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Epistemic Injustice and the Role of Narrative Fiction

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I look at the role that narrative fiction – film, television and literature – can play in countering and mitigating testimonial injustice. Testimonial injustice, as explicated by Miranda Fricker, occurs when a social agent attempts to tell a hearer something, but the hearer grants them a deflated level of credibility because of prejudice. It depends for its operation upon the social imagination and the shared concepts of social identity within it: what it is to be a man, woman, straight, black, gay, transgender, and so on. My central thesis is that narrative fiction has the potential to influence the social imagination for the better. The paper comprises two parts. In the first section I explore how narrative fiction can combat testimonial injustice, and propose that fiction can put pressure on prejudicial stereotypes in four distinct ways, thus contributing to a broadening of the social imagination. I then argue in the second section that fiction's unique capacity to actively engage its audience and evoke empathy enables it to capitalize on advantages that more overt or confrontational approaches to resisting testimonial injustice cannot share in.

In her book *Epistemic Injustice*, Miranda Fricker explicates the notion of a distinctive kind of injustice done to a person in her role as a knower, and explores social power's role in creating and perpetuating such epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). This paper focuses on the narrower concept of testimonial injustice, which occurs when a social agent attempts to tell a

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hearer something, but the hearer grants them a deflated level of credibility because of prejudice (2007, p.1).

I consider the role that narrative fiction – film, television and literature – can play in countering and mitigating epistemic injustice.[2] Of course, fictions can worsen epistemic injustice as well as alleviate it; but this paper comprises a constructive project regarding fiction's positive, transformative potential. In particular, my interest is in fiction's potential to influence the social imagination and the shared concepts of social identity within it: what it is to be a man, woman, straight, gay, black, white. Fricker uses scenarios from *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *The Talented Mr Ripley* to clarify her notions of epistemic injustice; I argue that aside from elucidating analysis of our epistemic practices, fiction can also provide epistemic correctives.

In §1 I explicate the notion of testimonial injustice, and propose that fiction can put pressure on prejudicial stereotypes and thus contribute to a broadening of the social imagination. §2 explores the unique features of narrative fiction in this capacity to resist epistemic injustice, and argues that in certain respects it capitalizes on advantages that other approaches cannot share in.

1.1. Fricker's Account of Testimonial Injustice

Fricker's central case of *testimonial injustice* occurs when a speaker tells a hearer something, but they are not believed because prejudice distorts the

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[2] I have restricted myself to film, television and literature, but I have no doubt that other narrative fictions – music, paintings, theatre, video games – can serve this purpose also.

hearer's perception of the speaker: the speaker suffers a *credibility deficit* due to a persistent and systematic *negative identity prejudice* influencing the hearer (2007, p.28). A credibility deficit involves a speaker being afforded less credibility than they would have received absent the prejudice, and a negative identity prejudice is a prejudice against an individual on the basis of their membership of a certain social group. The prejudices are systematic in that they track subjects through multiple areas of their lives, and render them vulnerable to a variety of social injustices. And they are persistent since they will exert sway repeatedly, subjecting an agent to testimonial injustice on numerous occasions. Fricker's example of testimonial injustice is Tom Robinson's trial in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, in which a black man is convicted for assaulting a white woman. Despite plentiful evidence suggesting Robinson's innocence, the white jurors in this novel are affected by racial prejudices and distrust his word. This case clearly involves negative identity prejudice that is systematic and persistent, since being black in 1930s Alabama involved experiencing injustice along multiple axes throughout one's life.

Prejudice in testimonial injustice operates through a mechanism of *negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes*, and such a stereotype is defined as "[a] widely held disparaging association between a social group and one or more attributes, where this association embodies a generalization that displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to an ethically bad affective investment" (Fricker 2007, p.35). So for Tom Robinson, stereotypes about black people interfere with the jurors' credibility judgements, such that they cannot see Robinson as

anything other than a lying Negro.[3] Importantly, Fricker does not see stereotypes as operating on a conscious, doxastic level; they instead exist in the *social imagination*, and feed into our judgements without our express authorization or awareness. This is particularly clear in cases of implicit bias, where stereotypes influence an agent's judgement despite actively conflicting with her stated, firmly held beliefs (e.g. Saul 2013). The social imagination, then, should be regarded as a collective bundle of concepts, ideas and stereotypes that provide the background assumptions and paradigms within which epistemic interactions take place. This is not to say that it is uniform; the social imagination surely contains contradictory and incompatible stereotypes, but the point is that some stereotypes are dominant, more authoritative.

Central cases of testimonial injustice involve serious harms, and for Fricker the primary harm is that a social agent is undermined in her capacity as a giver of knowledge, which is a capacity essential to human value (2007, p.44). The speaker may also suffer practical and epistemic secondary harms. The practical harms might include career impediments, financial burden, or physical or emotional injury. As for epistemic harms, this might involve the speaker losing faith in their own epistemic ability – as Karen Jones puts it, epistemic injustice can gravely undercut an agent's intellectual self-trust (2012, p.237).

With this picture established, it is clear that to counter testimonial injustice the social imagination must be transformed, since this generates,

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[3] Unless otherwise indicated, when I refer to 'stereotypes' throughout the paper I am referring specifically to a negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes, rather than something more generic.

sustains and adapts the identity stereotypes that prejudices feed from. Through the depiction of complex and nuanced narratives, and the thoughtful portrayal of characters from social groups against which epistemically unjust transactions are common, fiction can play an important role in rejecting such stereotypes. I identify four ways in which fiction serves this function – the ideas raised are interrelated, and the list is not intended to be exhaustive.

1.2. Narrative Fiction as Countering Stereotypes

First, narrative fiction can serve a function of *familiarization*, wherein the inclusion of characters from marginalized social groups acquaints an audience with those social groups. This primarily concerns fictions in which at least one protagonist belongs to an identity group that suffers from social injustice, and thus also testimonial injustice. It is important that the characters in question are richly drawn, such that their personalities and actions are not dictated solely by membership of a certain identity group and its associated stereotypes. There are two extremes to avoid. It should not be that a character's being disabled should be the most significant piece of information about them, defining their entire narrative arc; but neither should a fiction treat a disabled character in *exactly* the same way as its able-bodied characters, rendering the disability invisible or irrelevant.

One way fictions can familiarize is through a process of *normalization*. This is the introduction of a character with a social identity that is often portrayed prejudicially in the social imagination, where this aspect of their character is treated as unexceptional – as part of the

character, but simply one of many facts about them. An example of well-executed normalization is the introduction of the gay, black, and working-class companion character Bill Potts in the tenth series of the revived *Doctor Who*, a sci-fi show in which an alien travels through time and space with a human companion. She is an engaging protagonist, and whilst the show openly references racism, Bill's love life and her working-class roots, these identity factors are treated very matter-of-factly. Since *Doctor Who* is a flagship family-oriented BBC show, with a large following and cult status, it is particularly well placed to influence the social imagination.

Another aspect of familiarization is that narrative fictions can be *informative*: they supply information about a diverse range of social groups. A fiction might portray a social group that some particular agent would not have known anything about otherwise. This is especially pertinent regarding narratives that focus on an aspect of social identity that is frequently marginalized. Examples of this are the television shows *Transparent* and *Black-ish* – the former tracks the life of a transgender woman coming to terms with her identity, and the latter takes a comedic look at a black family living in a predominantly white, upper-middle-class neighborhood.

A diverse range of fictional characters challenges stereotypes by showing that membership of some particular social identity does not render somebody wholly different or unrelatable to you. Fictions can directly contradict prejudicial stereotypes in the social imagination – Bill Potts defies the stereotype that lesbians present as either 'butch' or 'femme', and *Transparent*'s Maura defies numerous stereotypes about trans women. Even if depictions of complex characters like these do not significantly erode relevant stereotypes in the social imagination, the hope is that the tension

between rooting for such characters and maintaining the relevant stereotypes creates cognitive dissonance. This lessens the immediate ease with which prejudicial stereotypes might influence a hearer in a testimonial transaction, therefore somewhat mitigating testimonial injustice.

A second way narrative fiction can combat testimonial injustice is by stimulating in an audience a higher level of *self- and other-awareness*: fiction's potential to promote attentiveness to systematic prejudices and the stereotypes entangled with them. Various fictional narratives engage with scenarios of racism, sexism or other prejudice, either as a central part of the narrative, or in some cases simply as a subplot or one-off storyline. Perhaps a protagonist is discriminated against; perhaps the protagonist themselves displays prejudice and must confront this; or perhaps the fiction constructs a world wherein our society's prejudices are amplified to dystopian levels. My contention is that examinations of prejudice in fiction can parallel instances of prejudice in everyday life, and that fictions that engage with such issues not only bring about increased understanding of the struggles that marginalized groups face (other-awareness), but also bring about increased appreciation of one's own positionality regarding such groups (self-awareness).

A prime example is Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, a film tells a horror story about a young African-American man's first encounter with his white girlfriend's parents, but also takes an unflinching look at the minutiae and microaggressions involved in the operation of racism in American society. As the protagonist, Chris, navigates an increasingly ominous family party, the film – both through explicit dialogue and heavy use of symbolism – explores issues such as suburban racism, police brutality and the taboos

surrounding mixed relationships. This is the other-awareness, since stereotypes that constrain how Chris is perceived by white individuals are highlighted. Furthermore, *Get Out* is very critical of a certain white liberal way of treating race, and of the myth of society being post-racial. The ostensibly polite, enlightened partygoers make forced mentions of Obama and Tiger Woods, and fetishize Chris' muscles. This is a targeted call for heightened self-awareness, since it encourages recognition that regardless of any good intent, white Americans are positioned in a particular way vis-à-vis African-Americans. In relation to testimonial injustice, other-awareness increases the likelihood of an agent looking for and recognizing unjust testimonial exchanges in action, and self-awareness makes the agent more likely to catch (and eventually correct) her own judgements involving unfair credibility deficit.

Third, narrative fiction can play a role in countering testimonial injustice by emphasizing *ambiguity*, drawing attention to the difficulty of making clear-cut judgements about scenarios and people. The presence of such ambiguity in fiction might attack our trust in the social imagination's dominant stereotypes, or our certainty in seeing ourselves as dependable judges. Put more constructively, my claim is that ambiguity in fiction can nurture traits or virtues such as open-mindedness and reflectiveness that act as correctives to epistemic injustice.

Regarding epistemic ambiguity, fiction is pertinent when it stresses human fallibility: that we are utterly undependable at making credibility judgements. In *Get Out*, the revelation that Chris' white girlfriend is complicit with her family's sinister plot is a prime example of a fiction demonstrating to its audience that their own assumptions cannot be trusted.

When it emerges that Rose is not an innocent bystander and is instead a conspirator who has lured numerous black men to terrible fates, this comprises a challenge: why was it so easy to presume her innocence in the first place? In thinking this over, the audience is encouraged to fully consider earlier events, background information, and assumptions made or accepted. On the one hand, then, highlighting our epistemic fallibility in fictional cases allows fiction to suggest that we might be just as fallible in everyday instances wherein others try to tell us things. And on the other hand, emphasis on epistemic fallibility urges audiences to be more reflective and to try to 'see the bigger picture' when making judgements. In sum, the thought is that ambiguity encourages the practice of epistemic humility in navigating both fictional and non-fictional worlds, thereby mitigating the effects of testimonial injustice.

A fourth way in which I suggest fiction can play a positive role in training our sensibility so as to counter testimonial injustice is through the provision of *representation* for marginalized groups, which plays a part in easing the secondary harm of eroded self-trust. Karen Jones defines intellectual self-trust as "an attitude of optimism about one's cognitive competence within that domain", and cashes this attitude of optimism out as a set of positive dispositions towards one's abilities, methods of inquiry, and actions stemming from inquiry (2012, p.243-244). The idea is that seeing members of your marginalized social group represented in rich and interesting ways in narratives loosens the absolute dominance of prejudicial identity stereotypes in the social imagination, thereby also loosening the grip that the stereotypes have on the very groups that they depict. It is not insignificant to a young black, gay or working-class child that a lead

character in *Doctor Who* possesses all of these identities, or that other such identities exist in fiction at large. Narrative fictions might even offer alternative, positive identity stereotypes. Fiction alone is hardly sufficient to restore and sustain self-trust, but it can at least contribute to blocking pre-emptive silencing wherein members of marginalized groups do not even attempt to give testimony, because they are doubtful that they have anything worth listening to, or that they will be listened to.

2. The Advantages of Narrative Fiction

I now turn to the advantages fiction has in functioning as epistemic corrective. By this I do not mean to say that narratives in isolation are sufficient to tackle epistemic injustice, but just that fictional narratives enjoy certain advantages *because* of their status as fictions.

One advantage fiction has is that it is often perceived as *less hostile* to those who – whether knowingly or not – perpetuate epistemic injustice. Although 'call out culture' and public discussions of prejudice and stereotype are becoming increasingly widespread, it remains true that agents tend to respond with indignation or denial to the idea that they are prejudiced. The existence of implicit bias and the pernicious role that the social imagination plays in our everyday interactions are not universally well-known, accepted phenomena, and direct attempts to address epistemic injustice are often met with hostility. Regarding testimonial injustice, then, the thought is that by drawing attention to prejudicial stereotypes in fictional rather than actual scenarios, an audience is less inclined to feel blamed or at fault. Whilst *Get Out* offers a blistering critique of white America's attitude

towards black bodies and black lives, its status as fiction somewhat shields it from resentment. By *showing* rather than telling in imparting its ideas, *Get Out* not only dampens the possibility for hostile response, but also makes these ideas more easily relatable; I will expand on this below.

A second advantage, then, is that narratives can show instead of simply telling, therefore prompting empathy, sympathy and the engagement of emotion in a way particular to fiction. Key to countering prejudicial stereotypes and thereby eventually transforming the social imagination is interaction with the concrete, complicated details of particular lives. Narrative fictions are exceptionally well-placed to counter epistemic injustice through contact with concrete imagined lives, since they encourage audiences to reach conclusions independently.

A feature that is uniquely emphasized in narrative fiction is that of *perspective-taking*: imagining yourself in somebody else's shoes. *Doctor Who* actively encourages the viewer to navigate the world it depicts through the eyes of the companion character; and in taking Chris as its protagonist, *Get Out* encourages the viewer to side with and therefore imagine yourself in his place. In these cases, and in narrative fiction generally, characters' thought processes and judgements are seen in great detail – and crucially, these judgements are to some extent mirrored by an audience. When Bill Potts struggles with a moral dilemma or is shocked by an instance of bigotry, we the audience to some extent replicate her experience and the judgements she makes ourselves: this is the phenomenon referred to as empathy (Coplan 2011, p.3). Sometimes an agent will not be able to or will not feel provoked to identify with a character this closely, yet will still experience a sympathetic reaction in the form of sustained positive attitudes

or emotions towards the character.

Literature can directly describe characters' mental states, and audio-visual media can achieve a similar effect using narration; a level of insight that is unavailable to many regarding epistemically marginalized individuals. And even without direct access to the thoughts of a character, a fiction can follow their life so closely that nonetheless perspective-taking is made easy. Furthermore, a benefit of narrative fiction is that it enables the consideration of multiple perspectives in a captivating way. In §1.2 I argued that ambiguity lends itself to countering epistemic injustice, since it encourages the thought that it is difficult to make judgements in a clear-cut way. The ability of narratives to show numerous viewpoints – by following several main characters, by alternating between scenes in which characters from different 'sides' interact, by explicitly adopting a multiple first-person narrative style – serves a similar function. Urging an agent to empathize or sympathize with different perspectives encourages nuance and ambiguity.

This exercise of perspective-taking makes narrative fiction particularly efficient in transforming the social imagination to guard against testimonial injustice. Fiction does not promote familiarity by dispassionately informing you about certain lived experiences: fiction encourages audiences to actively engage with those experiences. Likewise, instead of simply describing prejudicial stereotypes, narratives invite agents to vividly imagine scenarios involving such stereotypes. I therefore suggest that for many, fiction is a more compelling way to learn about social identities that they do not come into contact with than, say, reading non-fiction or watching a documentary. On the whole, fiction's ability to engross the imagination gives it wide appeal.

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