on the defective concepts of a hegemonic social imagination which together serves to hinder their representational capacities. Alcoff reminds us that the artist's location in the web of

invisible in popular fiction" (Donovan 2008). Moreover (and relevant to our purposes here), Hillerman's novels serve to misinform readers about the control the Navajo have over criminal justice on tribal land. Hillerman's detectives were able to travel the Navajo nation investigating and solving crimes as lead investigators whilst in reality such matters fall under FBI jurisdiction. As such, the fictionalised state of affairs may have been so enjoyed by the Navajo *because* of this key misrepresentation, which restored a long sought-after sovereign power to them. Yet, whilst this fantastical element of Hillerman's stories may have been enjoyed by some (insider) audiences for its symbolism, this does not negate the capacity of the misrepresentation to epistemically corrupt. For instance, uninformed (dominant) audiences may gain a false understanding of the jurisdictional injustices occurring on tribal land, and perhaps even not alter this understanding in the light of different evidence.

social structures is epistemically salient. As put by Abu-Lughod, "every view is a view from somewhere . . . what we call the outside is a position *within* a larger political historical complex" (1991: 141, emphasis in original).

The somewhere from which the dominant artist views, and forms perceptions about marginalised lives, is likely to have been overly informed by a defective social imagination as I argued above. Their social location, as standpoint epistemologists have argued, can limit what they know,

> including tacit, experiential knowledge as well as explicit understanding . . . [and] specific epistemic content. What counts as a 'social location' is structurally defined. What individuals experience and understand is shaped by their location in a hierarchically structured system of power relations: by the material conditions of their lives, by the relations of production and reproduction that structure their social interactions, and by the conceptual resources they have to represent and interpret these relations. (Wylie 2003: 31)

As I argued above, the dominant have an unfair advantage in structuring our collective social understanding. It is the more powerful that shape our collective understanding of what it is to be a man or a woman, what it is to be disabled or non-disabled and so on. Since power functions to keep dominant meanings in circulation, in many cases preventing meanings 'from below' from gaining social recognition, dominantly situated artists will likely have hermeneutical gaps in their understandings of the experiences and subjectivities of the oppressed that steer them to misrepresent. They are epistemically hindered, at the behest of the socially sanctioned ignorance I outlined above. Moreover, they may find it hard to truly rid themselves of previous understandings. For instance, whilst homosexual identities have attained a non-perverse (albeit often abnormal) status in at least some quadrants of the social imagination, common misrepresentations of homosexuality as a determining factor for deviant personalities persist, as in Elizabeth Day's *The Party* (published 2017), and the television series *Killing Eve* (initial release 2018). Moreover, there are further non-heterosexual identities, a proper understanding of which is not yet part of our collective interpretive resources, and which dominantly situated writers may therefore misrepresent. For instance, N. K. Jemisin has said she discovered that she had misrepresented asexuality after reading discussions about what we might term non-dominant hermeneutical resources on tumblr: "lots of young people hang out there and talk about identity and the way our society works, it's basically a media-criticism lab. . . . I did not understand until I saw these conversations that asexuality was an identity. I thought about it as a broken sexuality. My story reflected my lack of understanding of how that worked" (Jemisin quoted in Shapiro 2019).

Yet, as I mentioned above, we must acknowledge that the privileged are invested in their privilege, and in upholding the status quo. This investment functions as an incentive for the dominantly situated to perpetuate oppression at all levels of its functioning, both consciously and unconsciously. As such, there are strong incentives for the dominantly situated to fail to seek out what they might not know about the lives of the marginalised. Their ignorant standpoint, their misperception of the world as it truly is, is socially sanctioned. Charles Mills stresses in relation to race that this endorsement need not occur at a conscious level. He writes that the racial contract, as an ideology that permeates every aspect of life, creates for white people a world

> In their cultural image, political states differentially favouring their interests, an economy structured around the racial exploitation of others, and a moral psychology . . . skewed consciously or unconsciously toward privileging them, taking the status quo of differential racial entitlement as normatively legitimate, and not to be investigated further. (1997: 40)

What's more, the terms of the contract have effectively been invisibilised in order to protect its functioning. Dominantly situated authors have little reason, then, to consider whether the social blueprints they operate with are incorrect. In fact, the world is structured to prevent them from seeking to do so. Even amongst those who would consciously disavow racism, oppression functions to obfuscate its workings in many instances such that it might prohibit them from easily achieving a full comprehension of the workings and experience of racism.

We have seen, then, that our situatedness, and what we are able to know easily, is roughly shared due to our membership in groups with more or less social, political and other kinds of power, and due to the interplay between power and knowledge, the dominant are likely to have both a diminished understanding of the experiences and subjectivities of the oppressed, and clear incentives, rooted in various forms of privilege, to not alter this lack of understanding.

I discussed above the ways in which the dominant's articulation of the social world can, at times, be catching, leading to hermeneutical injustices in which the oppressed are unable to fully understand their experiences. Yet, at other times, groups who experience social relations from positions of marginality are thought to be able to come to a level of consciousness that makes visible not merely their experiences, but also oppressive aspects of social relations and the ways in which dominant groups conceive of these relations. Moreover, they possess clear incentives to do so, as the oppression they face can only be countered once it has been comprehended. They can come to understand to some extent the positionality and experiences of the dominant and the dominated. Many scholars have articulated modes of knowing that the marginalised are likely to use in

order to survive in a world that seeks to oppress them, that in turn result in an epistemological advantage. For instance, W. E. B. Du Bois articulates this notion of double vision in the term *double consciousness*, the sense of "always looking at oneself though the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (1903/2007: 3) which in turn leads to a split consciousness; that which comprehends oneself as one truly is, and that which comprehends oneself as dominant others see them.

It is argued that this double vision is generally unavailable through mere speculation to those who occupy dominant positionalities.[14] Instead the dominant are predisposed and incentivised to experience a mono-visual understanding of social reality and this invariably aligns with dominant perspectives and insufficient hermeneutical resources. As such, it is clear not only that the dominant are at a representational disadvantage, but that oppressed artists may experience a representational advantage. To put it another way, there is reason to believe that the "privileged outsider argument" may apply unidirectionally. We might think that the oppressed have privileged access to their own group experiences and subjectivities, as well as those of other groups, that the dominantly positioned do not.

Young and Haley are right to oppose Jannise Browning's statement that "people of colour have a hidden knowledge—a wisdom of experience we embody—that can't be accessed by white people because they have not been forced to continually combat white oppression" (1992: 33) as the epistemological insights of the marginalised cannot be thought of as an inevitable outcome of their marginal lived experience. The experience of oppression is not homogenous. There is no essential core to such experiences, and those beholden to them will not automatically come to view themselves and their social world in a given way. But we can generalise. As Charles Mills writes, "hegemonic groups characteristically have experiences that foster illusory perceptions about society's functioning, whereas subordinate groups characteristically have experiences that (at least potentially) give rise to more adequate conceptualizations" (1998: 28). Young and Haley's contention that "the superstructure of a culture is not necessarily apparent to those who live inside it" (2009: 276) appears to be a statement far more applicable to dominantly situated people. The oppressed are more likely to possess an epistemic privilege because "they grasp subtle manifestations of power dynamics and they make connections between the contexts in which these operate that the privileged have no reason to notice or indeed have good reason not to notice" (Wylie 2003: 34). Uma Narayan argues that the lived experience of oppression often grants an immediate knowledge of

14. I plan to explore how it might be accessed by artists in a non-exploitative manner in future work.

> The ways in which the oppression is experienced, seen to be inflicted, and of the ways in which the oppression affects the major and minor details of their social and psychic lives. They know first-hand the detailed and concrete ways in which oppression defines the spaces in which they live and how it affects their lives. (1988: 36)

Narayan argues that this point need not entail an "'unconveyability of insights' thesis" (1988: 37), but reveals that the social location of the dominantly situated makes them far less likely to understand the nature and experience of oppressed groups to which they do not belong, without undertaking large amounts of work to alter their epistemic standpoint, and disavow their privilege and investment in oppressive social structures.

It seems then that the epistemological deck is stacked against the dominantly situated artist. But might not the imaginative skills of artists aid them in accessing and representing the lifeworlds of others? If writers can summon a talking fish into existence, then might the imagination aid them past their standpoint and into the subjectivity more typically found amongst those occupying a marginal social location? Standard thinking asks us to suppose that through empathetic abstraction we can put ourselves in the shoes of others, understanding their experiences and points of view. Yet, as Thomas Nagel (1974) famously argued, selfhood is the basis of the (creative) imagination. Moreover, Catriona MacKenzie and Jackie Leach Scully have argued (primarily in relation to disability) that "there is a significant gap between . . . simple cases of belief and desire attribution . . . and imaginatively entering into another's point of view sufficient to understand, for example, how that person experiences" (2007: 340). With empirical support they argue that imagining (like knowing) is an embodied capacity, and that this presents limitations to what we can imagine. There is no imagining without a body, and our imaginative projection originates from our personal experience, as experience is both shaped by the specificities of embodiment and shaped and constrained by socio-cultural meanings: "being/having a specific form of embodiment places real constraints on our capacities to both imagine ourselves otherwise and to imaginatively put ourselves in the place of others" (2007: 342). Whilst they suggest that gifted novelists can engage in empathetic imagination, leaving behind their own perspectives to truly 'get' their characters, I counter that there is no guarantee that this imaginative process will not be hindered by socially sanctioned ignorance and situated knowledge, frames of reference and dominant interpretive schemas prohibiting the author from truly inhabiting a foreign embodied mode of engagement with the world. For instance, the novelist Sarah Schulman writes that in spite of meticulously researching the black character in her novel prior to embarking on a process of imaginative projection, she was informed that the black co-protagonist's

'discovery' that her grandfather had been married to a white woman ultimately put "white consciousness into the mind and mouth of a black character . . . [since] concern about hidden racial mixing was a white anxiety . . . [and] black people know the history of slavery and rape, and don't carry the same concepts of racial purity as white people" (Schulman 2016). Our experiences are shaped and constrained by the specificities of embodiment and the social space that we can inhabit and imaginatively adopt. As such, the imagination cannot be seen as a redeeming quality in the pursuit for understanding the experience of oppressed others.

4. Conclusion

I have provided the conceptual backing to make it clear that subject appropriation is of concern when dominantly situated authors misrepresent the experiences and subjectivities of the oppressed, given the capacity for misrepresentations to exacerbate and perpetuate oppression. I have provided a novel account of what misrepresentations of the oppressed entail, and I have detailed the ways in which misrepresentations uphold oppression. I have also argued that work in social epistemology gives us reason to believe that whilst dominantly situated artists will not inevitably misrepresent, their social positionality makes this more likely.

This allows us to trouble the binary terms of the popular debate over subject appropriation. That misrepresentation is not inevitable for dominantly situated artists problematises the argument that artists should stick to their wheelhouses, writing only what they know. But, that misrepresentations of the oppressed are unjust problematises arguments that artists should be able to write whatever they please. Instead, we can forge a middle ground, avoiding the unpalatable path of censorship, whilst advocating for the right of the oppressed to not be depicted in ways that will exacerbate and perpetuate oppressive systems to which they are already beholden. In other words, it is possible and desirable for dominantly situated artists to avoid wrongful appropriation through working to prevent their actions from exacerbating or perpetuating oppression.

In future work I plan to address how accurate representational practices might be achieved by dominantly situated artists with regards to those marginalised groups that they seek to represent. For now, it seems sufficient to note, as Uma Narayan reminds us in relation to coalitional political organising, that

> good-will is not enough. . . . A simple resolution on the part of individuals or groups that they will try to understand the experiences of more disadvantaged persons or groups, whose oppression they do not share,

> and a resolve to try and empathise with their interests . . . is not going to solve or resolve the thousands of problems that are going to crop up. (1988: 34)

Misrepresentations are not harmless, even when fictional, and as such, writers wishing to avoid the perpetuation of oppression would be wise to take steps to diminish their likelihood. Coming to understand the lived experience of oppression will likely involve more than simple epistemic repair via self-education that aims to uncover common modes of misrepresentation, or forms of selective dialogue with members of oppressed groups that seek to exploit their epistemically privileged status.[15] Instead, it seems likely that those seeking to create socially engaged art works ought to reject the paradigmatic romantic individualism of creation, becoming open to various modes of collaboration, to engage in struggle with the oppressed in non-instrumental ways, enter into friendships and other forms of sustained dialogue with them, and fight oppression alongside them.

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15. Nora Berenstain in particular warns us against epistemic exploitation, characterised as a form of "unrecognised, uncompensated, emotionally taxing, coerced epistemic labour" (2016: 570) performed by the marginalised for the education of the dominantly situated.

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