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TELL ME A STORY:
THE NORMATIVE POWER OF STORYTELLING

by

ZOE CUNLIFFE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Philosophy in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2022

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Zoe Cunliffe

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Philosophy in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

Tell Me A Story: The Normative Power of Storytelling

by

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Few would dispute that stories are powerful: they have the capacity to inform, to persuade, and to engage our imaginations and sympathies. However, the contemporary philosophical literature on stories focuses exclusively on the functions of narrative stories, and in particular on the role that novels can serve in cultivating our moral and political competencies. I argue that this narrow focus is theoretically pernicious in two ways. First, it leads to an unfortunate myopia regarding the value of non-narrative storytelling practices. Second, it results in analysis that is disproportionately likely to exclude forms of storytelling that originate in marginalized groups. My dissertation aims to correct these oversights by developing a novel account of storytelling, and using this as a theoretical framework to explore the moral, political, and epistemic upshots of storytelling for members of marginalized groups.

In foregrounding marginalized stories as foundational to my analysis and in focusing on the category of storytelling – two atypical practices in existing philosophical debates – I have three major goals. First, I expand the scope of the philosophical literature by offering a flexible account of storytelling as an open-ended activity. This allows me to engage with stories that are otherwise neglected, such as trauma stories and indigenous storytelling, and also facilitates the development of conceptual tools that aid in demarcating stories' beneficial functions. Second, I

delineate some significant uses of storytelling for those with marginalized social identities. In particular, I focus on the potential for stories to deepen and expand our moral understanding; to enable the development of hermeneutical resources (collective interpretive terminology); and to dislodge pernicious identity-based stereotypes. Third, I argue that storytelling is unique in its capacity to fulfil these functions. In doing so, I vindicate the claim that storytelling is sometimes superior to straightforward argumentation or theory in changing people's minds.

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Tell Me a Story: The Normative Power of Storytelling

Introduction

The Dissertation Project

Few would dispute that stories are powerful: they have the capacity to inform, to persuade, and to engage our imaginations and sympathies. There is a contemporary literature in both aesthetics and moral philosophy about narratives and their functions, and in particular about the role that novels can serve with regard to cultivating our moral and political competencies. A strikingly consistent feature of the existing conversations, however, is that they are exclusively focused on narrative stories.¹ I hold that this is theoretically pernicious in two substantial ways. First, it leads to an unfortunate myopia as regards the value – indeed the special value – of those storytelling practices that do not produce narratives. Second, it results in philosophical analysis that is disproportionately likely to exclude stories, and forms of storytelling, that originate in marginalized groups.

My dissertation aims to correct these oversights by offering a novel account of storytelling that is importantly distinct from existing philosophical accounts of narrative, and using this to explore the moral, political, and epistemic upshots of storytelling for members of marginalized groups. In positing storytelling as an alternative theoretical framework, I expand the scope of the existing literature and also develop conceptual tools that aid in demarcating the

¹ E.g. Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

beneficial functions of stories. Throughout the dissertation, I draw on case studies including trauma stories, activist storytelling, and fiction to explain the potential of storytelling to engender empathy, identify moral harms, counter stereotypes, and contribute to the formation of marginalized identities. By foregrounding marginalized stories in my analysis and focusing on the category of storytelling – two atypical practices in existing philosophical discussions – I advance a distinctive account of storytelling’s unique capacity to fulfil these functions.

Note that while my dissertation focuses on the positive upshots that storytelling and stories can engender for members of marginalized groups, I am not blind to the destructive potential of storytelling. Just as stories can further the interests of oppressed groups, they are also capable of perpetuating or worsening the injustices such groups face. My analysis of the constructive uses of stories in the upcoming chapters should therefore not be seen as ignoring the possible pitfalls of storytelling; these pitfalls are simply beyond the scope of this project.

Situating the Dissertation within the Philosophical Literature

The aforementioned atypical features of my dissertation signify the two substantial ways in which I see myself as departing from the prevailing literature. First, my concern in this dissertation lies in the potential that storytelling has for marginalized groups specifically – this contrasts with the conventional philosophical approach, which seeks to explore the way that narratives *in general* produce moral or epistemic effects. Rather than looking at how a given narrative might produce moral effects in abstracted audience members, I am concerned with the way that social identity interacts with the uptake and effects that stories have. For example, in exploring the epistemic upshots of stories, I hold it productive to examine the effects that stories

might generate *within* the marginalized group that created them, and also to examine the effects of those stories on external individuals, who do *not* share that identity. In other words, I am bringing to the fore concerns raised primarily in feminist philosophy and philosophy of race to argue that social location is pertinent in shaping the way that one formulates and appreciates stories.²

Second, the majority of existing philosophical debates about the moral and epistemic effects of stories prioritize fictional narratives, particularly novels and literature – whereas my focus is on the broader category of storytelling. This has significant ramifications both for my own dissertation, and for philosophical discussions of story/narrative more generally. To justify my departure from the literature, I first make the case that standard philosophical accounts of narrative are perniciously narrow, and then provide constructive arguments about the theoretical benefits of focusing on storytelling.

My complaint against standard philosophical approaches to narrative is that their definitional criteria are overly restrictive, such that stories told by marginalized individuals are disproportionately likely to be excluded from analysis.³ This is doubly harmful, since it results in academic investigations that risk eliding from analysis the perspectives of those who have already been too frequently disregarded, and that are themselves theoretically impoverished for omitting marginalized stories with significant moral, political, and epistemic upshots.

Broadening my focus to include but also extend beyond narrative allows my dissertation to

² For more on the feminist concern about social location, see Sandra Harding, “Standpoint Theories: Productively Controversial,” *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (2009) and Alison Wylie, “Why Standpoint Matters,” in Robert Figueroa and Sandra Harding (eds.), *Science and Other Cultures: Issues in Philosophies of Science and Technology* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

³ Among others, I critique the accounts of narrative given by Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and David J. Velleman, “Narrative Explanation,” *The Philosophical Review* 112, no. 1 (2003).

engage with fragmented first-personal trauma stories, indigenous modes of storytelling, and non-linear poems and prose.

Regarding the theoretical advantages of my emphasis on storytelling, I maintain that focusing on stories deepens my analysis by enabling a dialogue about the ways that narratives operate within stories, and also by highlighting the processual nature of storytelling. On the former point, delineating a distinction between narrative and story allows me to employ Gregory Currie's notion of narrativity to evaluate stories⁴, and to examine the phenomenon through which marginalized stories can be co-opted and turned *into* pernicious 'master narratives'.⁵ On the latter point, I hold that drawing attention to storytelling as an ongoing communicative activity enriches my analysis of stories' functions by foregrounding the contextual social and power relations that affect both the formation and the circulation of stories.

The Goals of the Dissertation

My dissertation has three major goals. First, I aim to offer a rich account of storytelling that is broader in scope than standard philosophical accounts of narrative. Given the centrality of marginalized perspectives to my project, I operate with a pluralist understanding of storytelling as an open-ended activity, and argue that strict criteria adjudicating whether something counts as a story or not must be eschewed. This is to prevent my analysis from being overly reductive, either by excluding from its purview pertinent stories that take a non-narrative or non-traditional form, or by flattening disparate storytelling practices in order to seek commonality. For example,

⁴ Currie, *Narratives and Narrators*, 33.

⁵ I borrow the term 'master narratives' from Hilde Lindemann Nelson's *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2001).

I argue that the commonplace focus on narrative in the literature excludes trauma stories from philosophical discussions, despite the significant capacity of trauma stories to pinpoint moral imperatives and deepen moral understanding.⁶

Second, the central portion of my dissertation brings insights from different philosophical subfields into conversation with one another in order to delineate various significant uses of storytelling for those with marginalized social identities. I focus in particular on the capacity of storytelling to diagnose and counter moral harms; to dislodge pernicious identity-based stereotypes and provide epistemic correctives; and to contribute to the formation of marginalized identities. I ultimately contend that these functions of storytelling depend for their efficacy upon the production of empathy – in doing so, I provide an account of empathy inspired by Adam Smith’s moral philosophy, and argue that there is a special link between storytelling and empathy.⁷ In outlining the functions stories can serve, I draw upon numerous historical and contemporary examples in which stories have played a beneficial role for the oppressed. In the realm of fictional storytelling, the inclusion of marginalized identities in mainstream films, television shows, and other media is celebrated for its capacity to reflect the lived experiences of individuals with those identities, and to offer them important representation. For trauma victims such as those subject to sexual assault, and those living through genocide and other atrocities, first-personal storytelling is touted as having therapeutic benefits, as well as offering victims the opportunity to raise awareness of their experiences and to highlight the injustices surrounding them. Stories have also played a central role in much political activism, from the feminist

⁶ My discussion of trauma stories draws on Susan Brison’s *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁷ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York: August M. Kelley Publishers, 1966 [1853]).

consciousness raising of the 1960s, to the contemporary #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements. I draw upon these examples and beyond throughout the dissertation.

The third goal of my dissertation is to provide a sustained argument to the effect that storytelling is distinctive in its capacity to fulfil these normative functions, and therefore significant as an object of analysis. In doing so, I seek to vindicate the claim, made both internally and externally to academia, that stories are sometimes superior to straightforward argumentation or theory in changing people's minds. For example, I argue that fictional stories can effectively provide epistemic correctives against pernicious identity stereotypes *because* of their status as stories, whereas more confrontational attempts to challenge stereotypes are more likely to provoke antagonism and resistance.⁸

Chapter Outlines

At this point, allow me to provide a brief roadmap to the dissertation as a whole. The dissertation will comprise five chapters, which I outline in brief here.

In Chapter One, I justify the decision to focus on storytelling rather than narrative, and defend a pluralist understanding of what counts as a story. Throughout the course of the chapter, I argue that the existing focus on narrative in the philosophical literature is overly narrow, and provide several arguments to back this up. I identify two assumptions commonly made in the literature, and argue that the maintenance of these assumptions results in the exclusion of philosophically significant non-narrative stories from contemporary analysis. I contend that this exclusion is both theoretically and practically harmful for members of marginalized groups in

⁸ See Chapter Four.

particular, and propose that adopting a pluralist approach to stories would forestall these harms. Finally, in this chapter I outline some of the theoretical benefits of my focus on storytelling rather than narrative throughout this dissertation.

In Chapter Two, I give an account of empathy, and argue that empathy is often centrally involved in storytelling, and underlies many of the political uses of stories for marginalized groups. I draw upon Adam Smith's moral philosophy to unpack the concept of empathy, and through close engagement and critique with Smith delineate an understanding of empathy as first-personal perspective taking. In this chapter I begin to explore the ways in which empathy can serve beneficial functions for oppressed individuals, and offer case studies from both fiction and from activist movements. I also introduce a discussion of the distinctive role that stories play in fostering empathy for marginalized groups, whereby I suggest that stories might in some cases be more efficacious than other forms of communication such as theory or argumentation.

In Chapters Three to Five, I aim to provide applied examples of ways in which storytelling, and empathetic engagement with storytelling, can serve productive functions for members of marginalized groups. Chapter Three focuses on how stories can help in the diagnosis and remediation of a certain kind of moral harm; Chapter Four contends that stories can serve as an epistemic corrective to prejudicial stereotypes in the social imagination; and Chapter Five explores the ways in which storytelling can contribute to both the repair and the formation of marginalized identities.

In Chapter Three, I articulate what I call 'contextually specific moral harms', which are harms that can only be understood in the context of a particular social group. Throughout the chapter, I argue that empathy is central to the diagnosis of these harms, and that storytelling is an excellent vehicle for this empathy. I outline various ways in which stories can contribute to the

diagnosis of such harms, and suggest that storytelling might also serve to rebut these harms to some degree. In particular, I maintain that empathizing with stories depicting contextually specific moral harms can be remedial for the sufferers of these harms, and can also challenge the societal demonization that perpetuates such harms.

Chapter Four argues that storytelling has the capacity to dislodge pernicious stereotypes about social identity, thereby also countering certain pernicious epistemic effects that the endurance of such stereotypes perpetuates. I utilize Miranda Fricker's notion of testimonial injustice, and delineate four distinct ways in which storytelling can counter testimonial injustice by dislodging pernicious identity-based stereotypes. In the final part of the chapter, I argue that storytelling has a unique capacity to actively engage an audience's imagination and evoke empathy in them, which enables it to capitalize on advantages that more overt or confrontational approaches to resisting epistemic injustice cannot share in. To fully develop this analysis of stories' capacity to provide epistemic correctives, I provide concrete illustrative examples by discussing both fictional storytelling and storytelling within political movements.

Finally, in Chapter Five I contend that stories and storytelling can serve important functions regarding identity formation for members of marginalized groups. Through critical engagement with Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the narrative self, I posit my own account of the relationship between stories and the self. By 'the self' here I mean to refer to how we characterize and understand ourselves: the question of who we are as human beings. After delineating an account of stories and the self that emphasizes multiplicity and pluralism, I then delineate two concrete ways in which storytelling can cultivate the identities of marginalized individuals. First, I argue that storytelling is essential for repairing damage that interferes with

self-understanding for oppressed groups; and second, I claim that stories can contribute to the formation of new, potentially liberating identity categories.

Chapter One – Storytelling

In this chapter, I argue that the philosophical literature surrounding stories and their functions focuses too exclusively on narrative stories, and propose that a more pluralistic understanding of storytelling should be adopted. This pluralist understanding of what counts as a story will guide the subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

There is a contemporary literature in both aesthetics and moral philosophy about stories and their functions, and in particular about the role that novels can serve with regard to cultivating our moral and political competencies. However, a strikingly consistent feature of the existing conversations is that they focus almost exclusively on narrative stories, despite purporting to analyze stories in general. I hold that this focus on narrative is theoretically pernicious in leading to an unfortunate myopia as regards the value – indeed the special value – of those storytelling practices that do not produce narratives. In particular, I claim that the prioritization of narrative in existing philosophical debate is disproportionately likely to exclude stories that originate in marginalized groups, and might even perpetuate their marginalization. My proposal is that adopting a more pluralistic understanding of stories would both facilitate the analysis of non-narrative stories, and avoid the various harms associated with their exclusion.

This chapter consists of four sections. In §1 I argue that in focusing nearly exclusively on narrative, the philosophical literature on stories and their upshots makes two problematic assumptions; I demarcate the assumptions as *narrative superiority* and *tacit conflation*. In §2 I examine standard accounts of narrative in order to identify some philosophically significant non-narrative stories that, given the persistence of these assumptions, fall beyond the scope of contemporary analysis. In §3 I delineate three harms associated with the exclusion of such stories

from philosophical discussion. Finally, in §4 I propose that the adoption of a pluralist approach to stories, according to which narratives are explicitly demarcated as a subset of the broader category of story, would be theoretically beneficial. Throughout the article, I draw on fragmented first-personal trauma stories and the prose poetry of Claudia Rankine as illustrative instances of non-narrative storytelling that engender philosophically interesting upshots.

1 – Two Assumptions in the Contemporary Literature on Stories

Stories come in many kinds, and can be conveyed through various means – fictional stories exist in the form of films, novels, plays, television shows, video games; first-personal stories are told in autobiographical novels or documentaries, used in legal settings as testimony, employed in political campaigns; myths and fables are passed on both orally and in written form; and so on. However, it is striking that in the contemporary philosophical analysis of stories and their effects, by far and large the dominant subject of discussion is narratives, particularly literary narratives. It is my contention that this nearly exclusive focus on narrative is theoretically pernicious, and that a more pluralistic approach to stories would be productive.

To make these arguments, it is necessary to first get a clearer picture of the existing literature on stories, and its limitations. To do so, I pinpoint two assumptions regarding the centrality of narrative to philosophical analysis, and argue that contemporary accounts of stories and their upshots tend to take up at least one of these assumptions, and sometimes both. Here and throughout the chapter, I refer to these assumptions as the *narrative superiority* assumption and the *tacit conflation* assumption. The narrative superiority assumption picks out the tendency of contemporary philosophers to presume that narratives are the most rich and complex form that

storytelling can take, and as such are the type of story most worthy of philosophical attention. I see this assumption – which is sometimes stated explicitly if not actually argued for, and sometimes not acknowledged at all – as providing a justificatory role for the narrow focus on narrative at the expense of other kinds of story. The tacit conflation assumption refers to the commonplace propensity in the literature to run the concepts of ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ together as roughly synonymous. As such, philosophers writing in this literature frequently declare their intention to explain some given effect that stories can distinctively produce, and then proceed to exclusively discuss narrative stories. I now turn to some examples from the contemporary literature to better illustrate the narrative superiority and tacit conflation assumptions.

Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty are perhaps the most prominent advocates for the moral and political significance of stories – they offer different accounts of stories’ upshots, but share a theoretical focus on novels. In foregrounding and prioritizing the capacity of novels to produce socially substantial effects, I contend that both thinkers espouse the narrative superiority assumption. Nussbaum argues that the study of certain works of literature plays an irreplaceable role in the explication of ethical life, and claims that by conveying the experiences of others in emotive detail, literature can develop “[h]abits of empathy and conjecture” key to moral interaction (Nussbaum 2008, 148). Importantly, in clarifying the way stories affect the moral imagination, she explicitly states that novels are “[the] most appropriate articulation” of this cognitive exercise (1985, 516). Rorty also develops a staunch defense of the philosophical significance of the novel, although his motivation lies in the importance of novels to democratic life (Rorty 1991). His principal claim is that novels have the capacity to highlight injustices and encourage individuals to see other human beings as “one of us” rather than as “them” (1989, xvi). As with Nussbaum, Rorty overtly identifies novels as “the best illustration” of stories’

capacity to affect change, and his writings on the topic are accordingly confined to the analysis of novels (Rorty 2010, 247). In both cases, the analysis of a particular kind of literary narrative is prioritized, since it is asserted that these stories can best bring about morally and politically significant upshots. However, neither Nussbaum nor Rorty truly provide arguments in support of this assertion of narrative superiority, or explore the possibility that non-narrative stories might engender precisely the kinds of moral and political transformations they describe.

As for the tacit conflation assumption, this blurring together of the notions of story and narrative is widespread – here I consider accounts given by Gregory Currie, David Velleman, and Sarah E. Worth as examples. Gregory Currie’s *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* begins by attempting to distinguish story and narrative, defining the former as “the characters and events” and the latter as “the vehicle of telling” (Currie 2010, vi). However, this manner of delineating narrative from story assumes that all depictions of characters and events take narrative form, thus ultimately failing to meaningfully separate the two concepts. In his article ‘Narrative Explanation’, David Velleman sets out to analyze “how storytelling conveys understanding” but then discusses narrative alone, and develops a theoretical account of the distinctive understanding that narrative specifically can produce (Velleman 2003, 1). Sarah E. Worth’s ‘Storytelling and Narrative Knowing: An Examination of the Epistemic Benefits of Well-Told Stories’ similarly purports to investigate the epistemic effects of stories in general, but ultimately focuses singularly on “well-constructed narratives”, and the way that these contribute to the formation of a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience (2008, 42). Presumably those accounts of stories that tacitly conflate story and narrative together in this way do so because they accept, whether explicitly or not, the narrative superiority assumption. In other words, if one takes narratives to be *the* philosophically interesting type of story, then the

interchangeable use of the terms story and narrative is plausible; it only becomes problematic when non-narrative stories enter the picture.

I contend that both the narrative superiority and tacit conflation assumptions are misplaced, and that their endurance in the literature on stories is theoretically harmful. The flaws of these assumptions become apparent if it can be demonstrated that certain non-narrative stories perform precisely the functions that contemporary philosophers are interested in. That is, if non-narrative stories can highlight injustices (as is Rorty's concern), or yield a greater understanding of the human experience (as is Worth's concern), then I charge that it is philosophically inconsistent to omit them from discussion entirely as per the narrative superiority assumption, or to treat stories and narratives as interchangeable as per the tacit conflation assumption. The next two sections respectively identify some significant non-narrative stories, and draw out the harms associated with their exclusion from the philosophical literature on stories.

2 – In Defense of the Philosophical Significance of Non-Narrative Stories

In order to identify stories and types of storytelling that are excluded by the narrative superiority and tacit conflation assumptions, an understanding of the philosophical approach to narrative is required. This is because in the contemporary literature, the boundaries of the category of narrative determine which stories receive philosophical attention. As Currie puts it in summary, “[n]arratives are generally highly organized corpora and, below a certain degree of organization, we cease to count the corpus as a narrative at all” (Currie 2010, 8). In other words, stories that fail to structure their contents appropriately might fail to qualify as narratives at all – thus falling outside the scope of the existing literature, with its prioritization of narrative stories.

There have been numerous, varied attempts to describe what kind of internal organization is required for something to count as a narrative. One common supposition, dating back to Aristotle, is that narratives should be constructed with a beginning, middle, and end: they should depict events as following on from one another in a manner intelligible to the audience (Poetics 1450b-1451a). This view persists in contemporary thought; for example, Noël Carroll stipulates that a narrative requires “a unified subject and a perspicuous temporal order”, and a sufficiently tight number of narrative connections (Carroll 2001, 120). David Velleman offers a distinct definition of narrative whereby it is seen as constitutive of something’s being a narrative that it depicts events and then leads an audience to closure or a conclusion regarding those events. He argues that narratives are distinctive in virtue of their power “to initiate and resolve an emotional cadence in [an] audience” (Velleman 2003, 18).

I maintain that in relying upon these accounts of narrative to pick out stories that engender philosophically significant upshots, non-narrative stories with the capacity to engender these same upshots are wrongly excluded from analysis. To demonstrate this, I turn to an examination of trauma stories – I hold that these are frequently fail to meet the given criteria for narratives, but are worthy of analysis. I aim to show that non-narrative trauma stories can serve the kinds of moral and political functions that Nussbaum, Rorty, and others are concerned with; and that excluding such stories from philosophical analysis is theoretically pernicious.

Trauma stories are first-personal accounts in which trauma victims aim to recount their experiences, where trauma can be understood as the result of injury or damage inflicted by a human perpetrator – such stories are commonly connected to war, abuse, or violence. There is a worry that traumatic memories do not lend themselves easily to robust narrative form, as traditionally construed; in other words, that storytelling attempting to report traumatic events

might not reflect the level of internal organization needed for a story to qualify as a narrative. Susan Brison, whose book *Aftermath* analyzes some of the ways in which storytelling enabled her to come to terms with an experience of violent rape and attempted murder, notes that traumatic memories are typically incomplete and fragmented (Brison 2002). This is especially true with those for whom traumatic experience extended over a longer period of time; in such cases, she describes “[t]he disappearance of the past and the foreshortening of the future” as common coping mechanisms (2002, 53). For example, in detailing an interview with a Gulag survivor, Jehanne M. Gheith remarks that in the process of storytelling, for the victim “[t]he past and present mix” and are spoken about in overlapping ways (Gheith 2007, 169).

I thus hold that it is characteristic of many recounted traumas that despite some structure being gained through narrativization, linear continuity and cohesive organization is absent. That is, it is not obvious that trauma stories will have a discernible beginning, middle, and end; nor that they will have a clear-cut sense of temporal order; nor that they will have a sense of completeness, or emotional resolution. As such, they likely fall short of counting as narratives at all, thus placing them beyond the scope of contemporary philosophical discussions of stories. It might be objected that this will only apply to *some* trauma stories, as most stories will have at least some recognizably narrative structure – so the problem of exclusion is small. After all, Brison herself is optimistic about the capacity of self-narrative to impose temporal order on the recollection of past events, and some academics working on trauma emphasize victims’ capacity to form narratives that counter fragmentation (e.g. Boss 2006, Herman 1992). However, I maintain that preserving the narrative superiority assumption and allowing even this minor exclusion is misguided. There are two reasons for this. First, this would exclude from analysis trauma victims who purposefully resist narrative forms of memory and storytelling, perhaps

because they continue to live under oppressive regimes. As Gheith argues, the societally enforced silence that followed labor camp experiences led Gulag survivors to actively preserve their fragmented recollections, and to seek alternative non-narrative forms of recuperation (2007, 161). Second, insofar as trauma stories are studied within a framework that prioritizes narrative, they might be considered to qualify as narratives, but as poorly told narratives that are worse-off for their fragmentation. This is undesirable as forcing trauma stories to assume narrative form might be materially damaging for their tellers, and might obscure or distort the content of the stories – I elaborate on this in §3.

So far I have established that trauma stories are frequently non-narrative in form; I now argue that such stories are capable of producing the kinds of moral and political upshots that contemporary philosophers care about, and that it is thus inappropriate to exclude them from analysis. In particular, I find trauma stories to have particular moral and political import in enabling the identification of moral harms or wrongs. For example, Diana Meyers argues that in the context of grave rights violations, many victims' stories convey important moral information, such that they can draw attention to “implicit moral imperative[s] that [have] been systematically ignored”, and thereby expand the scope of what is considered morally pertinent (Meyers 2016, 99). Along similar lines, María Pía Lara proposes that first-personal stories about historical atrocities can be key in provoking the kind of reflection necessary for a society to productively transform its public consciousness regarding those atrocities, and regarding the extreme moral wrongs bound up in them (Lara 2007, 4-5). To return to Gheith's interviews with Gulag survivors, then, these interviews yielded non-narrative testimonial accounts of lived trauma that contribute to an understanding of the moral wrongs and harms involved in the Gulags, despite their non-narrative nature.

Moreover, it is even arguable that the fragmented nature of Gheith's interviewee stories *enhances* rather than detracts from their moral significance. In her discussion of victims' stories and human rights, Meyers proposes that some stories achieve moral ends by successfully representing "a moral void" (2016, 99). Being unable to produce a trauma story that meets the criteria of a narrative might be a paradigmatic way of conveying a moral wrong so vile that it is difficult to comprehend, or that is not expressible by existing words or concepts. Part of the problem with recounting trauma is the impossibility of putting experiences so outside the norm into words: so breaks with traditional narrative structure could constitute an invitation to engage with the abnormal nature and subject of traumatic experience. Note that if it is correct that the non-narrative form of some stories actively contributes to their upshots, then their exclusion from analysis on this very basis is especially egregious – more on this in §4.

Importantly, the moral and political functions that trauma stories can perform seem crucially similar to the functions of stories that philosophers such as Nussbaum, Rorty, and Worth are self-professedly interested in. These thinkers aim to analyze stories that are morally educative and expand the imagination (Nussbaum), that highlight and work against democracy-threatening injustices (Rorty), and that confer epistemic benefits to improve our understanding of human experiences (Worth). Stated as such, it seems bizarre that non-narrative trauma stories should be excluded from this analysis – yet as things currently stand, this is exactly what happens. The narrative superiority assumption in the literature serves to actively discourage scholars from considering non-narrative stories, since it suggests that they are less capable or efficient in producing moral and political upshots. I contend that this assumption thus ought to be discarded; or at the very least, philosophers with a specific focus on narrative ought to face a stronger theoretical burden to justify their narrow focus. Concurrently, the prevalence of the tacit

conflation assumption conceals the possibility that such non-narrative stories even exist, as it evokes a presumption that all stories take narrative form. I hold this to be especially damaging, as it does not leave available the conceptual space required for non-narrative stories like those of the Gulag survivors to be discussed at all. In general, the largely unspoken blanket exclusion of non-narrative stories from the contemporary philosophical literature belies a kind of philosophical carelessness that ought to be addressed.

3 – The Harms of Excluding Non-Narrative Stories from Philosophical Analysis

Thus far I have established that the existing literature on stories excludes non-narrative stories from its remit, despite the capacity of such stories to engender philosophically interesting upshots. In this section I articulate three harms associated with this exclusion, in order to demonstrate the need for a more pluralistic understanding of stories that eschews the narrative superiority and tacit conflation assumptions.

3.1 – The Incompleteness of the Philosophical Analysis of Stories

One way in which the ongoing neglect of non-narrative stories in the philosophical literature is harmful is in leading to incomplete analysis, which is impoverished and made somewhat opaque by its failure to consider non-narrative forms.

Many philosophers working on stories hope to explain how stories are distinctive in their potential to produce certain effects. If, as I've argued, non-narrative stories can perform the same functions that narratives can, then any account of stories' distinctiveness that ignores them

completely – either because it is assumed that they cannot perform these functions well (narrative superiority assumption) or because stories are tacitly defined in such a way that all stories lacking narrative form are excluded (tacit assumption) – will fail to be theoretically comprehensive. Shen-Yi Liao argues that contemporary discussions of literature’s capacity to morally persuade pay insufficient attention to genre, assuming that all philosophically significant stories are realist in nature (Liao 2013, 270). His point is that insofar as this assumption is upheld, philosophers’ efforts to explicate the mechanisms through which literature can affect readers’ moral inclinations will overlook those mechanisms operating in non-realist genres. My critique runs along similar lines, although it is more wide-ranging than Liao’s. Insofar as narratives remain the sole focus of the philosophical analysis of stories, I hold that the mechanisms through which non-narrative stories engender normative upshots will be under-theorized.

Furthermore, it is not just that the existing analysis of stories might be missing out on some of the mechanisms specific to non-narrative stories, but that this analysis might be actively misidentifying which mechanisms most fundamentally underlie stories’ affective upshots. Entwined with both the narrative superiority and tacit conflation assumptions is the idea that narrative structure itself is responsible for the moral and political effects that stories can have. This is visible in Nussbaum’s assertion that stories can enhance our moral capacities by honing the “narrative imagination” (2008, 148); and in Worth’s delineation of the notion of “narrative meaning construction”, which she takes to be improved by well-constructed stories (2008, 42). However, since both narrative and non-narrative stories appear able to engender similar philosophically significant functions, I suggest that the emphasis upon narrative structure as *the* mechanism through which stories serve normative functions is mistaken. Explanations of these

functions that go beyond narrative structure are necessary, and might reveal features of stories that have been thus far disregarded.

The thought that important non-narrative mechanisms might be actively obscured by “the exclusive focus on narrative” in philosophical analysis is supported by an account offered by Karen Simecek (Simecek 2015, 498). She argues that, contrary to widespread consensus, literature’s capacity to offer insights into the nature of the emotions is best explained by perspectival features of literary artworks, rather than by their narrative structure (2015, 500). Simecek explicitly maintains that the narrow prioritization of narrative in contemporary debate has obscured considerations of perspective in stories. More broadly, I contend that attributing the capacity of stories to produce moral and political upshots solely to narrative-specific features is inadequate. The moral upshots of non-narrative trauma stories, for example, cannot be explained solely with appeal to narrative structure; and delineating an explanatory account of such stories might pave the way for a more comprehensive account of stories’ distinctiveness in general.

3.2 – The Disproportionate Exclusion of Marginalized Storytelling

In §2 I argued that it might be characteristic of trauma stories that they do not meet the standard conditions for narratives – I now want to suggest that this might be the case for a substantial portion of storytelling produced by marginalized groups. I hold that stories told and crafted by oppressed individuals are in some ways less likely to conform to standard narrative structures. They are thereby disproportionately likely to be neglected the mainstream philosophical discussion of stories, given the prioritization of narrative as the dominant form of storytelling. This is doubly harmful, since as well as resulting in academic investigations that are

impoverished for their omission of stories with significant upshots, it excludes from analysis marginalized perspectives that are already too frequently disregarded. I see two major reasons for the correlation between marginalized groups and non-narrative storytelling forms.

The first is that the standard understanding of narrative comes from accounts that tend to take Western literary classics as paradigmatic of the narrative form, and thus of the kind of story that deserves philosophical attention. Currie opens his book on narrative with a discussion of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*; Nussbaum goes to great lengths to explain how Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* qualifies as a piece of moral philosophy; Velleman invokes Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* to aid in articulating his account of narrative; and so on (Currie 2010, 1; Nussbaum 1985, 516; Velleman 2003, 9). On narrative accounts like those of Aristotle, Carroll, and Velleman, trauma stories are very much an outlier to the so-called exemplar narratives that are central to academic discussion. My point is that this is not purely accidental, and that marginalized stories in general are disproportionately treated as outliers. This is because the fact that a group is marginalized means that their storytelling practices are also likely to be marginalized, and so to fall outside of the mainstream understandings of stories. For example, in taking Western classics as central in determining the conditions for narratives, standard accounts also neglect indigenous traditions of storytelling, which tend not to be expressed in written form, and might take the form of non-narrative prose, poetry, song, or dance. In other words, many indigenous modes of storytelling – consider too body painting, rock art, and carvings – also fail to qualify as narratives on a standard definition.¹ Since the existing aesthetics and ethics literature that focuses on the capacity of narrative stories to affect change maintains the understanding of narrative conveyed by the accounts offered by Aristotle, Carroll, and Velleman,

¹ For a good description of the importance of storytelling for Choctaw people, see Thurman Lee Hester's 'Choctaw Conceptions of the Excellence of the Self, with Implications for Education'.

this means that the upshots of stories from indigenous groups and other marginalized groups are overlooked.

The second reason that stories constructed by members of marginalized groups are more likely than other stories to break from standard conditions laid out for narratives is because their tellers might want to *deliberately* resist these conditions. This is especially true for stories that are explicitly fashioned to further the interests of the marginalized in some way, or to resist some dominant universal claim. For example, in Claudia Rankine's book-length poem *Citizen*, she interrogates anti-black racism in the USA by weaving together cultural criticism, lyrical poetry, documentation of real-life racist violence, photos, and much more in a pointedly disjointed, genre-defying experiment in storytelling (Rankine 2014). In the opening segment of the book, she recounts in the second person a string of everyday racist microaggressions and incidents; each example she gives is a brief snapshot that decidedly lacks linear or causal continuity, or any kind of easy emotional resolution. *Citizen* does not qualify as a narrative, yet seems like a model example of storytelling that engenders moral, political, and epistemic functions. In other words, it appears to produce the kinds of upshots that philosophers with interests in analyzing stories care about – yet Rankine, alongside other authors and creators keen to represent and criticize their oppression, purposefully rejects the traditional narrative.

This link between non-narrative stories and marginalized identities offers further support to my proposal that the philosophical literature on stories ought to focus less exclusively on the category of narrative. It is undesirable to routinely exclude marginalized forms of storytelling from analysis, especially given the historical precedent – within academia and beyond – of neglecting marginalized perspectives. I intend for this dissertation, with its broader focus on the category of storytelling rather than that of narrative, to contribute to ameliorating this neglect.

3.3 – The Distortion of Marginalized Non-Narrative Stories

The previous subsection argued that prioritizing narrative in the analysis of stories neglects marginalized stories; here I go one step further, and argue that the exclusive emphasis on narrative might actively perpetuate the marginalization of certain groups, and distort the content and subsequent moral upshots of their non-narrative stories. Through the narrative superiority assumption, the contemporary philosophical discourse exerts an implicit normative demand that stories ought to take narrative form to produce relevant upshots, or to be deemed worthy in some sense. To the extent that marginalized storytellers are aware of this hierarchical preference towards narrative, this has the potential to influence and shape the formation of their stories.

In the case of trauma stories, if somebody trying to put their traumatic experience into words is aware that their audience expects their story to be organized and non-fragmented, this might lead them to impose structure on their experiences too hastily. That is, if a victim thinks emotional closure or temporal organization are necessary to receive a sympathetic or sustained response from a listener, they might narrate their experience accordingly even though this misrepresents it, or pushes them into a conclusion that they might not have reached, given more time to reflect. If, as I suggested in §2, the moral upshots of trauma stories are in some ways characterized or enhanced by their gaps and discontinuities – by their departures from narrative form – then is particularly damaging to obscure these gaps. For indigenous storytellers, an awareness that narrative stories are more palatable, appealing, or commercially viable to their audiences would plausibly lead to an emphasis on narrative forms of indigenous storytelling at the expense of non-narrative forms. In a worst case scenario, this kind of pressure might even

contribute to the gradual disappearance of certain non-narrative indigenous storytelling art forms, which in some cases are already practiced by very few people.

To better understand the harm involved in these examples, and in the exclusive focus and celebration of narrative forms of storytelling, Kristie Dotson's notion of testimonial smothering is relevant. This is a phenomenon that she describes as "the truncating of one's own testimony in order to insure that the testimony contains only content for which one's audience demonstrates testimonial competence" (Dotson 2011, 244). Testimonial smothering is harmful since it comprises a form of self-silencing in response to the prejudices or ignorance of others. In Dotson's terms then, the problem with any general assumption that narrative stories are the most refined, or the most likely to receive uptake, is that this might result in marginalized individuals adapting their stories such that they fit narrative form, even if this distorts or changes the stories. A concrete example of testimonial smothering regarding trauma stories might be a rape victim choosing not to disclose that they cannot fully remember the sequence of events surrounding their assault, for fear of their story being judged as unreliable and thus disregarded in its failure to correspond to narrative form.

Insofar as the narrative superiority and tacit conflation assumptions are upheld, I contend that a philosophical discourse that examines and celebrates narrative stories alone perpetuates and contributes to this testimonial smothering of marginalized storytelling. In order to avoid this, I hold that the contemporary literature must adopt a more pluralistic understanding of stories. Otherwise, I worry that trying to fit some stories and their upshots into an analysis of narrative would culminate in the demand that members of marginalized groups change and adapt their stories in order to be accepted. This would be politically undesirable, as it would silence certain perspectives and place further burdens upon marginalized individuals; but it would also be

theoretically undesirable, as distorting stories to fit within a standard narrative framework might also obscure the ways in which they affect moral and epistemic change.

4 – The Advantages of a Pluralist Understanding of Storytelling

In the final section of this chapter, I argue that the philosophical analysis of stories would be greatly enhanced by the adoption of a more pluralistic conception of story, whereby the narrative superiority and tacit conflation assumptions are rejected and a clear conceptual distinction is made between story and narrative. Taking a pluralist approach to stories would enable the contemporary literature to overcome the three harms I delineated above, as viewing narrative as a subset of story accommodates the examination of both non-narrative and narrative stories. Note that it is not my intention to posit a comprehensive pluralist account of stories in this chapter (or indeed in the dissertation as a whole), although this is a worthy project in its own right. I simply hope to demonstrate that construing stories more broadly opens up novel and philosophically rewarding avenues for research.

The arguments from §3 against the use of standard philosophical accounts of narrative to discuss stories told by members of marginalized groups have certain corollaries for the way I choose to understand storytelling, the concept that this dissertation focuses on instead. Above all, I take the points made in this chapter to warn against any kind of rigid or universal definition or understanding of storytelling, or of what a story is. In other words, I purposefully recognize storytelling to be a broad and varied category, and resist any kind of essentialized understanding of what a story is. In order to respect the perspectives and interests of marginalized groups, a flexible classification of stories is indispensable. This is to prevent my analysis from being

overly reductive, either by excluding from its purview pertinent stories that take a non-narrative or non-traditional form, or by flattening disparate storytelling practices to seek commonality.

It should be noted, however, that while I see a certain vagueness to be beneficial in demarcating what count as stories, this does *not* mean that no conditions can be placed upon stories or storytellers, and that measures of clarity, linear form, and completeness fall out of the picture altogether. Stories are always constructed by an individual, or by a group of individuals, and as such they can be designed well or poorly, and their design will inevitably affect the moral, epistemic, and political upshots they have the potential to produce. Indeed, sometimes stories told by oppressed individuals might fail to bring about their intended effects precisely *because* they lack narrative cohesion. With trauma stories, the idea is not that *no* expectations should be placed upon victims, as we might still reasonably expect some attempt at clarity; and placing some expectations on speakers can be a way of respecting them. The point instead is that in this case, as more generally, it is unhelpful to use a set of general criteria to determine whether something counts as a story or a narrative, or to assess whether it should be considered a well- or poorly-constructed story. The expectations and demands that one places on stories pertaining to marginalized individuals and groups must be sensitive to context.

In construing the category of storytelling as distinct from that of narrative, and insisting that stories are a broader and less rigidly constrained category of analysis, my dissertation is able to enjoy certain advantages. As well as widening the scope of the analysis of stories, such that pertinent stories involving members of marginalized groups are included, there are theoretical benefits to this rejection of the narrative superiority and tacit conflation assumptions. The rest of this section focuses on explicating these advantages. In §4.1, I argue that distinguishing between stories and narratives allow for a rich exploration of the way that narratives and stories interact

with one another. In §4.2, I argue that a focus on storytelling rather than narratives or even just stories encourages a productive examination of the processes that produce, transform, and circulate stories.

4.1 – The Relationship Between Stories and Narratives

The ability to distinguish narrative from story yields significant theoretical advantages, as it enables a dialogue about the ways that narratives operate within stories, about the ways that external narratives might influence stories, the ways that stories might be turned *into* narratives, and so on. In other words, I hold that it is theoretically productive to focus on stories as broader categorical units which interact with narratives and other kinds of discourse in various ways. As put by Sujatha Fernandes, “[a] story is a text that contains several different kinds of discourse units, including narrative, description, and argumentation” (Fernandes 2017, 5-6). Seeing stories as a composite enables one to address its components separately from one another, and to explore the ways that narrative form and its presence or absence in a story affects the capacity of that story to generate socially pertinent upshots.

In this chapter I have argued that a story’s inclusion or exclusion from the category of narrative does not meaningfully track that story’s capacity to engender philosophically significant upshots. However, this does not mean that considerations bound up with narrative lack bearing, even in the analysis of non-narrative stories themselves. The ways in which stories convey, contain, or reject standard narrative form directly interact with the upshots that stories produce – and this only comes into view once stories and narratives are explicitly demarcated as distinct categories.

To further develop this thought, I hold Gregory Currie's notion of narrativity to be theoretically fertile, whereby the concept of narrative is viewed as gradational rather than categorical (2010, 33). Currie argues that contemporary philosophers with an interest in narrative – that is, those that hold some version of the narrative superiority assumption – generally focus on stories with “a greater degree of ‘narrativeness’” than others (2010, 34). On his account, narrativity tracks the extent to which a story focuses on the histories of several highly interrelated persons, gives ample information about causal dependencies, and holds all of this in place by some kind of thematic unity (2010, 35). The three conditions that he picks out can be recognized as closely related to the conditions laid out by Aristotle, Carroll, and Velleman. His departure from these thinkers comes in the view of narrative as coming in degrees, which allows for the recognition that stories might exhibit higher or lower narrativity in interesting ways.

I contend that given a pluralistic understanding of stories, whereby stories and narratives are seen as distinct categories, the application of this notion of narrativity opens up novel avenues for research. Currie himself sees narrativity's significance as lying in its correspondence to the class of ‘exemplary narratives’ – those narratives that successfully fulfil the three conditions he identifies (2010, 35). In this, he upholds the narrative superiority assumption and perpetuates the prioritization of such stories in philosophical analysis. However, I propose that once narrativity is separated from the narrative superiority assumption, it can be used as a tool to move beyond the widespread, narrow understanding of stories in the literature. It has theoretical value for the purposes of investigating storytelling pertaining to oppressed individuals and groups, since it might be that for certain types of stories, being particularly low or high in narrativity is significant for the stories' social effects.

In some contexts, stories told by or about oppressed individuals might enhance their socially relevant functions by maintaining a high degree of narrativity. Take as an example stories that aim to perform an epistemic function by introducing and informing outsiders about the everyday lives of a marginalized group. The first season of the television show *The Wire* is praised for its sensitive portrayal of the ins and outs of various African-American lives in Baltimore housing projects precisely *because* it follows characters with interlinked lives, spells out the causal dependencies between these characters, and provides a highly thematically unified look at the challenges they face. The narrativity present in *The Wire*, and in other such storytelling practices, is arguably key to engaging its audience, and in urging them to take up the perspectives of the characters portrayed and to empathize with their emotions and perspectives. Indeed, the crucial role that narrativity plays in fiction and its effects on those that consume it are seen as central in existing discussions of the moral power of novels, such as in Nussbaum's exploration of the narrative imagination.

On the flip side, however, in some cases a lack of narrativity in stories might actually increase their capacity to serve moral, epistemic, and political functions for marginalized groups. Indeed, in the previous section I suggested that for certain types of story, a low level of narrativity – whether intentional or unintentional – might be characteristic. To illustrate this, I return to Rankine's *Citizen*, and run through three ways in which the low level of narrativity in this prose poem actively constitutes or contributes to its moral and political effects.

First, I contend that the disjointed arrangement of the book allows Rankine to better illuminate the pervasive nature of racism and structural injustice in the US. *Citizen*'s overall structure is non-narrative in that it juxtaposes various scenes, figures, and quotations relating to racist encounters in American life without providing ample information about their causal

dependencies, or about the ways in which the depicted figures interrelate. For example, Rankine moves swiftly from an extended description of the racism that Serena Williams routinely faces on and off court straight (2014, 25-36), directly to a briefly recounted scenario in which an anonymous individual's friend calls them a 'nappy-headed ho' (2014, 41), and then on to eleven other recounted and anonymous microaggressions (2014, 43-55). The non-narrative structure here highlights the omnipresence and inescapability of racism for black people. The sheer number of prejudicial encounters that Rankine details show the depth of the problem, and their disorderly arrangement contributes to the reader's sense that racial prejudice might creep into any interaction or moment, no matter how unexpectedly. Interestingly, on Currie's given criteria for narrativity, it can be observed that *Citizen* scores highly with regard to one criterion (thematic unity, where this thematic unity is the depiction of racism in the US context) as a direct result of its avoidance of the other two criteria (interrelation between characters and information about causal dependencies). This shows that the interaction between narrative, non-narrative, and narrativity is far more complex than is currently acknowledged in the philosophical literature, and deserves more attention.

A second way in which *Citizen's* lack of narrativity can be seen to enhance its effects can be seen in Rankine's use of disjointed language and sentence formation to reflect the phenomenological experience of blackness in the US. Especially in the latter half of the book, Rankine increasingly incorporates fragmented forms of storytelling:

Hey you—/

Slipping down burying the you buried within. You
are everywhere and you are nowhere in the day./

The outside comes in—/

Then you, hey you— (2014, 140-141)

Such segments of *Citizen* express splintered and scattered thoughts, which cut themselves off midsentence and shift focus from one moment to the next – in other words, which are particularly low in narrativity. I propose that in such cases, Rankine’s language is purposefully clipped and jerky in order to convey the fragmented sense of self that many black people report as a result of the constant experience of racism and an ‘othering’ gaze. Furthermore, the short lines of text that seem to interrupt one another in the excerpt above convey to the reader a sense of urgency, and a sense of the violence with which black individuals experience racism. This is reminiscent of my suggestion in §2 that trauma stories might characteristically take a fragmented, non-narrative form, as this might be the best way to accurately reflect traumatic memory and experience. The link between phenomenological experiences of oppression and low narrativity is noteworthy, and deserves increased philosophical consideration.

Third, I argue that *Citizen*’s lack of narrativity serves to actively involve and implicate the reader in its depiction of racial injustice – this is particularly important because it runs contrary to the narrative superiority assumption, whereby it is held that the provision of narrative detail is key to engaging one’s audience. Another example of Rankine’s intentional resistance of narrativity is her inclusion of a number of highly emotional questions, which she poses at various points throughout the book without subsequently answering or even acknowledging:

What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard?

Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? (2014, 10)

These questions often serve to break up longer pieces of prose, and the combination of their second-person address, their suddenness in the larger context of the text, and their unanswered nature give them an arresting effect on readers. In addition, the first of the two given excerpts further breaks from narrative form by shifting rapidly between addressing an external ‘he’ or

‘she’ back to the first-personal address. Rankine frequently employs this disorienting shift in perspective, and I maintain that by doing so, she denies the reader any detachment from the depicted experiences, and instead pushes them to continuously adopt different identifications and perspectives. As Evie Shockley comments in her critical reflection on *Citizen*, through such devices Rankine actively encourages “white cross-racial identification” – and presumably this cross-identification is key to the epistemic effects that the book might engender, especially in non-black readers (Shockley 2016, par. 11).

Through this analysis of Rankine’s *Citizen*, it should be evident that stories with low levels of narrativity have the capacity to produce significant philosophical upshots that are actively enhanced by their non-narrative elements. This relationship between narrativity and story is particularly important to stress, since it runs contrary to both the narrative superiority assumption (according to which there is a direct correlation between high narrativity and normative effects of stories) and the tacit conflation assumption (according to which the existence of non-narrative stories – stories which by definition are low in narrativity – is completely obscured). This is why I insist on decoupling Currie’s concept of narrativity from his own account of narrativity’s importance. In holding that stories with higher levels of narrativity are generally more valuable, Currie does not allow adequate theoretical space for stories that are low in narrativity, yet effective in bringing about social ends; or stories that are high in narrativity, but ineffective or even actively pernicious in their intended socially relevant effects.

A final noteworthy benefit of differentiating narratives from stories is that this permits discussion of a story containing within it multiple narratives, or certain types of narrative – and it might also allow us to argue that in some cases, stories can be turned *into* narratives. To elaborate on these ideas, Hilde Lindemann Nelson’s concept of ‘master narratives’ is invaluable,

where these master narratives are defined as distorting stock plots from our culture's socially shared understandings (Nelson 2001, 112). For example, a master narrative about rape is that victims are responsible for their assault based on their clothing or actions prior to being assaulted; distinguishing narrative from story allows one to fully examine the ways in which this particular master narrative manifests in a rape victim's story.² Indeed, there might be more than one identifiable master narrative present in some stories told by marginalized individuals. Looking for types of narrative within stories also opens up space for identifying counter narratives – narratives that specifically resist pernicious master narratives and the stereotypical assumptions embedded within them – within stories told by members of marginalized groups. It is entirely possible that one story might contain elements of both a pernicious master narrative, yet also a transformative counter narrative. Finally, the capacity to separate out narrative from story in this case yields the theoretical tools necessary to be able to identify the way that stories of marginalized groups are sometimes turned into master narratives by dominant groups, or co-opted to perpetuate existing master narratives.

4.2 – Storytelling as an Activity

Another major advantage of focusing on storytelling rather than on narratives for the purpose of investigating the stories of marginalized groups is that this category picks out a *process*: it encourages one to look at the formation and the circulation of stories, as these contextual factors importantly shape their content. Currie makes some headway in recognizing the importance of

² In 'Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices', Katharine Jenkins argues that rape myths interfere with victims' epistemic capacities, such that they cannot properly understand their experiences.

process by distinguishing between the internal and external aspects of narrative – where the former picks out the content of the narrative itself and the latter picks out the activity of the author – and insisting that both are necessary to fully assess any given narrative (2010, 49). He argues that our comprehension of a narrative is impoverished if we fail to relate its contents to its author's intentions; without reflecting upon these intentions, some of the narrative's upshots will be overlooked. However, Currie does not go far enough, as he only identifies the activity of the creator of a story as pertinent, and assumes that paying attention to authorial intention is sufficient to contextualize a story.

I contend that the broad context in which a story is formulated is significant, beyond merely the author and their intentions: factors such as audience expectations, political conditions, prominent cultural or master narratives, and story genre conventions are also worthy of attention. After all, factors such as these will inevitably impact the teller of a story and their intentions about story content, either at the conscious or unconscious level. In focusing on storytelling as a communicative craft that produces stories and narratives, I hope to enrich my analysis of the functions that stories can serve for marginalized groups by foregrounding the various social relations that they are subject to. In this section I first argue that neglecting storytelling as a socially situated activity is pernicious in discussing the stories pertaining to oppressed groups, and then contend that recognizing the various processes of storytelling opens up constructive theoretical space.

In the previous section, I argued that master narratives sometimes interact with the stories told by members of marginalized groups in damaging ways – yet the full influence of master narratives over such stories is obscured unless one recognizes storytelling as an activity, situated within a web of power relations. So far, I have primarily discussed the possibility of identifying

and analyzing master narratives that are present within stories, but I hold that it is also important to look at how the existence of master narratives, and the pressure to conform to them, shapes the formation of stories in the first place. Someone telling a story is constrained to an extent by simply being aware of master narratives relating to their story and of corresponding audience expectations, and is potentially further constrained by active interference that urges conformity with these master narratives – these constraints inevitably affect the story’s content, and therefore also its moral and epistemic upshots, in significant ways.

I want to note that in analyzing stories in general, not just those told by members of marginalized groups, I hold that reviewing contextual audience expectations and related master narratives is important. As remarked about first-personal storytelling by feminist scholars Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett: “stories that people tell about their lives are never simply individual, but are told in historically specific times and settings and draw on the rules and models in circulation that govern how story elements link together in narrative logics” (2008, 2). That is, anyone constructing a story about themselves will construct this story in anticipation of it being received in a particular way or by particular audiences, and will have a certain awareness of existing stories that are similar to the one they are trying to tell. I maintain that contextual factors such as these are in fact relevant for *all* stories, not just first-personal ones – fictional tales, plays, documentaries, and many other such kinds of storytelling are also importantly informed by their social situation. Some stories are funded by governmental organizations with particular political leanings, which affects their permitted content; we can explain why certain stories become popular in a culture with reference to the current ‘zeitgeist’; and so on. However, while context is important for appreciating stories generally, both of the fictional and non-fictional kind, I hold that it is *particularly* important to pay attention to the

context surrounding stories told by marginalized individuals, as such individuals are especially likely to be negatively impacted by storytelling norms, and to be subject to master narratives. Indeed, master narratives are often weaponized against marginalized individuals, such that if their stories resist or contradict these narratives, they are rejected by their audience, sometimes at high cost.

A further point to make about the importance of recognizing and analyzing storytelling as an active process is that it brings to light the way in which the distribution and circulation of stories promotes some voices, but silences others. That is, the context surrounding the formation of stories is important to study since it might perniciously shape the content of stories told by marginalized individuals. Further, some stories told by the marginalized do not make it to prominence, and are not widely recognized. Since stories cannot produce significant moral, epistemic, and political upshots without being heard or consumed in some way, this is a substantial point. As Sujatha Fernandes comments, some oppressed individuals might not be able to make their stories legible to the mainstream – to focus on stories or narratives alone, as artefacts, would theoretically elide the perspectives of such individuals (2017, 5).

However, it is not just that the processes of storytelling are important to my analysis to identify the ways that these processes can hamper and interfere with the stories of oppressed individuals; examining the formation and circulation of stories also allows for a fuller analysis of how stories can serve meaningful functions for marginalized groups. An initial argument in favor of paying attention to storytelling as a highly context-dependent activity is that sometimes, the reason stories told by oppressed individuals *are* so morally or epistemically efficacious is because they specifically aim to draw attention to their context, and to the power relations and master narratives that constrain them. This is particularly true with regard to stories told or

constructed for the purposes of political activism. It would be difficult to analyze the feminist consciousness-raising popularized in the 1960s, in which women shared personal testimonies with one another to disrupt dominant assumptions, without discussing it as an activity, as a process that explicitly focused on the way that contextual factors shape women's stories. In contemporary terms, I contend that it would also be theoretically inadequate to address the many and varied stories shared as part of the #MeToo movement as anything other than active cases of storytelling, through which master narratives about sexual norms were challenged.

Furthermore, these cases bring into view the fact that the activity of storytelling for marginalized groups is often importantly collective in nature, since stories are formed, retold, and distributed cooperatively – something that is neglected if stories are examined merely as artefacts. The examples of stories as utilized in consciousness raising and in the #MeToo movement demonstrate the way in which stories are sometimes constructed cooperatively, such that their content and meaning depends upon being produced in dialogue with others. I want to suggest that the significant epistemic role that such stories can play for members of marginalized groups is dependent on this collectivity.

Indeed, in analyzing storytelling as an activity, one can productively distinguish between stories that are intended to circulate within a smaller social group – perhaps just within a particular marginalized community – and those that are intended for mainstream consumption. It might be the case that for some storytelling practices, their socially significant upshots depend upon a smaller circulation pool; in the case of consciousness raising, perhaps the capacity of participants to develop new hermeneutical tools and resources depends upon this. And with regard to trauma stories, and their capacity to serve a morally significant therapeutic role for

victims, we might think that this is sometimes contingent on storytelling regarding trauma occurring in a closed off setting – this is presumably the idea behind confidential support groups.

A final consideration that speaks to the theoretical benefits of viewing storytelling as an activity is that doing so brings to the fore the way in which stories might be told and retold as they are circulated, which is important because both their content and their socially pertinent upshots might change accordingly. While the retelling of stories in different contexts clearly has the capacity to harm the interests of the marginalized, if their stories are told to align with master narratives or to appease a mainstream audience, I nonetheless maintain that the activity of retelling stories has great transformative potential. To return to the example of stories told for activist purposes, stories that might be told countless times in feminist consciousness raising groups and then beyond, or as part of the #MeToo movement, can be seen to take on more and more significance as the relevant political movement advances. Relatedly, there is power in the telling and retelling of the stories of black individuals killed in cases of police brutality, and in presenting these stories as importantly interconnected. This highlights the importance of how stories are framed and presented to the way that they are then perceived, and therefore to the moral and epistemic functions that they might serve. Another example in which the activity of storytelling, of deliberately framing and retelling stories, explicitly aims to further the perspectives of marginalized individuals is the 1619 Project developed by *The New York Times Magazine* (Silverman et al 2021). This project is an attempt to reframe American history with slavery and the contributions of African-Americans foregrounded, and involves many instances of retelling familiar stories with unfamiliar emphases.

Since stories and storytelling are inevitably and importantly shaped by their social contexts, I hold that it is to my advantage in analyzing the storytelling of marginalized groups to

construe storytelling broadly, and to emphasize the processes surrounding the formation and distribution of stories. It should be noted that the highly contextual nature of storytelling means that, as sociologists Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey point out, storytelling has no necessary political or epistemological valence; instead, they “depend on the particular context and organization of their production for their political effect” (1995, 197). The next four chapters unpack some of the ways in which stories are contextualized and organized in order to effect morally, epistemically, and politically beneficial functions for members of marginalized groups.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that it is both inconsistent and pernicious for the philosophical analysis of stories to exclude non-narrative stories from their remit, simply on the basis of the narrative superiority and tacit conflation assumptions. This exclusion is inconsistent because it neglects stories that engender precisely the kinds of moral, political, and epistemic functions that philosophers are concerned with, thereby giving rise to incomplete and potentially misguided accounts of stories’ distinctive features. The neglect of non-narrative stories is pernicious because it disproportionately results in the exclusion of stories and storytelling forms that originate in marginalized groups, and potentially perpetuates their marginalization or distortion. In response to these concerns, I defended a pluralist understanding of the category storytelling, such that narrative is distinguished as a subset of a broader, richer category of stories. Adopting storytelling as my focus throughout this dissertation allows me to take advantage of a greater number of conceptual tools, and to examine the social and political processes that contribute to the successes and failures of different kinds of story.

Chapter Two – Storytelling and Empathy

Empathy is centrally involved in storytelling, and often underlies the moral, political, and epistemic functions that stories can provide for members of marginalized groups. The concept of empathy can be understood in different ways, but commonly picks out those psychological capacities that enable individuals to know what others are thinking, to share in their feelings and emotions, and to thereby take an interest in their wellbeing. The potential for stories to prompt empathy and to enhance our empathetic skills is therefore significant for marginalized groups, and can both constitute or contribute to significant upshots that serve their interests. Storytelling characteristically involves empathy as reading, watching, or hearing a story tends to involve responding to and imaginatively entering into the thoughts and feelings of the individual or individuals whose actions are being depicted.

In this chapter I give an account of empathy, argue that storytelling can promote empathy in ways that have significant value for members of marginalized groups, and suggest that there is a distinctive connection between storytelling and empathy. In §1 I unpack the concept of empathy in relation to Adam Smith's moral philosophy, narrow its definition, and articulate some of its noteworthy features. In short, I take empathy to fundamentally involve a kind of first-personal perspective taking: imagining 'what it is like' to be in somebody else's shoes through a process of imaginative projection. §2 then turns to the links between empathy, storytelling, and the interests of marginalized groups. I argue that empathy can play various beneficial roles for oppressed individuals, and discuss both fictional storytelling and storytelling within activist movements to illustrate this. Furthermore, I contend that stories have a distinctive role to play in fostering empathy for marginalized groups, and that stories might sometimes be more efficacious

at producing beneficial upshots than other forms of communication such as theory or argumentation.

1 – Defining Empathy

In recent years, empathy has been widely discussed across a broad spectrum of disciplines, so while it is widely recognized as some kind of psychological capacity to understand and to share in the feelings of others, there are numerous competing definitions associated with the concept. Broadly speaking, empathy is commonly contrasted with sympathy, whereby the latter refers to a kind of warm or caring feeling *towards* a subject, rather than empathy's feeling *in* or *with* a subject. Yet this still allows for much ambiguity. Indeed, in an article analyzing empathy's competing conceptualizations, Amy Coplan identifies seven distinct phenomena that are sometimes picked out as empathy, and notes that diverse discussions of empathy focus on or emphasize different features (2011, 4). She goes on to argue that precision is therefore needed in invoking or analyzing empathy, as conflating it with other, related processes makes it difficult to grasp precisely what is being claimed, and leads to theoretical confusion and ambiguity (2011, 5).

For my purposes, it is important to pinpoint a narrow definition of empathy so that I can better explain the role that empathy plays in enabling stories to generate morally, politically, and epistemically beneficial upshots for marginalized groups. My preferred understanding of the concept draws heavily on Samuel Fleischacker's interpretation of Adam Smith's notion of empathy, although I will note the places in which my account departs from his. In what follows I

outline an account of empathy, taking care to draw out its significant features, and begin to relate those features to storytelling and its capacity to serve the interests of the oppressed.

1.1 – Projective Empathy vs. Contagious Empathy

Although Adam Smith did not evoke the term ‘empathy’ itself – this first appears in the twentieth century – both he and David Hume developed extensive accounts of what they called ‘sympathy’ in order to explain how we share feelings with others. I will refer to these two accounts as Humean and Smithian empathy respectively, as the phenomena they discussed are closer to the contemporary understanding of empathy than to any other concept. The principal difference between Hume and Smith lies in the particular psychological mechanism that each takes to underlie the process of empathizing with others, and examining where the accounts depart one another is instructive.

For Hume, the focus is on emotional contagion: he held that “the minds of men are mirrors to one another”, and that as such individuals commonly experience the same feelings as others simply through association (Hume 1739-40, 365). Sometimes someone might start laughing because everyone else around them is laughing, or they might become sad when they observe another person crying. For an example specifically invoking storytelling, consider an individual who becomes scared while watching a horror movie, in response to the fear exhibited by onscreen characters and to the ominous music playing in the background. As Hume argues, we are social creatures and cannot help but to respond to the emotions of others: “a cheerful countenance infuses a sensible complacency and serenity into my mind... as an angry or sorrowful one throws a sudden damp upon me” (1739-40, 317). Humean empathy does not

require an awareness of cause – that is, if one ‘catches’ somebody else’s emotions, this does not entail an understanding of why that person feels that way, or of whether this emotion is merited given the circumstances. Noticing that a stranger in your subway carriage is crying might understandably make you sad, but this contagious sadness does not tell you anything about the stranger themselves, or about why they are crying.

Smithian empathy, on the other hand, takes imaginative projection as its central psychological mechanism – this involves trying to imagine yourself in another’s situation, and then feeling certain emotions as a result of this. As Smith contends, this imaginative activity involves observing another person’s circumstances, and “conceiving of what we ourselves should feel in the like situation” (1976, 47-8). In contemporary discussions of empathy, this psychological process is often described as first-personal ‘perspective taking’, and as some kind of imagining ‘what it is like’ to be in somebody else’s shoes (Code 1995; Coplan 2011; Matravers 2017). So if one observes a stranger bursting into tears on the subway immediately after being sexually harassed or objectified by another passenger, it is possible to projectively empathize with this stranger by imagining yourself in her place, and then experiencing sad, anxious or angry feelings in response to this projection. Importantly, projective empathy differs from contagious empathy in that it is highly cognitive, and requires that one knows more about its subject than just her short-lived emotions. To be able to take someone’s perspective successfully, knowledge of the entire situation at hand is necessary – of both the context, and of the individual in question’s character. The more detail one knows about a situation, and about the individual’s life, mindset, and everyday routines, the better one’s attempt to empathize projectively will be. As Smith comments, in contrasting his account to Hume’s, the feelings he’s concerned with “[do] not arise so much from the view of the passion as from that of the situation

which excites it” (1976, 51). I now give two reasons for preferring projective empathy to contagious empathy for my particular project, for discussing the ways that storytelling can prove beneficial to oppressed and marginalized individuals.

First, the central role that perspective taking and knowledge of cause plays for projective empathy makes Smithian empathy more appropriate for my project than contagious empathy. Before unpacking my reasoning here, a little more needs to be said about what perspective taking means. I follow Fleischacker in defining a perspective as “a mesh of opinions and attitudes that respond to the situations we have lived through in the past and shape the way that we live through future situations” (Fleischacker 2019, 31). In favoring projective empathy, then, I am endorsing empathy’s value as a perspectival exercise of the imagination – it allows us to not only share in but to understand the experiences of others, including those with different social identities to our own. Unlike contagion, projective imagining enables one to grasp what it is that another person actually thinks, desires, or needs, and to appreciate the ways in which their perspectives differ from our own. By definition, the experiences and perspectives of individuals from marginalized groups are frequently overlooked, distorted or suppressed – so in general, Smithian empathy is important for elucidating and disseminating the perspectives of marginalized individuals to external others. One of the significant functions that storytelling can serve is therefore to better enable individuals across social groups to engage in imaginative acts of empathy with the perspectives of marginalized individuals.¹ For example, personal stories are often utilized and sometimes made viral in activist campaigning to provoke those external to the political movement to empathize with the suffering of individuals, and thereby to better

¹ Importantly, this is not the only role that I see empathy as serving with regard to storytelling that benefits marginalized groups. For example, stories told by marginalized individuals to others who share their social identity might engender in-group empathy, which in turn enables the generation of group identity, and of new hermeneutical space. More on this later.

understand their viewpoints and the injustices they face. Indeed, it is this taking of others' perspectives 'from the inside' that underlies almost all of the moral, political, and epistemic functions of storytelling that this dissertation is concerned with.

It should be noted at this point that in defending the merits of projective empathy, I do not mean to suggest that contagious empathy is thereby entirely undesirable, or even that projective empathy will always be more successful than contagious empathy. Since projectively imagining what another person might be feeling and thinking is highly cognitively demanding, there are many ways in which an individual attempting this might go wrong. It is not uncommon for individuals to fail to accurately grasp the perspective of another person, and I certainly do not hold that acts of projective empathy always yield positive results for marginalized groups. It might even be argued that contagious empathy is less risky on this front, and less likely to lead someone astray – after all, you cannot catch something that someone does not have. However, the insights that contagious empathy can yield are very cognitively thin; you might experience what somebody else feels, but without projection, you cannot understand *why* they feel this way.² My contention is that while projective empathy sometimes goes awry, its cognitive richness makes its execution a worthwhile risk.

My second reason for preferring projective empathy to contagious empathy is that the latter is passive, while the former is active and requires a certain level of effort on the part of the empathizer. Humean empathy involves feelings that you catch merely by being in their presence; Hume himself comments on the way that affective emotions “readily pass from one person to

² Noting that contagious empathy is cognitively thin is not to say that this form of empathy is without its uses. The phenomenon of catching the feelings of others seems to have a biological basis, and surely plays an important role in forming bonds with others. Indeed, it might be that in some cases of projective empathy, some element of contagion is also present. My contention, and the intended upshot of my arguments here, is that it is more appropriate to reserve the term empathy for projective empathy.

another” (Hume 1739-40, 576). Indeed, it is entirely possible to share in the feelings of others through contagion without realizing that it is happening – we are all subconsciously affected by one another’s moods and countenances constantly, and much of this happens on an implicit level. Even babies and young children experience contagious emotions in this instinctive and passive way, such as when a baby starts crying in response to the sound of another baby’s cries. Smithian empathy, on the other hand, demands a high level of cognitive effort through various imaginative processes. One might need to think about what it would be like to be treated a certain way, to live under particular political regimes, to experience kinds of harms beyond one’s usual purview, and so on.

Understood this way, empathy is an activity – and just as recognizing storytelling as a process yields certain theoretical benefits, so too does treating empathy as a process. Importantly, when you empathize with somebody else you might be constantly revising and adjusting your imaginative act of projection. You can consider whether you’ve adequately factored in their cultural context, their social identity, their past experiences; and then amend your act of empathy accordingly, in order to better think about what it would be like to be in their shoes. Indeed, this self-conscious and continuous process of imaginative adjustment is key to many of the upshots that storytelling can produce for marginalized individuals, as should become apparent both through the rest of this chapter and for the duration of the dissertation. It is the fact that we expend cognitive effort in imaginative processes that makes empathizing with others a skill, which can therefore be worked on and enriched. As Fleischacker puts it, we “may need to extend our imaginations to correct or improve” our capacity to empathize – and my contention is that storytelling is a potent way to achieve this.

1.2 – Empathy and the Distinction Between Self and Other

An additional difference between contagious and projective empathy is that the former involves feeling the *same* emotion as the person whose feelings you catch, whereas the latter might result in feeling slightly different emotions. Contagion merely involves picking up on the feelings of others, and as such comprises a very direct form of sharing in the feelings of others – it is thus likely that you will share exact emotions with others, and that you might experience this emotion with the same intensity as them. However, since Smithian empathy does not have as its source the actual emotions of the individual that you are empathizing with, it is possible for feelings you experience through this exercise of empathy to differ from theirs both in content and in intensity. For example, in trying to what someone who has recently had a significantly traumatic experience feels, you might suppose that they feel great anger towards the person or event that caused the trauma. Yet it is entirely possible that the person in question is simply too overwhelmed or upset to be angry, or that the person is not able to ultimately identify this cause of trauma. The level of cognitive effort required by projective empathy also means that the feelings we experience through empathizing with another person are likely to be less intense than their actual feelings are. This is ultimately beneficial – if empathy is to serve a morally and epistemically significant role for marginalized individuals, it is for the better that empathetic feelings are less intense, and therefore subject to one’s control and able to be scrutinized and amended.

The gap that Smithian empathy opens up between one’s own perspective and the perspective that one is trying to empathize with invites questions about what kind of cognitive control projection requires. In particular, there has been some discussion about the extent to

which projective empathy involves departing from or quarantining one's own perspective. As defined thus far, there is a certain degree of ambiguity in what perspective taking consists in – as Peter Goldie puts it, there is a distinction between an individual imagining themselves being in the situation of another, and imagining actually *being* the person in the described situation (Goldie 2011, 305). Goldie defines these different phenomena as 'in-his-shoes-imagining' and empathy respectively, thereby arguing that true empathy involves largely jettisoning one's own perspective in favor of imaginatively entering into the perspective of another. Coplan makes an analogous distinction, whereby 'self-oriented perspective-taking' involves imagining yourself in someone's place, and other-oriented perspective-taking' involves imagining that you *are* somebody else; again, she contends that effective empathy requires the latter (Coplan 2011, 9). Indeed, this appears to be the understanding of perspective taking that Smith himself favored, in declaring the following: "I consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters" (TMS VII.iii.1.4, 317).

On the face of it, it seems clear that understanding empathy as other-oriented rather than self-oriented in the manner described is beneficial for the purposes of investigating the processes through which storytelling can encourage empathy with members of marginalized groups. If someone tries to empathize with a trauma victim by imagining undergoing their traumatic experiences, they might learn something about the traumatic experience itself, but they are unlikely to learn much about the trauma victim themselves. They will not gain a deeper understanding of the marginalized individual's life and circumstances, and certainly will not appreciate the way that the individual's social identity might importantly intersect with their experience of trauma. Responding to marginalized stories with self-oriented empathy, then, is likely to be actively harmful; in stories about the suffering of marginalized groups, self-oriented

empathy obscures structural injustice – it is difficult to see how one can truly appreciate the harms associated with living through apartheid in South Africa without imagining what it would have been like to have a non-white identity in those circumstances. As such, we can see that even the basic epistemic import of stories is threatened by self-oriented or in-his-shoes-imagining. Simply projecting yourself into a traumatic situation, without trying to fill in contextual details and appreciating the specificity of someone’s social location, is likely to distort and diminish your understanding of the traumatic experience.

So far so good – however, I hold it necessary at this point to complicate the picture, by challenging the assumption that self-oriented and other-oriented empathy *are* two distinct and conceptually discrete phenomena. Here I follow Fleischacker, who argues compellingly that the two notions are interconnected, such that we cannot make sense of one without invoking the other, at least to some extent. In other words, he reasons that you cannot fully imagine yourself in another’s place without also imagining what it might be like to actually be them; and on the flip side, that you cannot enter into the perspective of another without bringing *something* of yourself to the table (2019, 35).

The first prong of this claim makes the point that it is impossible to project your own perspective into the situation of another individual without imagining at least some inner elements of their cultural position, their social identity, their material circumstances. To return to a previous example, it is inconceivable that one would be able to projectively imagine living through apartheid without so much as considering how it must have felt for black South Africans to have been subject to institutionalized racist segregation, and what the experiences of growing up under this political regime might have been like. A person’s perspective – their feelings, beliefs, psychological history – cannot be clearly separated from their circumstances.

The second prong of Fleischacker's argument makes the related point that it is impossible to make sense of the projective effort to imagine what another person is feeling without also making some reference to your own perspective. Inevitably, in trying to imagine how someone else would feel given their situation, you draw upon your own experiences and feelings as a basis for imagining your way into their perspective. If you are trying to empathize with an individual who lived in South Africa during apartheid, it is important that *you* are the person engaged in this cognitive exercise. That is, unless something of your own perspective is present, Smithian empathy ends up being a kind of attempt to fuse together your own perspective with another's, or to eradicate your own sense of self in the cognitive act of empathizing. As well as being highly improbable as a mental act, this is clearly undesirable, and surely no longer meaningfully counts as empathy – for empathizing with others to have any morally or epistemically significant upshot, the person engaging in the act of empathy needs to maintain a perspective that is distinct from the subject of their empathy.³ As Nancy Sherman argues about attempts to empathize with others, “to bring the case home and infer in light of our own experiences and the cultural repository we carry need not necessarily contaminate an imaginative transport”, and might ultimately enhance the imaginative act (1998, 102).

Highlighting the artificiality of drawing a clear-cut distinction between self-oriented and other-oriented empathy is important because ultimately, the blurriness of the gap between one's own perspective and the perspectives of others is precisely what enables empathy with stories to produce moral, political, and epistemic upshots for marginalized groups. Key to the transformative potential of empathy is the idea that our perspectives are constantly changing –

³ This ‘something of your own perspective’ is what Coplan refers to as ‘self-other differentiation’ (Coplan 2011, 5). She actually does agree with Fleischacker in making the argument that self-other differentiation is an indispensable part of empathizing with another. The point of contention with her account is simply that she does hold it conceptually possible for one to distinguish self-oriented and other-oriented examples of empathy.

and that, importantly, your own perspective might change in response to the perspectives of those that you are empathizing with. I have already emphasized the importance of seeing empathy as a dynamic activity, and this is where that becomes truly significant. When you empathize with another, the empathetic process might involve trying to bridge the gap between your perspective and theirs by imagining how they feel; evaluating the degree to which you've been successful in doing so, and adjusting your projection accordingly; and then evaluating and changing your own perspective in response to this imaginative activity. Each of these steps has a significant role to play in enabling empathy with stories to serve beneficial functions for marginalized groups, and will be expanded upon further throughout the dissertation. Empathy has an importantly interactive quality that Goldie and Coplan somewhat obscure.

As Fleischacker emphasizes, we do not have a perspective that is independent of empathy, in the way that the distinction drawn by both Goldie and Coplan implies (2019, 37). We cannot help but to actually respond to – to have feelings and opinions about – the stories, situations, and people that we empathize with. It is theoretically important to recognize that the indeterminacy of our perspectives is what allows the imaginative processes of empathy to change our viewpoints and beliefs.

1.3 – Empathy's Role in Ethical Life

Before more specifically discussing the utility of projective empathy for my project, it is worth exploring a few final aspects of Smithian empathy, as describing where my understanding of empathy both differs and converges with his account is instructive. My main point of divergence with Smith lies in what he saw empathy as being *for*. His account of empathy as discussed thus

far primarily operates as a descriptive account of the mechanisms of social cognition – however, it is also an account that aims to provide a basis for our moral judgements, and ultimately pave the way to general moral rules and principles. I argue that maintaining this view of empathy’s purposes is antithetical to investigating empathy’s effects amongst marginalized groups.

For Smith, moral judgement involves projectively imagining others’ feelings, subsequently comparing that imaginative act with one’s own feelings, and then determining whether your feelings are aligned with theirs. The thought is that if your feelings are congruent with theirs, then you are making a judgement of approval, and deeming their feelings reasonable. As he puts it, “to approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them” (Smith 58). On the flip side, if your act of projective empathy departs from your actual feelings, this is then an evaluative judgement of disapproval, such that you judge the individual in question to have an inappropriate emotional response to their circumstances. If you listen to a story in which a victim describes their rage at the perpetrator of a traumatic event they experienced, and find that when you engage in an act of empathy – i.e. imagining what it would have been like for this person to suffer in this way – you also experience feelings of rage, this comprises a judgement that their rage is justified.

In order for these judgements to qualify as moral judgements, Smith’s notorious impartial spectator enters the scene. This notion is central to Smith’s moral philosophy more generally, and involves a psychological device within individuals that tells us how a human being in general – “anyone”, as Fleischacker puts it – would respond to a given situation (2019, 39). The impartial spectator serves as a corrective of sorts, and provides a framework for what we as moral agents ought to approve and disapprove of when empathizing with others. Importantly, empathy is crucially constitutive of the impartial spectator, as exercises of projective imagination

are necessary in figuring out what the general human being would feel in a specified circumstance. In this way, empathy is ultimately what enables us to morally evaluate ourselves, and serves as the foundation of our lives as ethical beings.

While I concur that much of empathy's import lies in its capacity to enable self-evaluation, I reject the particular theoretical mechanisms that he sees as underlying this self-evaluation. This is because in investigating the way that empathy in storytelling benefits marginalized groups, Smith's prioritization of moral judgement obscures and undermines some important moral, political, and epistemic upshots. I provide two reasons for departing from Smith's account of empathy, and from his understanding of empathy as aiming at moral judgement. Note that while I will largely discuss the limitations of Smith's account specifically for my project, I think that these considerations are applicable to empathy more generally too (although I will not defend this claim in depth here).

First, given the role of empathy in Smith's moral philosophy, his account of empathy does not emphasize the value of the process of empathizing with and coming to understand and appreciate the perspectives of others; yet this is of fundamental importance in addressing empathy's capacity to benefit marginalized individuals. Smith is certainly interested in the potential for empathy to enable individuals to self-reflect in a morally significant way, and to gain epistemic insights, given the centrality of projective imagining in moral judgement. However, as Sherman remarks, the empathetic modes of engagement encouraged by Smith's impartial spectator are "not meant to take us further into the world of the observed but rather become ways to attain more reasonable standards of external judgement" (1998, 90). This means that Smith primarily cares about understanding the experiences of others insofar as this contributes to the adjudication of which kinds of feelings and actions are appropriate and

justified; he does not recognize that a deep understanding of someone else's perspective might be valuable for other reasons.

In contrast, in examining the ways that storytelling can prompt empathy and thereby yield moral, political, and epistemic benefits, empathy's fundamental capacity to aid individuals external to marginalized groups in understanding the experiences of the marginalized is invaluable. I hold that there is value in merely being able to occupy the perspective of another, especially when that perspective is one that has been unjustly excluded from the mainstream. There is significant epistemic value in understanding the viewpoints of individuals with different social identities to yours, even if one's close empathetic identification with others does not contribute to the establishment of standards of propriety. Indeed, there are many other purposes that successful acts of empathy might serve; these will be unpacked further in Chapters Three through Five, but I will briefly mention some now. Empathizing with a particular indigenous autobiographical story is productive simply in bringing about increased understanding of an identity that has been historically oppressed and pushed aside. Furthermore, we might think that empathizing with some indigenous stories is morally significant in providing acknowledgement and recognition of past injustices. In a different vein, empathizing with personal stories within activist movements might be fruitful for members of marginalized groups in gaining more awareness of their own socially located situation, and also for engendering solidarity among diverse members of a particular marginalized group. For outsiders engaging with such acts of storytelling, empathetic engagement might be seen as productive again simply for the greater understanding that it yields, and also for thereby teaching individuals how to better engage with people of certain social identities going forward. In departing from Smith's account, I open up

the conceptual space to explore a broad range of empathy's features that enable significant functions for marginalized groups, which are obscured if reasonableness alone is prioritized.

My second reason for moving away from Smith's account of empathy's role in ethical life is that when thinking about how empathy facilitates moral, political, and epistemic functions through storytelling, highlighting the capacity of empathy to constitute moral judgement might sometimes actively undermine the interests of the marginalized. This is because I hold that, in order to be responsible in the cognitive exercise of empathizing with others, a certain cautious open-mindedness is necessary – I hold that this is generally true, but especially so regarding empathy with marginalized stories and storytellers. My concern is that if we are not open-minded in attempting to empathetically identify with others, we will not succeed in fully occupying their perspective; and that viewing empathy as important in the formation of moral evaluations is liable to interrupt this open-mindedness.

Applying this worry specifically to my project, the thought is that if one is insufficiently open-minded when empathizing with a marginalized individual, they are disproportionately likely to absorb the views of the marginalized into their own views, or to otherwise misunderstand or distort them. If you enter into an imaginative exercise with the awareness that you are doing so to ascertain how reasonable the subject's behavior is, I contend that you are therefore less attentive to the subject's particular perspective – less open-minded – than you would have been if you were simply aiming to gain an understanding of that subject. This is because judging reasonableness encourages one's critical faculties to be at the forefront when engaging in empathy, potentially cutting short or interfering with the imaginative act of projection. This is particularly worrying with regard to marginalized individuals, because marginalized perspectives are already more liable to be misinterpreted and misunderstood. This

could be because these marginalized viewpoints tend to be less visible and familiar to the mainstream, and we as thinkers are notoriously more likely to judge unfamiliar ideas as unreasonable or illogical. It could also be because marginalized individuals are likely to be subject to the interference of prejudicial stereotypes and pernicious master narratives, which then unduly influence those that attempt to empathize with them. Given this, I take it that outsiders attempting to empathize with marginalized perspectives ought to be especially cautious in their imaginative efforts; and I think that explicitly aiming at moral judgement is antithetical to this.

To make this less abstract, I will give a concrete illustration in which I see Smith's ethical model for empathy as potentially leading empathizers astray. Let us return to the example of the trauma story in which a victim describes her rage towards the individual that was responsible for their traumatic experience; and let us imagine that her story is a depiction of sexual assault. If one is trying to empathize with the victim in this situation, I believe it might be inappropriate to subject her description of rage to a straightforward evaluation of reasonableness. This is because it is too easy for someone party to the story to write off the seriousness of the experience, and thus judge the rage an overreaction; or to decide that the victim acted rashly prior to her assault, putting her at blame for irresponsibility and making her rage unjustified in this way. These conclusions are problematic, and the latter judgement feeds from and perpetuates the master narrative that rape victims are responsible for their assault based on their clothing or actions prior to being assaulted. If the individual empathizing with the victim here does not have the explicit objective of evaluating her feelings, and instead sees the process of empathizing as itself the goal, I contend that they are less likely to come to these harmful conclusions, and thus ultimately more likely to achieve accurate empathy.

This given example demonstrates that those who empathize with others while explicitly aiming at moral judgment are likely to go astray; but it also demonstrates that Smithian empathy's focus on moral evaluation might also prove harmful for marginalized storytellers. The victim of sexual assault might suffer material consequences as a result of facing explicitly moralized judgements – her mental state could deteriorate, she might lose confidence in the reliability of her own memories or judgements, and so on. Furthermore, if she is aware that those empathizing with her are doing so in order to judge her reasonableness, she might change the story she tells accordingly to try to ensure that an external audience will judge her reasonable – for example, she might underplay her feelings of rage, and play up her feelings of victimization. This is true more broadly, and is a prominent worry for the capacity of Smithian empathy to accommodate the moral significance of marginalized stories. In general, storytellers with oppressed social identities are likely to have a high level of awareness of the audience their stories might face, and of the skepticism and prejudice these stories might be met with. However, if they therefore change their stories in order to be more accessible to a general audience – to be more likely to be judged as reasonable by the impartial spectator – this might distort the content of their stories, and be disloyal to their actual perspectives.

In departing from Smith's account, I emphasize empathy as an open-ended account that is valuable in enabling us to inhabit the viewpoints of others and to profoundly understand where they are coming from. I hold that this is both more likely to result in successful instances of empathy with marginalized individuals, and to avoid distorting the perspectives of those individuals. The psychological mechanisms of empathy as outlined by Smith are useful, and offer rich theoretical support to my project; I only depart from his account insofar as empathy's purpose and motivation is concerned. With this account of empathy in view, I turn now to

delineating the connection between storytelling and empathy. Throughout the discussions in the rest of the chapter, more of empathy's features should become apparent.

2 – Storytelling and Empathy

Storytelling centrally involves acts of imagination, both in the formation and telling of stories, and also in audience responses to stories. Stories can take many forms, and have diverse purposes, subjects, and upshots; but for all these differences, what stories have in common with one another is that they engage the imagination, and involve highly cognitive mental activity. Indeed, many stories are specifically designed and constructed in order to maximally involve and absorb their audiences, and to encourage these audiences to imagine the perspectives of particular fictional or non-fictional people. Since empathy consists of an extended imaginative effort to projectively think oneself into the perspective of another, this means that storytelling is well placed to hone our empathetic skills. I hold that this improvement that storytelling can bring about in our empathetic capacities is what underpins the beneficial moral, political, and epistemic functions that stories can serve for members of marginalized groups. In this section, I first discuss fictional storytelling and storytelling in activist movements in order to illustrate the ways in which stories can prompt empathy and thereby benefit marginalized groups. I then discuss the distinctiveness of storytelling as a means of prompting empathy and thus bringing about beneficial upshots, arguing that storytelling is sometimes superior to straightforward argumentation or theory in producing such upshots.

2.1 – Storytelling, Empathy, and Marginalized Groups: Two Examples

Stories enhance our empathetic skills by encouraging us to imagine the inner states of fictional or real others, and thereby expanding our imaginative capacities. As Adrian Piper puts it, “music, painting, poetry, fiction, and first-person narrative accounts enhance our ability to imagine modally another’s inner states, even if we have no such first-personal experience ourselves” (Piper 1991, 739). Indeed, stories or narratives of various forms are commonly recognized in the philosophical literature as efficient ways to hone and enhance empathy.

At its core, the thought is that exercising empathy in both the formation of and the response to stories contributes to an individual’s imaginative vision, thereby transforming and enlarging their moral and epistemic capacities. So for my project, empathizing with storytelling is significant because it offers insights into marginalized perspectives and ideas, thereby enhancing and furnishing individuals with certain moral and epistemic capacities. I give two example cases here to make the links between storytelling, empathy, and marginalized interests more concrete. In both cases, the discussion in this chapter is brief; I will expand of these two forms of storytelling in subsequent chapters, as there is far more to be said about their beneficial functions. Indeed, Chapters Three through Five of my dissertation are specifically dedicated to unpacking the moral and epistemic capacities of various kinds of storytelling in more detail.

First, consider the numerous ways in which fictional storytelling can provoke empathy and thus produce significant upshots for members of marginalized groups. Discussion of fictional stories – novels in particular – dominates the existing literature on narratives and empathy, since it is recognized that novels are commonly constructed with the specific purpose of engaging their readers’ imaginations and empathetic skills. This seems true of fictional

storytelling more broadly; fiction has the capacity to give detail and nuance to the lives of those with marginalized social identities, therefore prompting empathy with them. Indeed, it is not difficult to think of examples of fictional storytelling that engenders empathy towards or among marginalized groups in a way that yields morally and epistemically significant upshots.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* depicts the life of a young Nigerian woman who moves to the United States to study. By empathizing with this character and seeing the world through her eyes, the reader is encouraged to interrogate the multiple meanings of blackness both across and within individual cultures, and to challenge their assumptions about race and class structures. The Marvel film *Black Panther* was widely hailed as “a groundbreaking celebration of black culture”, and was particularly praised for offering African-Americans important representation in mainstream media. While *Black Panther* was not without its controversy in its depiction of Africa and of African people, it was hugely influential and gained a large following.⁴ The film's outsized cultural impact is in large part because the film offers a broad range of complex black characters for audiences to empathize with; something that is particularly significant for black viewers, since this has been historically absent.

The beneficial effects that fictional storytelling can bring about for marginalized groups depend, to some extent, upon the existence of empathy. For *Americanah* to prompt reflection in an American reader about the prejudices in American society, that reader needs to occupy the perspective of the protagonist, thereby obtaining a more detached or external outlook on their own cultural norms. Without somewhat divorcing themselves from their own perspective – as discussed in §1.2 – such prejudicial assumptions will remain alien or not fully comprehensible to the reader. In the case of *Black Panther*, explanations of the importance of representation in

⁴ For example, some have been critical of the idea that Wakanda – and thereby Africa – is proved to be valuable primarily because of its depicted technological advances.

fictional stories are incomplete without mention of empathy. *Black Panther* and films of its ilk are commonly described as groundbreaking precisely because they offer African-American individuals relatable or aspirational characters, with whom it is both easy and empowering to projectively imagine themselves in the place of. This is why conversations about representation often invoke children, as it is seen as important for young people to be able to ‘see themselves’ in stories, and to empathize with characters with shared social identities.

A second example of storytelling that involves empathy and therefore benefits marginalized groups is storytelling within activist movements. Stories often play a central role in activist movements reaching out to and trying to persuade outsiders of the justness of their cause, and also within the organizing bodies or among the members of activist movements themselves. On the former point, political movements often utilize testimonial stories to convey their movement’s viewpoints, values, and goals to outsiders in a compelling way, either to recruit more members or perhaps even to persuade or convince those in power to meet their demands. For example, in the New York Domestic Rights campaign, domestic worker organizers under the banner of the DWU (Domestic Workers United) used first-person stories to lobby for legislative change (Fernandes 2016, 5-6).⁵ The invocation of stories served to humanize their storytellers, and to make visible an area of injustice that mostly concerns undocumented women, which otherwise remains unknown. The political upshots of these stories are clearly dependent upon the establishment of empathy, as the point of collecting and publicizing the stories of domestic workers is precisely to invite outsiders to imagine what it must be like to undertake such exploitative labor. Part of the reason that storytelling is such a common tool in political

⁵ Note that the way that storytelling played out in this campaign is not uncontroversial; indeed, Fernandes’ articles about the DWU is highly critical of the way they selectively weaponized the domestic worker stories that seemed most palatable to outsiders.

movements is because of its capacity to invite those who have not experienced particular injustices to projectively imagine those experiences, and to thus become invested in the cause.

Storytelling and empathy also hold a central place *within* activist movements themselves, in aiding in organization for the movement's members, and also in creating solidarity and shared meanings. For example, in its early stages of planning the DWU held meetings in which domestic workers with divergent native languages met, and communicated their experiences to one another through interpreters (Fernandes 2016, 5). These domestic workers found that their experiences were remarkably similar, and this process of communal storytelling aided in pinpointing the priorities and goals of the political movement, as well as creating solidarity among its members. This centrally involves empathy – stories told and formed internally to a political movement foster relationships and shared understandings precisely because individuals within the movement are thus able to occupy and understand the perspectives of others in similar situations. Indeed, sometimes this process of coming to empathize with the experiences of others enables individuals to ultimately empathize with themselves, and recognize that they have suffered the same injustices. This example is particularly interesting, as the vast majority of existing philosophical discussions of the upshots of stories focus exclusively on audiences *responding* to stories, and explicating the effects that consuming these stories can produce. However, this is a case in which it is evident that the process of formulating and expressing stories – that is, the activity of storytelling – is itself constitutive of certain beneficial upshots for marginalized individuals. Stories are significant not just for their capacity to prompt empathy in others, but also because in formulating and then distributing stories might also involve empathetic engagement with others in a productive way.

Before moving on, I would like to clarify that I am not committed to the view that empathy underlies *all* beneficial functions that stories can serve for the marginalized. Stories are complex and invite many different kinds of audience response, and a story that fails to provoke empathy or does not intend to engender empathy might produce significant upshots nonetheless. For example, even if one fails to empathize with the protagonist of *Americanah*, one might still plausibly benefit epistemically from the story, as they might learn certain facts about what it is like to be black in America – even if they do not learn what it is like ‘from the inside’. Similarly, a political movement might productively raise awareness of their goals through the distribution of activist stories in some circles, although they do not ultimately prompt much empathy. However, while my claim is not absolutist in nature, I do hold that the presence of empathy in correlation with storytelling is *more* likely to produce beneficial upshots for the marginalized than if empathy were absent. Furthermore, I maintain that there are some productive functions of storytelling that are made possible only through the exercise of empathy – more on this in Chapter Three.

2.2 – Storytelling as Distinctively Connected to Empathy

I contend that storytelling has a distinctive connection to empathy, in that stories are particularly well suited – more so than other formats – to engendering empathy and therefore bringing about certain moral, political, and epistemic upshots for marginalized groups. The suggestion is not that only storytelling can provoke empathy, nor that only storytelling can produce the beneficial functions discussed throughout the dissertation. Instead, I propose that storytelling often has certain advantages over other more traditional or confrontational methods of generating these

functions, such as the presentation of theory or straightforward efforts at argumentation. This is because stories are usually designed to actively engage their audiences in various ways, and are also less likely to provoke antagonism. Furthermore, I maintain that stories enjoy these advantages *because* of their status as stories.

It is significant that stories are paradigmatically designed as centrally involving perspective-taking and empathetic engagement, in a way that is not true for other methods of bringing about beneficial effects for marginalized groups. Since empathy, as explained in the previous section, underlies or at least enhances these beneficial effects, it then stands to reason that storytelling is a particularly efficacious means of bringing these effects about, as it is more likely to prompt empathy. Stories are often designed in such a way that they encourage their audiences to engage in acts of projective imagining. The events of Adichie's *Americanah* are primarily narrated by one of its two protagonists, Ifemelu; readers are invited to navigate the events depicted through her eyes, bearing her experiences and social identity in mind. In putting forward the stories of domestic workers to bring about legislative change, the DWU crafted and presented stories that would urge listeners to imagine what it would feel like to be an undocumented domestic worker in New York. Even non-narrative stories often centrally involve projective empathy; poems are capable of conveying perspectives just as vividly as novels, and even photographs can evoke strong empathic responses.

Furthermore, it is not only the case that stories are frequently designed to prompt empathy – it is also true that when we read, listen to, or otherwise consume stories, audiences perceive this projective imagining as part of the *point* of storytelling. This is important because if an individual approaches something with the intention of exercising acts of imagination, and specifically empathetic acts, their engagement is then more likely to yield highly cognitive

imaginative activity than it would if they lacked this intention. That is, when someone goes to the cinema to see a film or documentary, part of what they expect is to be absorbed and transported by what they see, and to follow the experiences of others. As film director David Cronenberg has commented, “I think people go to the movies to live other lives” (Thielman 2007).

I hold that audiences thus approach stories and their contents in a more open-minded way than they might approach, say, a factual document or a philosophical theory. For example, a written report or a magazine article might propose a debate or an intervention about whether violence is ever justifiable in the fight for black liberation. A general audience member might read the article and accordingly reflect on the topic, and of course might try to imagine why individuals on either side of the debate draw the conclusions that they do. However, in presenting two characters – T’Challa and Erik Killmonger – that hold divergent views on the permissibility of violence, *Black Panther* actively invites viewers to projectively imagine holding each of these beliefs, and to imagine the context that supports each side of the debate.⁶ In this case, I suggest that presenting this debate in the form of storytelling is more effective in encouraging individuals to reflect on the debate positions, and might therefore prompt deeper and more nuanced thought.

Another, related advantage storytelling has is that some forms of storytelling might be perceived as *less hostile* to those who – whether explicitly or not – are skeptical of or uninterested in the interests or beliefs of particular marginalized groups. That is, I hold that certain stories are well-positioned to prompt empathy in individuals that would otherwise be inclined to ignore or belittle marginalized perspectives, because they are seen as less threatening.

⁶ It should be noted that the legacy of *Black Panther* is fiercely contested on this front, with some reviewers and commentators praising the way it handles this debate, and others holding that the film offers an overly simplified version of it.

To give a concrete example here, think of *Americanah* and its capacity to raise awareness and provoke reflection upon prejudice and race relations in the United States. Here, the thought is that drawing attention to injustice in the form of a fictional story is more likely to gain traction than simply presenting someone with factual information about racism in America. This is partially because a non-black reader of a story about prejudice is less likely to feel ‘lectured to’, or like they are being personally blamed for that prejudice.⁷ However, I hold that this is also because of the more general open-mindedness that many have with regard to stories, which they might not have to other sources of information or persuasion.

This brings me to another point about the efficiency of storytelling at engaging the imagination, and therefore at prompting empathy and serving beneficial functions for marginalized groups. So far I have argued that exercises of the imagination and acts of projective empathy are central to much storytelling, and that this makes storytelling particularly apt to prompt empathy and serve beneficial functions for marginalized groups. I would now like to also suggest that this centrality of the imagination also makes stories particularly compelling, which is to their profit. When we consume stories, we often cannot help but be drawn in – we have emotional responses towards and on behalf of the individuals described, and we get attached to particular people or settings. This is, after all, why activist movements so often invoke and publicize testimonial stories; because such stories are thought to grab the attention of outsiders more readily than mere informational pamphlets or signs would. It is worth noting that this also means that stories, compared to other sources of information, are perhaps more likely to ‘live on in the imagination’, or to continue to be thought about. A very natural reaction to hearing or reading a story is to talk about it with friends, to recommend it to others, to read opinion articles

⁷ This is not to detract from fictions that do condemn specific members of social groups, or as a claim that fictions should always de-radicalize until acceptable to a mainstream audience.

about the story's central figures and events, or to revisit parts of the story itself. The upshots that storytelling can produce are not imparted only in the precise moment that one is told a story; they rely too upon reflection after the fact.

Another fundamental advantage that storytelling has in producing beneficial upshots for marginalized groups is that it *actively* engages the imaginations of both those telling the stories and those receiving them. It is commonly said that good stories *show* rather than tell, therefore requiring a complex and involved exercise of the imagination to engage with them. Stories are to some degree interactive, as their audiences are encouraged to construct the depicted experiences for themselves. For example, in conveying information about racial prejudice in the United States, *Americanah* does not merely dispassionately describe prevalent prejudicial stereotypes and behaviors, but invites readers to vividly imagine various scenarios wherein these prejudices come into play. I maintain that this is a more efficacious way of bringing about epistemic reflection on prejudice, as it demands that the reader actively interrogates these prejudices against their own experiences. Indeed, as I argued in §1.2, most of storytelling's productive functions for marginalized groups involve the adjustment of one's own perspective in response to the acts of projective imagining directed towards others. This is sometimes important in practices of storytelling that are internal to marginalized groups, such as in the aforementioned example of domestic workers sharing their experiences with one another through translators and thereby coming to better understand their own experiences and exploitation.

In general, the interactivity of storytelling commonly involves audiences being forced to arrive at certain conclusions themselves – and reaching a conclusion due to one's own cognitive activity is more forceful than simply being given or told that conclusion. Stories that convey morally atrocious events need not explicitly condemn those events within their structure – they

might simply invite an audience to imagine the events, and then allow them to themselves come to the realization that these events contain moral wrongs. Gregory Currie argues with regard to fiction specifically that stories can enrich our moral reasoning and values by serving as guides to the imagination, eliciting us to construct and weave together complex imaginings, and potentially “bring us to the point where we can make imaginative leaps for ourselves” (1995, 254). This seems to me to be true of stories more generally, and is a helpful way to think about the distinctiveness of storytelling at provoking empathy and bringing about morally and epistemically significant upshots.

I will now make a final methodological point before drawing this chapter to a close, in pointing out that my project is primarily concerned with the way that storytelling broadly speaking enhances our empathetic skills. This contrasts with much of the existing philosophical literature, in which philosophers often devote themselves to elucidating how particular forms of storytelling can *distinctively* produce empathy, and thus particular upshots. As already mentioned, Currie tends to discuss the empathetic potential of fiction specifically, as do many others such as Elisabeth Camp (Currie 1995; Camp 2017). Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty focus exclusively on the potential of novels to evoke empathy and thereby develop individuals’ moral and political capacities (Nussbaum 1985; Rorty 1989). Approaching photographs – such as in photojournalism, most obviously – as potential sources of storytelling, Dominic Lopes is keen to explain how pictures can distinctively contribute to the development of empathetic character traits (Lopes 2011).

There are two major reasons behind my decision to explore the way that storytelling in general relates to empathy. First, I take this approach because I hold that while storytelling is a very diverse category, different kinds of story have enough in common that it makes sense to

approach them collectively. Second, I maintain that discussing stories in a broader sense is advantageous for its capacity to allow discussion across the porous borders of genre, and to allow discussion of stories that involve mixed media. Plenty of photojournalism, say, combines prose and pictures to tell a story; so while there is a place for discussing the empathetic effects of the prose and the pictures in isolation, it is also productive to discuss their cumulative effect. Even my discussion of fictional stories and storytelling in activist movements in §2.1 of this chapter can be complicated in this way, as these categories of story type are not discrete and mutually exclusive. Not all fictional stories are purely fictitious; and fictional stories are sometimes used and distributed by activist movements, such as in the controversial invocation of the film *The Help* by the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) in 2011 (Fernandes 2016, 1).

This is not, however, to overlook or demean the value of philosophical discussion that does aim to delineate the distinctive features and empathetic effects of different forms of storytelling; they are merely beyond the scope of my project. Such discussions are philosophically rich in their own right, and indeed, are sometimes pertinent in considering the interests of marginalized groups. When members of marginalized social identities use storytelling in order to try to bring about particular moral or epistemic upshots, it might be useful to know which forms of storytelling or which types of story construction are more likely to bring about the kind of empathetic transformation they seek.

Conclusion

In this chapter I put forward an account of empathy based on Adam Smith's moral philosophy, and explored the distinctive linkages between storytelling and empathy. In doing so, I began to

develop two claims that are significant for my broader project, and will be expanded upon in subsequent chapters. First, that empathy underlies the beneficial functions that storytelling can serve for members of marginalized groups. Second, that storytelling is distinctive in the way it prompts empathy and hones our empathetic skills, thereby producing morally and epistemically significant upshots.

It is also worth noting that this chapter focuses solely on the potentially positive effects that empathetic engagement with stories can bring about. In recent years, the moral efficacy of empathy has been called into question and criticized; and certainly, empathy has its limitations, and can lead us astray. As part of my exploration of the moral roles that storytelling can play for the marginalized, the next chapter addresses these concerns about empathy's shortcomings, and lays out some criteria governing the responsible exercise of projective empathy.

Chapter Three – Storytelling and Contextually Specific Moral Harms

Storytelling can play an important role in enabling the diagnosis of moral harms pertaining to marginalized groups. I contend that for certain types of moral harm, the process of empathizing with stories that depict the content of these harms plays an essential role both in recognizing them as such, and in working toward their remediation.¹ My goal is to delineate the kinds of moral harms for which storytelling plays this important diagnostic role, and to explain what it is about empathetic storytelling that makes it so apt for this role. In outlining this account, I hope to show that using stories as a guide to the diagnosis of certain moral harms is in some circumstances more effective than other means of diagnosing such harms.

This chapter is comprised of three major parts. In §1 I argue that some moral harms can only be understood in the context of community-based or culturally specific norms, and offer a definition of these harms as ‘contextually specific moral harms’. I then contend that empathy is essential to the diagnosis of such harms, and that they are likely to be misconstrued unless treated empathetically. §2 then turns to the role that storytelling can play in the diagnosis of contextually specific moral harms, wherein I maintain that stories are an apt vehicle for this empathy. I delineate three distinct functions that stories can serve. Finally, in §3 I argue that the empathetic recognition of moral harm that stories can engender comprises an important step in countering these harms. I show that empathetic recognition serves an important remedial function for the sufferers of harms, and that it can also contribute to the disputation of the political climates of demonization and distrust that perpetuate contextually specific moral harms.

¹ Note that my claim is not that empathetic storytelling will play this remedial role for marginalized groups without fail. Storytelling and empathy are double-edged swords, and it is also possible for stories to facilitate rather than alleviate moral blindness. My claim is that empathetic storytelling has the capacity to play a remedial role regarding certain harms, and in some cases is even necessary for their diagnosis; so despite the possibility that storytelling can be destructive, its constructive capacity should not be overlooked.

1 – Empathy and the Diagnosis of Contextually Specific Moral Harms

Some kinds of moral harm are fairly universal in nature, and thus require no special insights or consideration to be recognized as such. It is obvious that someone whose child has been murdered has suffered a great moral harm, or that being subject to verbal and physical abuse constitutes moral harm. However, a great number of moral harms are more contextually situated than this, as they can only be fully understood in relation to a particular culture, set of values, or conception of the good. For example, grasping the way in which loss or destruction of land constitutes moral harm for indigenous groups requires an appreciation of the spiritual connection that indigenous groups hold with their ancestral lands. Without an understanding of the ways in which indigenous culture are tied to land, the moral harm of indigenous land loss might be assumed to largely involve economic hardship, and ignore the suppression and erasure of indigenous identities themselves. In other words, there are some moral harms whose harm hinges upon contextually specific values or commitments – in what follows, I focus on cases where these values or commitments are tied specifically to a marginalized social identity. My principal claim in this section is that to properly understand these moral harms, empathetic engagement with members of the social groups at hand is necessary; and that storytelling is a particularly good vehicle for this empathy.

As discussed in the previous chapter, a Smithian form of empathy is frequently seen as an excellent tool for pinpointing moral harms in general. This is because of the perspectival nature of empathy, where empathy is understood as the imaginative projection into the situation of another and the subsequent “conceiving of what we ourselves should feel in the like situation”

(Smith 1976, 47-8). The basic thought is that empathy can help people to identify moral harms by pushing them to consider the suffering of others ‘from the inside’, thereby recognizing the damaging and unjust nature of this suffering. Indeed, this is how children are often taught about right and wrong. If a child bullies a younger child in the playground, a parent or teacher might tell them to imagine how they would feel if they were that age, and an older student picked on them – the hope being that the child’s imaginative activity will bring into view the moral harm of their own actions to them.

While empathy plays a central role in understanding moral harms generally, I contend that empathy is indispensable when it comes to contextually specific moral harms (for my purposes, I will use ‘contextually specific moral harms’ as shorthand for harms tied to values bound up with a marginalized social identity). This is because many such moral harms involve humiliation, disrespect, or breaches of dignity – and all of these notions are rooted in particular cultures or value frameworks. Furthermore, for those moral harms whose severity is bound up with the commitments of a marginalized social group, the fact of that group’s marginalization renders the harm they have suffered more difficult to comprehend from the outside. This is because the values and practices of such groups tend to occupy less space than other groups in a society’s social imagination, meaning that these practices are likely to appear alien or ‘other’ to individuals external to the group. Marginalized communities are also disproportionately likely to have their beliefs and practices distorted in the social imagination, since they often face prejudicial stereotyping and othering political rhetoric.

Given both the specificity of the values underlying contextually specific moral harms and the often widespread prejudicial treatment of the groups that suffer them, it stands to reason that attending to harms suffered by individuals with marginalized identities requires a suspension of

one's own perspective and set of values. For example, Serene Khader argues that without empathy it is difficult for Westerners to understand why a Muslim woman who has been forced to remove her face or body coverings might experience this as a violation (2018, 15). This is because without imaginatively separating themselves from their own culturally embedded views – in this case regarding private and public zones of the body – many Westerners struggle to understand the cultural significance of unveiling. The projective imagining involved in successful empathy enables one to appreciate the moral framework of those individuals suffering a given moral harm; without some understanding of what these individuals see as good and as valuable, the moral harm at hand is often not fully intelligible.

Not only is empathy essential, then, to the comprehension of contextually specific moral harms; but failing to attend to such harms empathetically is also likely to result in a distortion of the experiences of those that suffer the harms. Empathy demands that attention be paid to the situationally specific perspective of another, which other kinds of engagement – sympathizing with others, contagious empathy with the emotions of others – do not require. The worry is that without the particularist push of empathy, the moral harms suffered by particular social groups will be misdiagnosed. This is bad for two reasons. First, because failing to acknowledge a moral harm that someone has suffered – even if this failure is not ill-intentioned – reflects a kind of disrespect or disregard for the victim of that harm. In fact, in some cases this failure of acknowledgement might ultimately worsen the effects of the harm, or the profundity with which the harm is experienced. Second, the misdiagnosis of moral harms is damaging in its material consequences, as it results in subsequent responses and suggested solutions to such harms that ultimately miss the mark, and might even perpetuate the moral harm at hand. Without the projective attempt to understand Muslim women ‘from the inside’, it is not just that outsiders

cannot appreciate the damage of unveiling; but that Westerners might actually falsely identify unveiling as an empowering, feminist-friendly move. Similarly, if the loss of indigenous land is falsely identified as harmful purely for its economic consequences, an obvious proposal to correct this harm might be financial compensation; yet this proposal misses a fundamental part of the moral damage of indigenous land loss (namely, the severance of a spiritual connection to the land and to nature), and thus fails to offer a suitable response. In general, then, without a fine-grained grasp of the nature of a moral harm as experienced by the pertinent group or individual at hand, attempts to make amends are likely to be misdirected or inappropriate.

2 – The Role of Storytelling in the Diagnosis of Contextually Specific Moral Harms

Stories are often seen as a particularly efficacious way of prompting empathy in audiences, and allowing outsiders to understand the perspectives of other people; as illustrated in the preceding chapter. Storytelling can thus play an important role in the diagnosis of contextually situated moral harms, by prompting the empathetic engagement that is essential to their proper appraisal. In this section, I outline three functions that stories can serve that aid in the diagnosis of contextually specific moral harms; in doing so, I hope to demonstrate that stories are particularly well-suited to serve these functions. In §2.1 and §2.2 I argue that stories can help those external to a marginalized group to identify and understand, respectively, a moral harm that this group faces. In §2.3 I examine the way that storytelling can aid marginalized groups themselves in interrogating contextually specific moral harms whose meaning and significance are contested.

2.1 – Identifying Contextually Specific Moral Harms

One important function that stories can play is in aiding the identification of moral harms that are commonly not recognized as such. By definition, contextually specific moral harms are harmful for reasons best understood by the members of a particular social identity group (e.g. the harm of unveiling is most easily understood by Muslim women, whose cultural and religious beliefs underlie a harm that they are at risk of experiencing). Furthermore, since such social identity groups are often marginalized within the societies that they inhabit, the details of the value systems that inform contextually specific moral harms are often either unknown or distorted to many members of the society. This is where stories come in – stories can serve as an excellent way of introducing or explaining harms specific to a marginalized social group to individuals external that group, thereby enabling outside persons and communities to perceive as moral harms actions that might not have registered as pernicious previously. Stories achieve this primarily by portraying the perspective of a person or group of people grappling with the contextually specific moral harms at hand. First-personal stories might convey someone’s actual recounted experiences of such a moral harm; fictional stories might draw on real life experiences in their depictions of characters who are subject to harm; poems might represent moral harms using metaphorical devices and a blend of the fictional and non-fictional; and so on. By empathizing with the perspectives of those subject to moral harms, individuals without prior understanding of such experiences might thereby gain an appreciation of how those experiences are harmful. To make this more concrete, I will consider an example of this kind of storytelling.

The 2019 film *Sound of Metal* provides a compelling demonstration of the harm involved in perceiving deafness as a handicap, through its depiction of the process of grief and eventual

acceptance that its metal drummer protagonist, Ruben Stone, undergoes when he begins to lose his hearing. Ruben's overarching goal throughout the film is to gather together sufficient money to fund cochlear implant surgery, such that he can regain his hearing and return to his old life; in other words, to fix a loss that he has suffered. This way of perceiving deafness reflects the mainstream understanding of what it means to be deaf, whereby it is viewed purely as a disability, and as a setback that makes the lives of those afflicted by it more difficult. However, disability theorists and activists, as well as deaf communities themselves, have long resisted this construal of deafness, arguing that an inability to hear does not intrinsically make one's life difficult; but that being governed by social systems that assume hearing as a default for all individuals and organizes society accordingly is what makes deafness difficult (e.g. Garland-Thomson 2011, Silvers 2007). For such deaf individuals, the conventional understanding of deafness as nothing more than a handicap constitutes a significant moral harm, as it ignores both the culture and identity of deaf communities.

Ruben spends a significant amount of *Sound of Metal's* screen time at a rural shelter for deaf recovering drug addicts where he slowly learns American Sign Language and connects with members of the deaf community, even volunteering as a drum teacher at a deaf school. This provides audiences a detailed look at a thriving deaf community, wherein deafness is seen as the norm and deaf individuals live full and self-sufficient lives. Given an appreciation of the culture surrounding deaf communities, viewers are thus able to identify Ruben's dogged pursuit of a 'fix' for his deafness as harmful both to himself and potentially to the vulnerable deaf individuals around him. The film's denouement, whereby Ruben alienates his newfound community and ultimately realizes that his surgery 'fixed' his hearing but has not solved his problems, brings this into sharp relief. In depicting the way that Ruben's attitude towards his own deafness shifts from

one of loss to one of acceptance, *Sound of Metal* pushes viewers to empathetically track this changing attitude; and thus to recognize the mainstream perception of deafness as harmful.

Storytelling is of course not the only way to prompt the empathetic engagement required to recognize that treating deafness as a handicap is morally harmful; but I hold that storytelling is particularly well-placed to serve this function. Given a widespread lack of knowledge regarding the deaf community and their practices, and given how pervasive the idea that bodily deviations from ‘the norm’ constitute disability and are worthy of pity is, the notion that deafness is not a handicap is likely to meet some instinctive resistance. That is, without the imaginatively transporting immersion in deaf culture that stories such as *Sound of Metal* offer, an appropriate identification of the moral harm at hand is likely to go awry. Stories are good at immersing those who consume them in the perspectives and scenarios they portray because they are often designed with this kind of immersion in mind, and employ techniques explicitly intended to make these perspectives more vivid. *Sound of Metal* experiments with its audio track, frequently distorting the sounds in scenes that it depicts, in order to better convey to a hearing audience Ruben’s experiences of losing his hearing. When watching *Sound of Metal*, viewers are thus encouraged to fully inhabit Ruben’s perspective, and to share in his growing understanding and eventual acceptance of his own deafness as a valuable part of him. When he ultimately decides to go through with his cochlear implant surgery, the film is able to demonstrate the depth of the moral harm involved in this construal of deafness as mere disability by inviting viewers to share in Ruben’s own realization of the harm.

It is worthy of note that many contextually situated moral harms are difficult to diagnose from the outside precisely because the values that underlie their harmful nature are not particularly prominent or visible within a society. The harm of straightforwardly construing

deafness as a handicap is relatively unknown precisely because the values of deaf communities are largely obscure to non-deaf communities. With this in mind, storytelling is a particularly appropriate means of enabling outsiders to identify moral harms, as stories have a notorious capacity to linger in the public imagination. Movies, books, theatre, and other storytelling forms often spread through word of mouth, and have the potential to contribute to shifts in the public consciousness regarding the identities and the problems they depict. *Sound of Metal* was nominated for six Academy Awards, and likely introduced moral harms surrounding the treatment of deaf people to wider audiences than other formats for encouraging empathy with deaf individuals would be able to.

2.2 – Understanding Contextually Specific Moral Harms

As well as enabling the identification of contextually specific moral harms, empathetic engagement with stories can deepen one's understanding of those moral harms. Even when a given contextually specific moral harm is already known to an individual, stories aiming to communicate the experience of suffering that harm might still expand that individual's grasp on it. For example, for hearing viewers of *Sound of Metal* who already know and accept that treating deafness as a handicap is harmful, the film nonetheless might be morally educative in its potential to foster a greater understanding of this harm. The thought is that stories have the capacity to do more than just tell someone morally pertinent, propositional facts about a moral harm; stories can enhance their comprehension of the harm such that they can better appreciate the severity of harm involved, and hone moral skills that enable them to better engage with those subject to that harm. Thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum and Gregory Currie have written

extensively about the potential for certain kinds of stories to enrich our moral imaginations and capacity for moral reasoning; my intention here is to develop an applied, more concrete version of these claims specifically regarding contextually specific moral harms (e.g. Currie 2010, Nussbaum 1992).

A noteworthy function of storytelling that portrays moral harm is that it can deepen one's awareness of just how bad it is to be subjected to a certain kind of abuse, injury, or moral affront. Stories can achieve this precisely because of their capacity to imaginatively absorb you in the perspective of someone suffering this harm, and through this empathetic engagement to convey the interiority of this experience. As Derek Matravers points out, an epistemological advantage of engaging with a perspective empathetically – rather than merely being given the propositional content of that perspective – is that through such engagement one “will gain a better of understanding of the causal role of ‘the experience of being [that person]’” (2014, 30). Only through empathetic engagement with someone's perspective can you appreciate not just that they feel sad or hurt, but also what this sadness consists of, and how it might motivate them to react to the harm they have experienced in the way that they do.²

Gaining a more profound understanding of a moral harm's severity is significant for various reasons. Perhaps most obviously, this realization of severity makes one more likely to take a moral harm seriously, and to recognize the importance of preventing or correcting this kind of harm in analogous scenarios. After all, this is why charities and non-profits often employ fundraising strategies that involve testimonial stories told by members of the groups that the

² Note that while the majority of the illustrative stories I draw upon in this chapter – concern naturalistic, realistic portrayals of moral harm, I do not mean to suggest that other kinds of storytelling cannot play a role in the diagnosis of contextually specific moral harms. The 2020 film *The Invisible Man* compellingly portrays the seriousness of the harms associated with domestic abuse, and with the gaslighting of vulnerable women. Its depiction of a woman being harassed by her abusive ex-boyfriend involves said ex-boyfriend's literal invisibility, yet this science fiction element of the film is an essential mechanism for conveying the horror and depth of the harms that she experiences.

funds are aiming to aid; because such stories emphasize how bad a certain harm is and underscore the need for a solution.³ In addition, the capacity of empathy with stories to increase the understanding of the depth of moral harms is valuable in enabling solidarity between those subject to the harms and outsiders to the harms. The better someone understands the suffering of a group that has suffered harm, the more likely it becomes that they can engage with that members of that group productively and appropriately. This kind of relational understanding is valuable both for everyday interpersonal interactions, but also for the potential of solidarity in political movements and activist forums.

In addition to underscoring the gravity of a given moral harm, empathetic engagement with storytelling can deepen understanding of such a harm by fostering a better grasp on why the harm is injurious, and thus increasing one's sensitivity to the harm in other contexts. Alison Hills' notion of moral understanding is instructive here (Hills 2009). She argues that moral knowledge and moral understanding are separable concepts, wherein the former involves mere moral propositions, but the latter "involves a grasp of the relation between a moral proposition and the reasons why it is true" (2009, 101). The thought is that possessing moral understanding regarding a moral harm is *more* than just knowing that a certain kind of action is wrong; it consists of being able to identify and articulate what it is that makes it wrong, and why the identity group that experiences the action as harmful hold it be so. It is one thing to have been told, or to be aware, that treating deafness as a mere disability is offensive to members of the deaf community; developing an understanding of why it is offensive (because it ignores the

³ Note that I do not draw upon this example to applaud or pass a value judgement on the aptness of such fundraising techniques. There are constructive debates to be had about the pros and cons of such approaches, but such discussions are beyond the scope of my discussion in this chapter.

cultures of deaf communities, and reflects an ableism that holds certain bodies as ‘normal’ and renders all bodies that differ from this norm as deviant) constitutes a further moral capacity.

There are numerous material benefits attached to the promotion of a more expansive moral understanding of contextually specific moral harms, as can be gained through empathy with stories. For one, a more nuanced grasp of what makes something harmful better equips one to identify that harm on subsequent occasions. As Hills puts it, a well-developed moral understanding is “a route to doing reliably right”, as it involves the understanding of cause and effect necessary for one to be able to diagnose moral harms repeatedly (2009, 106). Recognizing the moral harm involved in Ruben treating his own deafness as a handicap to be cured pushes viewers to question whether analogous mainstream perceptions of disability might be misplaced also. The hope is that this questioning attitude carries through into everyday life, and to the way that individuals interact with members of the deaf community on an interpersonal basis. Furthermore, a deeper grasp of why a moral harm is pernicious is valuable in improving one’s capacity to judge the kinds of responses that are and are not appropriate in countering said harm. If one develops moral understanding regarding the harm of forcefully unveiling Muslim women, the incongruity of any proposed solution that implies that the wearing facial or bodily coverings is ultimately undesirable will become apparent.

While there is certainly no consensus on how moral understanding can be best nurtured, Hills herself appears skeptical of the capacity of theory or of moral philosophy itself to help on this front (2009, 126-127). Well-told stories, with their potential to depict the perspectives of those subject to contextually specific moral harms in great detail, are arguably very well-placed to hone moral understanding regarding these harms. This is because maturing one’s moral understanding essentially involves the improvement of various morally pertinent abilities – and

the imaginative projection and engagement that stories demand present ideal opportunities to practice exercising these abilities. This capacity of stories is enhanced by the fact that stories do not always explicitly convey moral propositions that condemn a given moral harm; they often present audiences with scenarios and with perspectives, and encourage them to draw their own conclusions. *Sound of Metal* does not overtly inform its audiences that deafness ought not to be perceived as mere handicap; it presents reasons in favor of this, but then allows viewers to arrive at this conclusion in their own time. This pushes viewers to make links and draw inferences themselves, which presumably then improves their capacity to independently navigate the moral harm at hand.

Diana Meyers' account of the role that moral voids in storytelling can play in expanding the depth of our moral understanding is illuminating here. She argues that in the context of grave rights violations that many victims' stories convey some kind of moral void: this is a set of circumstances that allowed the traumatic events to take place (2016, 99). This set of circumstances might include longstanding structures of oppression, such as the patriarchal backdrop many women's experiences of rape; concrete political situations involving armed conflict and domestic or foreign government interference; and oversights such as the general indifference of large communities to harmful practices. To the extent that stories have the potential to convey a moral void, then, Meyers argues that they also constitute a moral demand upon the reader or listener. They are able to draw attention to "implicit moral imperative[s] that [have] been systematically ignored", and thereby highlight contextually specific moral harms and expand the scope of what we consider to be morally pertinent.

Importantly, stories that convey moral voids might do so implicitly, without direct reference to the moral harms that they depict to audiences. There are two possible reasons for

this. First, in the case of some first-personal testimonial stories, Khader points out that those being empathized with might not themselves be aware of the deeper causes or significance of their victimization, and thereby also unaware of the moral harms and imperatives that their stories give rise to (2018, 20). Second, some stories might be purposefully constructed such that the harms they aim to depict are not transparent at surface level, and require active audience engagement to come clearly into view. This is a technique deployed by a number of recent horror films whose goal is to interrogate structural injustices, such as *Get Out*, *The Invisible Man*, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*. Such films rarely offer an explicit statement of their social critique, and instead push audiences to interact with the film and thereby actively piece together the parts of a culture that are being called into question as contributing to moral harm. In the case of both kinds of story, the necessity for audiences to actively engage with the contents of their stories and identify their morally salient features themselves contributes to the nurturing of a distinctive, and potentially more profound kind of moral understanding.

While storytelling is clearly not the only means through which moral understanding regarding contextually specific moral harms, I do want to suggest that in one sense, storytelling provides a remarkably safe arena in which to practice the skills that are demanded by moral understanding. My point is not that storytelling comes without risks for members of marginalized groups and for those subject to moral harms, as this is clearly not the case – in some political climates or within certain communities, the telling of certain stories can come with life-altering material risk. Instead, I hold that stories are safer ways for outsiders to identify and understand moral harms experienced by marginalized groups to the extent that this morally educative process does not then involve the immediate efforts of marginalized individuals. Engaging empathetically with the perspective of an individual in a story places no demands on actual

individuals to explain their cultures, their values, or their traumatic experiences to unknown others. The imaginative access that stories can grant non-members of marginalized groups to those groups offers an opportunity for individuals to think about and interrogate harms that are beyond their own standard spheres of interest without running the risk of offending members of that group, or inadvertently worsening or perpetuating the moral harm they were subject to. This might be especially important when it comes to communities whose practices are particularly alien to our own, as it is remarkably easy in such cases to default to instinctively viewing these practices with disapproval, or at the very least with incomprehension.

2.3 – Interrogating Contextually Specific Moral Harms

The final function that storytelling can serve in the diagnosis of contextually specific harms is as an aid to the delineation of these harms within the marginalized groups or communities that are themselves subject to the harms. Stories can play this role by facilitating the examination of harms whose content and ramifications are fiercely contested within a community. The functions discussed in the previous two subsections primarily pick out the capacity of stories to communicate harms whose damage derives from a set of values arising in a particular identity group; this capacity to interrogate the content of harms largely occurs within the identity group itself.

Stories in general can provide excellent opportunities for individuals to engage with and think through various kinds of moral harm, and to consider a variety of questions regarding such harms. For example, they can – explicitly or not – pose questions about which kinds of actions count as harms; about the consequences that certain harms can bring about; and about why

different individuals or parties might construe harms as such. In particular, stories are capable of depicting harms whose meanings are contested: contextually specific moral harms about which a clear-cut consensus is lacking. It is overly simplistic to think that sets of values within a given community or social group are monolithic, as values are disputed and transformed continually, and are rarely agreed upon by all members of a group. This means that the kinds of actions that count as injurious to a group's values are also contested, and that the reasons behind the severity of these injuries are not set in stone. It is my contention that storytelling practices within particular social groups can contribute to productive dialogues around these contested sites of meaning, thereby providing some clarity regarding contextually specific moral harms.

There are various ways in which empathy with stories can contribute to the fruitful interrogation of a moral harm. A story might enable the examination of a harm by providing depictions of two or more individuals from a community with differing approaches to that harm, or with different understandings of the content of the harm. For example, Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria* depicts the lives of various indigenous and white individuals in the fictional Australian town of Desperance, where a multinational mining operation has been set up on indigenous sacred land (Wright 2006). The novel details the lives of two rival indigenous groups. One group live on the Westside of the town, and have historical roots to the land in the area; characters in this group by and large oppose the mine, and perceive its presence as a grave moral harm. The group living on the town's Eastside, however, are recent arrivals from disparate parts of Australia, drawn to the town by the potential profits to be made from the mine in light of the country's Native Title Laws. In empathetically portraying characters from both groups, Wright complicates the moral harm associated with indigenous land loss, and invites readers to recognize and question different indigenous perspectives.

Another technique stories can utilize is to prompt audiences to empathize with a given individual who is themselves negotiating a given kind of moral harm. The process of imaginative projection into the perspective of somebody subjecting their moral beliefs to examination invites one to subject their own moral beliefs to examination also, potentially in novel ways. An example of this kind of storytelling is Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novels *Persepolis 1* and *Persepolis 2*, in which Satrapi details her experiences growing up in Iran and later Austria, throughout and beyond the Islamic Revolution (Satrapi 2007). While Satrapi explores numerous themes throughout these novels, she returns to the veil and its status in the life of Iranian women repeatedly, ultimately presenting a nuanced depiction of the role it plays in her own life. The first volume of *Persepolis* begins in 1980, as Iranian women have become forcibly obliged to wear the veil by the new political regime; Satrapi describes her perception of the veil as an imposition that stifles her individuality, and her growing understanding of the brutality of the regime she now lives under and the corresponding political connotations of the veil (2007, 5-6). However, as *Persepolis* continues, she slowly to recognize multiple, nuanced meanings to the veil, and articulates various ways in which Iranian women use the veil as a form of resistance. She describes her own teenage choices to pair the veil with Nikes and a denim jacket adorned with a Michael Jackson pin (2007, 131), and later describes the diverse ways in which women actualize their feelings towards the regime through the way they wear the veil (2007, 145). In depicting her changing stance and understanding of the veil, Satrapi shows her readers how her moral appraisal of the veil's significance shifts, and highlights the various ways in which wearing a veil in Iran can constitute moral harm yet also potentially serves as a form of resistance *against* moral harm. *Persepolis* thus offers Muslim readers a complex perspective on

the veil, and provides an opportunity to compare their own perspective to Satrapi's, thus potentially deepening their own appraisal of it.

I contend that storytelling is an appropriate and valuable medium for interrogating contextually specific moral harms because of the process that it involves, both for storytellers and for consumers of stories. For those telling stories, the articulation of moral harm can be instructive in clarifying their own judgements. Just as first-personal trauma stories are important in enabling trauma victims to make sense of their own experiences, sometimes through the process of formulating a story about a moral harm one is able to better come to grasp that moral harm. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of autobiographical stories such as *Persepolis*, where it is widely acknowledged that putting your life into story form has the capacity to bring you greater clarity, and to make links and interconnections between past experiences that you might not have otherwise. The process of formulating a story depicting a moral harm pushes one to develop and reflect upon their original understanding of that moral harm, in ways that are potentially very productive.

Likewise, the processes of empathy and reflection involved in engaging with stories that depict contextually specific moral harms are well-placed to deepen the understanding of such moral harms for consumers of those stories. Being pushed to empathize with different viewpoints on a harm, or with a perspective different from your own regarding that harm, might at the very least enable someone to gain a clearer grasp of the morally salient contestations regarding the harm. In seeing elements of their own experiences and judgements reflected at them, an indigenous reader of *Carpentaria* might – through empathizing with different indigenous characters in the book, with different stakes in Desperance's current status – gain a clearer appreciation for which of these elements are most central to the harm of indigenous land loss,

and which elements are less significant. The indeterminacy of stories is pertinent regarding their capacity to encourage the interrogation of the content of moral harms. While some stories of course explicitly relay a ‘moral message’, or a clear conception of what the moral harm they are depicting consists of, often well-told and well-regarded stories avoid this kind of moralizing. Instead, they present scenarios and viewpoints and allow you, an audience member, to come to your own conclusions. This imaginative freedom – something that is not exclusive to the domain of storytelling, but that is arguably paradigmatic of stories in a way that is not so for other mediums – underpins the potential for stories to provoke moral deliberation.

Note that while my focus in this subsection has been on the capacity of stories to enable members of social groups to interrogate harms that directly affect them, it is worth noting that a wide availability of stories highlighting the contested nature of contextually specific moral harms is also important for the morally educative capacities of stories as discussed in 2.1 and 2.2. It is valuable for those external to a community to learn about that community’s values, and why certain actions thereby constitutes harms against that community – but it is also important that this community is not cast as a monolith, or as having fixed values. A static understanding of a community or of a social identity as ‘all having belief x’, or as ‘all finding y to be harmful in the same way’ is pernicious itself, and might even contribute to some kind of moral harm of objectification. Uma Narayan argues that the perception of any given cultural community as monolithic in this way is pernicious, and further marginalizes its members insofar as their speech is then taken to be intrinsically linked to their heritage, and not engaged with critically or sincerely (Narayan 1997, 142-3). To properly identify or diagnose a contextually specific moral harm, it is also important that this harm be recognized as complex and nuanced, in the way that the stories discussed in this section emphasize.

3 – Empathetic Recognition of Contextually Specific Moral Harms

The previous section detailed some of the ways in which storytelling can aid the diagnosis of contextually specific moral harms; in this section I turn to ways in which this storytelling can also contribute to the resolution of these harms. Stories in isolation cannot provide a full solution to moral harms, but I claim that the fostering of empathetic recognition that stories are particularly apt to bring about – through the means described in §2.1 through §2.3 – is a necessary step in moving towards such a solution. In this section I articulate two ways in which the recognition that stories can engender is beneficial for those marginalized communities that experience contextually specific moral harms. First, in §3.1 I argue that this recognition serves an important remedial function for sufferers of moral harms, especially since an absence of such recognition is typically partially constitutive of contextually specific moral harms. Second, §3.2 contends that recognition can counter the background climates of demonization and distrust that establish and perpetuate moral harms.

3.1 – Empathetic Recognition as Remedial

One way in which the empathetic recognition of a harm is important is that the recognition of suffering can play a significant remedial role for individuals or groups who have experienced this harm, and who are subject to the various material consequences associated with that harm. The therapeutic role that empathetic recognition can play is perhaps most thoroughly documented with regard to severe moral harms, whereby trauma victims require interpersonal support and understanding in order to come to terms with their experiences. As Aaron D. Cobb argues,

compassion – where compassion is construed as growing from empathetic connection, and comprising of a commitment to share with the sufferer in her suffering – better enables those suffering from harms to endure and recover from their experiences (Cobb 2018, 49). In cases where this interpersonal recognition is lacking, recovery is typically much more difficult. For example, a woman who is sexually assaulted but then denied recognition regarding this assault – perhaps because she is not believed by those around her, or perceived to somehow be at fault for her own trauma – is likely to struggle more in her recovery because of this lack of recognition. I contend that this is true of moral harms in general, regardless of their severity – to the extent that one is denied recognition by those around them, one’s capacity to move on or to counter the ill effects of that harm is impaired.

With regard to contextually specific moral harms, I contend that the remedial effect of empathetic recognition is particularly important because these harms are often partially constituted by the absence of recognition. For example, the harm of construing deafness as mere disability is comprised precisely of a deficiency of acknowledgement of the deaf community, and of a lack of understanding that this community views itself as a self-sufficient culture unto itself. Regarding the harm of indigenous land loss, this moral harm is at least partially comprised – and is certainly deepened – by the failure to recognize the ways in which indigenous cultures tie their identities and values to the land upon which they live. Recognition plays such a key role in the severity of contextually specific moral harms because these harms, by definition, are grounded in the failure to appropriately grasp the value system or commitments of a marginalized social group. As such, these moral harms are insidious because they inevitably involve the denial or rejection of a component of someone’s identity. It is materially harmful to have your land or

property taken from you, regardless of your identity – but for indigenous people, this loss also damages their way of life, and their construal of themselves as a collective community.

With this in mind, I hold that for contextually specific moral harms, establishing recognition in the ways described in §2 is not only significant in alleviating suffering, but also in validating the existence and the worth of the groups that suffer these harms. Storytelling practices that stimulate the empathetic recognition of a group-based moral harm also have the potential to prompt both the acknowledgement and the celebration of that group and their values. Monika Betzler argues that empathy’s most valuable feature is its distinct relational capacity – that it can help us “to establish, maintain and deepen relationships with others” (Betzler 2019, 138). Empathizing with the stories of marginalized individuals involves a recognition of their worth, their identities, and the aptness of the emotions that they experience in response to contextually specific moral harms. This recognition is essential for the possibility of relationships of solidarity to be established, and might also enhance feelings of self-worth within marginalized groups. This is an important first step in working towards the remediation of these moral harms, and at the very least should lessen the severity of their effects.

3.2 – Empathetic Recognition as Countering Demonization

I argued above that lack of recognition is often partially constitutive of contextually specific moral harms – this means that the existence of many contextually specific moral harms is contingent upon an absence of empathy towards the communities that experience these harms. I contend that this absence of empathy is not happenstance, and that marginalized groups that are frequently subject to contextually specific moral harms experience constant privations of

empathy due to their marginalized status within society. This is because such groups – indigenous communities, deaf communities, Muslim women, and so on – are often subject to demonization in public forums, such that they are subject to prejudicial stereotypes, and often structural forms of injustice. As construed by Samuel Fleischacker, demonization paradigmatically involves a suspension of efforts to empathize and engage with members of a particular group, often maintained and perpetuated by a society’s political rhetoric and its depictions of that group in the media, among other things (Fleischacker 2019, 149). This means that such marginalized groups tend to occupy a small space in a society’s social imagination, such that it is easy for outsiders to those groups to think of them prejudicially, or simply with misguided indifference. As Charles Mills emphasizes, these kinds of background conditions are a perfect breeding ground for a pernicious kind of ignorance about the marginalized and the harms they face. With regard to white ignorance specifically, he argues that ignorance is not a contingent matter, and involves a variety of defence mechanisms and resistance to challenge that are fed by a society’s social imagination (2007, 13). It is this backdrop of demonization and prejudice against marginalized groups that make the existence of most contextually specific moral harms possible and so pernicious.

My claim in this subsection is that storytelling has the capacity to counter this demonization to some degree, thereby creating improved background conditions according to which both the identification and resolution of contextually specific moral harms is easier. This is because demonization and associated phenomena are primarily emotional, and involve the creation of instinctive reactions of fear and contempt regarding a given social group. Prejudicial ideas in the social imagination are often not easily countered by propositional denials for this reason; and this is why stories potentially have a better chance of counteracting such ideas.

Storytelling in both its fictional and non-fictional forms relies heavily on emotional engagement to convey its ideas, and – as previously discussed both in this chapter and Chapter Two – is particularly well-placed to prompt emotional empathetic responses. Furthermore, stories are an appropriate means of countering demonization because they are particularly effective at portraying and interrogating the relationships between and among individuals, groups, and institutions. As María Pía Lara contends, “[e]ven the most subtle dimensions of every aspect of the relationship between [an oppressor and a] victim can be captured through a story” (Lara 2007, 16). As such, reading *Persepolis* is often more likely to evoke empathy towards Muslim women and their perspectives on the veil than reading an informational pamphlet that tries to convey similar content. First, this is because *Persepolis* engages the reader’s emotions and empathy towards Satrapi in a way that more abstract information might not. Second, this is because in the graphic and textual depiction of her experiences, Satrapi is able to convey the complex ways that Iranian women interact with each other, with the regime that makes the veil mandatory, and with their own stance on the significance of wearing a veil; it is difficult to imagine conveying such nuanced interconnections in a medium other than that of storytelling.

In general, with social groups that are frequently subject to prejudicial political rhetoric, I contend stories are more likely to garner empathy for members of those groups than other, more straightforwardly propositional means. Karen Jones’ account of distrust is instructive here, wherein she argues that the contemporary climate of distrust towards numerous social groups in the United States is maintained by the political cultivation of emotional states that drive out trust and replace it with distrust (Jones 2019, 969). She terms this ‘affective looping’, where this prior emotional state then provides grounds for its own continuance, such that climates of distrust such as xenophobia are sustained. Jones argues that blocking the demonization of difference is

necessary to overcoming this distrust towards marginalized social groups, and comments that since “[i]t is hearts that need changing more than minds”, activists often invoke first-personal stories as an efficacious way of interrupting the instinctive emotional patterns that are weighted against members of those groups (2019, 966). The point is not that storytelling is a cure for the demonization of particular social groups, as stories in isolation are certainly unlikely to change the minds of those who actively hold prejudicial beliefs. However, stories are at least capable of disturbing the automatic affective loops that perpetuate relations of distrust, thereby opening up space within which moral transformation is possible. Chapter Four will develop this idea further, as I discuss ways in which stories might counter prejudicial stereotypes and thus transform the social imagination.

In sum, the capacity of storytelling to counter the demonization of marginalized groups is important for two reasons. First, weakening the instinctive affective loops that engender distrust towards such groups is essential in lessening the effects of contextually specific moral harms, and in contributing to their resolution. Second, unless the demonization of certain social groups is challenged and undermined, the important diagnostic functions of stories outlined in §2 are obscured, and less likely to be efficacious.

Conclusion

This chapter is the first chapter of three in which I aim to delineate a specific role that storytelling can play for marginalized groups. I argued here that a process of empathizing with stories that depict contextually specific moral harms is essential to both diagnosing and beginning to counter these harms. In other words, my major claim in this chapter has been that

storytelling can serve crucial moral functions for oppressed individuals. In doing so, I have expanded on the previous chapter on empathy by demonstrating the key role that empathetic engagement plays in enabling these moral functions. In the next chapter, I turn my attention to an epistemic function that storytelling can serve for members of marginalized groups.

Chapter Four – Storytelling, Stereotypes, and Testimonial Injustice¹

Another positive function that storytelling can serve for members of marginalized groups is in countering stereotypes concerning these groups. This is a way in which stories can play an epistemically beneficial role for marginalized individuals, since dislodging negative stereotypes allows for a contestation of mainstream derogatory ideas about particular social identities. In this chapter, my particular focus is on the capacity of storytelling to counter epistemic injustice through the countering of prejudicial stereotypes. In particular, my interest is in the potential of stories to influence the social imagination and the shared concepts of social identity within it: what it is to be a man or a woman; to be straight or gay; to be a refugee or an immigrant; and so on. Throughout the chapter, I will delineate four ways in which stories can counteract epistemic injustice, and will argue that storytelling as an activity is particularly well-positioned to do so. Of course, stories can and often do worsen epistemic injustice as well as alleviate it; but this chapter comprises a constructive project regarding the positive, transformative potential of storytelling.²

This chapter is split into three sections. In §1 I outline Miranda Fricker's notion of testimonial injustice, which is the particular type of epistemic injustice I focus on throughout the chapter. §2 then delineates four ways in which storytelling can counter testimonial injustice by dislodging pernicious identity-based stereotypes. I draw upon two particular types of story to provide concrete illustrative examples here – in turn, fictional storytelling and storytelling within

¹ Significant portions of this chapter have been previously published as an article in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. The citation is as follows. Cunliffe, Zoe. 'Narrative Fiction and Epistemic Injustice.' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77, no. 2 (2019): 169-180.

² Furthermore, there is no sharp distinction between stories that worsens epistemic injustice and stories that alleviate it. In discussing stories that can counter testimonial injustice in this chapter, I am not suggesting that any given story is uniformly positive in its effects – a story might encourage certain epistemic correctives whilst being epistemically harmful in other respects. My intention is to provide a framework for recognizing ways in which storytelling *can* prove helpful, and the examples I use should not be taken as stories that I deem entirely unproblematic.

political movements. In §3, I argue that storytelling has a unique capacity to actively engage an audience's imagination and evoke empathy in them, which enables it to capitalize on advantages that more overt or confrontational approaches to resisting epistemic injustice cannot share in.

1 – Testimonial Injustice and Stereotypes

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). She identifies two types of epistemic injustice, testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. The former occurs when a social agent attempts to tell a hearer something, but the hearer grants them a deflated level of credibility because prejudicial stereotypes interfere; this type of injustice is my focus in this chapter (2007, 1).

Fricker's central case of *testimonial injustice* occurs when a speaker tells a hearer something, but they are not believed because prejudice distorts the 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, 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, ultimately judging him guilty. 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, 35). So in the Tom Robinson case, 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 these 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 prejudicial stereotypes persist in influencing 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 key 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

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

capacity essential to human value (2007, 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; for Tom Robinson, the practical harms were imprisonment and death. As for epistemic harms, this might involve the speaker losing faith in their belief, or perhaps losing faith in their own epistemic ability – as Karen Jones puts it, epistemic injustice can gravely undercut an agent’s intellectual self-trust (2012, 237).

With this picture established, it is clear that to counter testimonial injustice the social imagination must be transformed, since this generates and sustains the identity stereotypes that prejudices feed from. Through the depiction of complex lives, and the thoughtful portrayal of the experiences of social groups against which epistemically unjust transactions are common, storytelling can play an important role in undermining such stereotypes. Note that the aim is not to eradicate *all* stereotypes from the social imagination, as some stereotypes are positive, and given the limitations of human epistemic capacities, they may well be indispensable heuristics; the goal is to resist the dominance and content of prejudicial stereotypes.

2 – Storytelling as Countering Stereotypes

In this section, I identify four ways in which storytelling can serve to counter pernicious identity stereotypes and thus contribute to the easing of testimonial injustice – these ways are interrelated, and the list is not intended to be exhaustive. §2.1 posits that storytelling has the capacity to *familiarize* outsiders to marginalized social groups of which they are not a member. §2.2 then argues that stories can stimulate *self- and other-awareness*, thereby highlighting the way in which harmful identity stereotypes are implicated in systematic injustices. §2.3 turns its

attention to the promotion of *ambiguity* regarding marginalized social groups through storytelling, arguing that this ambiguity is productive in broadening the social imagination. Finally, §2.4 contends that in providing *representation* for members of marginalized groups, stories ease some of the secondary harms caused by testimonial injustice.

In explicating the manner in which storytelling can alleviate testimonial injustice, I focus my attention on two types of storytelling in particular: fictional stories and stories within political movements. I do so in order to provide concrete examples, such that discussions of these stories make the conceptual framework that I am offering more vivid. I chose these two types of storytelling as, while they are clearly not representative of all possible kinds of storytelling, they do offer a diverse range of story types for analysis. Fictional storytelling paradigmatically involves fictional characters and scenarios, and tends to be designed to absorb audiences; it traditionally takes the form of novels, films, television shows, or plays. 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. Storytelling in political movements, on the other hand, paradigmatically involves first-personal testimonial narratives detailing specific lived experiences, and tends to be designed to highlight a particular injustice or cluster of issues. I argue that in addition to serving numerous other beneficial functions, political storytelling can serve to counter testimonial injustice both directly and indirectly.

2.1 – Storytelling and Familiarization

Storytelling can serve a function of *familiarization*, wherein the depiction of the lives of individuals from marginalized social groups acquaints an audience with those social groups. The thought is that exposure to marginalized individuals and to their experiences challenges stereotypes by showing that membership of some particular social identity does not render somebody wholly different or unrelatable to you. Indeed, stories can directly contradict prejudicial stereotypes in the social imagination; in their simplest form, simply by describing the experiences of a marginalized individual, where these experiences explicitly run contrary to a given stereotype.

Regarding fictional storytelling, a paradigmatic way in which stories familiarize is through the inclusion of a protagonist belonging 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, for example, should be the most significant thing we learn about them, defining their entire story 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. As for political movements, in this case storytelling that familiarizes takes the form of testimonial stories that explicitly convey the experiences of an individual from a marginalized group. This explicit aim of political storytelling distinguishes it sharply from much fictional storytelling, wherein there are often numerous intended purposes of a given fictional story (e.g. to convey an allegory, to tell a larger overarching story, to reimagine a historical event, to set up

the first story in a series, to engage in an exercise of worldbuilding). In explicitly aiming to make the lives of the marginalized relatable to outsiders, political storytelling must walk a fine line between emphasizing commonalities between marginalized individuals and members of dominant social groups, while trying not to erase the difference.

I will delineate two major ways in which the function of familiarization can be enacted through storytelling. First, stories can familiarize through a process of *normalization*. Storytelling can introduce audiences to individuals with social identities that are often portrayed prejudicially in the social imagination, where this aspect of their personality is treated as unexceptional – as a part of their identity, but as simply one of many facts about them.

An example of well-executed normalization in fictional storytelling is the introduction of the gay, black, and working-class companion character Bill Potts in the tenth series of the revived *Doctor Who*, a science-fiction 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. This is a particularly good example of normalization since *Doctor Who* is a flagship family-oriented BBC show, with a large following and cult status: its popularity makes it well-placed to influence the social imagination.

In the realm of political movements, much of the storytelling surrounding immigrant rights in the United States aims to normalize immigrant individuals and groups to both US citizens on the whole, and to the political bodies with the power to legislate immigrant rights. A prime example of this kind of storytelling is the personal accounts put forward by young undocumented people, who came to be known as Dreamers. Immigrant advocacy groups at the start of the millennium and beyond highlighted personal accounts that tended to emphasize the

full and nuanced lives led by young undocumented individuals. In these stories, Dreamers would stress the extent to which they had assimilated to American life, and disclose details about their studies, friends, and hobbies (Fernandes 2017, 106). This storytelling comprises a kind of normalization, as it is an attempt by Dreamers to portray themselves as regular everyday Americans, whose status as undocumented is merely one of many facts about them. Personal stories of this kind were promoted strongly by mainstream advocacy groups precisely because they render the lives of Dreamers relatable. While such storytelling clearly aimed to counter multiple types of injustice, it countered testimonial injustice specifically insofar as it pushed against negative stereotypes concerning undocumented immigrants as lazy or even criminal. Of course, it must be noted that in so explicitly decrying these stereotypes to normalize undocumented individuals, these early forms of Dreamer storytelling were extremely limited in their scope; more on this as the chapter progresses.

The second way in which storytelling can facilitate familiarization is in being *informative*: stories can supply information about a diverse range of social groups. So storytelling might show to an audience a social group about which a particular agent would otherwise have known nothing, or alternatively might convey information that is not widely known or appreciated about a social group that one is conversant with. This might be especially pertinent regarding stories that focus on an aspect of social identity that is frequently marginalized.

Examples of this in fictional storytelling are Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, and the television show *Black-ish*. The former is narrated from the first-person perspective of a 15-year old boy with an autism spectrum condition, and the latter takes a comedic look at a black family living in a predominantly white, upper-middle-class

neighborhood. In turn, these fictional stories are able to provide details about what it is like to experience the world in a particular way, or to inhabit a certain identity.

Informative familiarization occurs in much political storytelling, since so much of this storytelling is designed precisely to relay information about a particular cause – usually a particular cause that affects a certain demographic or social group to a disproportionate degree. To return to the case of the Dreamers, another way in which first-personal stories told by undocumented immigrants can familiarize others with their cause is by informing people about the details of their lives. This was to some extent achieved by early Dreamer stories in the media and in legislative battles, as these stories *did* supply the general public with glimpses into the lives of many Dreamers. However, these early Dreamer exercises in storytelling were also later criticized by Dreamers themselves, who argued that mainstream advocacy organizations were shaping Dreamers' stories to restrict the representation of undocumented immigrants to only the 'good immigrants', who essentially have no strong ties to any culture outside of the US (Fernandes 2017 127). In later years, around 2010 and onwards, Dreamers became increasingly vocal and tended to share their stories outside of the frameworks offered by mainstream organizations. As Sujatha Fernandes terms it, they started sharing 'dissident Dreamer narratives' – their stories thus "brought out the silenced dimensions of earlier narratives" (Fernandes 2017, 121). Such stories brought their cultural backgrounds to the fore, and gave greater detail and context to their lives – thus providing information to more robustly combat stereotypes concerning undocumented immigrants, without sacrificing difference.

It is worth noting at this juncture – in relation to the argument of Chapter One, in which I proposed that philosophers pay insufficient attention to non-narrative stories – that many dissident Dreamer stories were purposefully non-narrative in form. For example, two

undocumented artists named Yosimar Reyes and Julio Salgado produced a video together entitled 'The Legalities of Being', which incorporated sketches, voiced narration, and switches between English and Spanish to convey Reyes' experiences as an undocumented individual (Reyes and Salgado, 2014). It seems that in such cases, storytelling that is non-narrative in this way succeeds at engaging an audience and informing them precisely because of their non-traditional structure and the way this structure – or lack of it – underlines the disorientating nature of the experience being articulated.

In general, then, by exposing audiences to a diverse range of social identities and lived experiences, storytelling has the capacity to render the lives of marginalized individuals as less different or 'other' to their own lives. Stories can directly contradict prejudicial stereotypes in the social imagination. In the realm of fiction, Bill Potts defies the stereotype that lesbians present as either 'butch' or 'femme', and the protagonist of Mark Haddon's novel defies numerous stereotypes about autism. In the case of the Dreamers, first-personal stories can directly oppose notions that undocumented immigrants are criminal or suspect due to their immigration status. Even if depictions of complex lives like these do not significantly erode relevant stereotypes in the social imagination, the hope is that the tension between rooting for such individuals and maintaining the relevant stereotypes creates cognitive dissonance. This lessens the immediacy and ease with which prejudicial stereotypes might influence a hearer in a testimonial transaction, therefore mitigating testimonial injustice to a degree.

2.2 – Storytelling and Self- and Other-Awareness

A second way in which storytelling can combat testimonial injustice is by stimulating in an audience a higher level of *self-* and *other-awareness*. The simplest manner in which stories provide other-awareness is by providing information about social groups, which certain audience members might not have been aware of otherwise. Indeed, this is part of what normalization does, in bringing into clearer focus what it might actually be like to be gay, straight, disabled, and so on.

However, whilst this is clearly valuable, this is not my emphasis regarding self- and other-awareness: I want to focus on the potential of stories to promote attentiveness to systematic prejudices and the stereotypes entangled with them. My claim here is that storytelling that engages with and explores systematic prejudices have the capacity to bring about increased understanding of the struggles that marginalized groups face (other-awareness), but also to bring about increased appreciation of one's own positionality regarding such groups (self-awareness). 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.

Regarding fictional storytelling, many fictional stories engage with scenarios of racism, sexism or other prejudice, either as a central part of the plot, 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 story constructs a world wherein the prejudices of our society are amplified to dystopian levels. My contention is that examinations of prejudice in fictional stories can parallel instances of prejudice in everyday life, and that stories that engage with such issues can promote both other-awareness and self-awareness.

This aligns with Elisabeth Camp's suggestion that fiction has the capacity to alter what audiences notice and care about, thereby adjusting which emotional and evaluative responses come naturally to us (Camp 2017, 94). While engaging with a fictional story, one temporarily takes on somebody else's perspective and thus temporarily re-structures their manner of evaluating individuals and events. The adoption of such dispositions is temporary, and often restricted to engagement with the fictional world at hand; yet Camp argues that the activity of 'trying on' other perspectives can have lingering effects on one's own evaluative practices.

A prime example of a fictional story that performs this function is Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. The 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 interracial relationships. This is the other-awareness, since the 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 associated 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 white Americans are positioned in a particular way vis-à-vis African-Americans.

Political storytelling is often more explicit in its emphasis on self- and other-awareness than fictional storytelling, since stories that are leveraged within political movements often explicitly aim to combat a particular kind of material injustice in the world, and thus address said injustice head on. For example, the expansive #MeToo movement explicitly aimed to bring to the

fore injustices that women faced with regard to sexual harassment and sexual violence. This movement has a long history, but became especially prominent in 2017, as social media platforms were inundated with the personal storytelling of women describing their experiences with sexual misconduct. These stories promoted other-awareness by demonstrating the sheer magnitude of the sexual injustice faced by women, since so many stories were shared in that moment in 2017. These stories often stressed the ways in which stereotypes about women and their sexual behavior contributed to the harm they faced, allowing those who read the stories to more deeply understand the systematic injustices faced by women in this regard. Furthermore, since #MeToo stories often explicitly describe the ways in which the perpetrators of sexual assault suppress women's testimony about their experiences, these stories also serve to highlight self-awareness for male readers. In 2017, many men expressed surprise about how many women came forward with stories of sexual harassment and abuse; by detailing why they were unable or unwilling to speak out prior to 2017, #MeToo stories prompt reflection upon one's own positionality with regard to these women.

The personal stories told by Dreamers and used within the immigrant rights movement to push for legislative reform also constitute an example of the promotion of self- and other-awareness. Early Dreamer stories, with their more rigid structure and somewhat more conservative content, tended to stress other-awareness the most – that is, tended to emphasize the struggles faced by young undocumented students, who wanted to live regular American lives but lived in constant anxiety due to their immigration status. Storytelling in such cases was able to highlight the stereotypes and obstacles holding Dreamers back. However, these traditionally formed Dreamer stories tended to neglect self-awareness, presumably since advocacy organizations did not want to run the risk of alienating listeners or making them feel uncomfortable. As Eithne

Lubheid argues, early Dreamer stories often refrained from directly commenting upon the influence of US policies in creating the underlying conditions prompting migration, instead praising their journey to the US as one from repression to freedom (Lubheid 2005). Dissident Dreamer narratives, on the other hand, often overtly highlighted the role of the US interventions and policies in their own displacement – for example, describing “American supported wars that devastated their countries” (Fernandes 2017, 111) – thereby highlighting self-awareness, and suggesting that US citizens ought not to see the plight of undocumented immigrants as a problem entirely external to their own lives.

In general, storytelling has the capacity to develop self- and other-awareness in audiences or listeners. This might have various beneficial upshots for members of marginalized groups, one of which being the destabilization of acts of testimonial injustice. By highlighting the way that systematic prejudice feeds into stereotypes about marginalized groups, stories encourage their consumers to both recognize unjust testimonial exchanges, and also to identify their own role in perpetuating testimonial injustice.

2.3 – Storytelling and Ambiguity

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

A particularly good way for fictional storytelling to promote ambiguity is to stress human fallibility: that we are utterly undependable at making credibility judgements. In *Get Out*, the revelation that Chris' white girlfriend is complicit in her family's sinister plot is a prime example of a story demonstrating to its audience that their own assumptions cannot be trusted. The realization that Rose is not an innocent bystander and is instead a conspirator who has lured numerous black men to terrible fates comprises a challenge: why was it so easy to presume her innocence in the first place? More broadly, the stylistic device of the unreliable narrator is a common one in fictional stories, and serves a similar purpose. In popular novels such as *Fight Club* and *Wuthering Heights*, the story is conveyed through a clearly inconsistent relator. In many such cases, determining the actual events of the novel and the motivations of this narrator involves more than a face-value reading of their words, but also a fuller consideration of earlier events, background information, and assumptions made or accepted. On the one hand, then, highlighting our epistemic fallibility in fictional stories allows these stories 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.

A prime example of ambiguity in the realm of political storytelling can be found in the strongly contested #MeToo media debate following the publication of an online article in January 2018, in which an anonymous woman told a story about a date she'd been on with Aziz Ansari (Way 2018). In the article, the anonymous woman accuses Ansari of sexual misconduct, as she describes feeling pressured by him to perform oral sex and pressured into sexual activity that she wasn't altogether comfortable with. The story sparked a huge amount of media attention, with some commentators arguing that the evening as described seemed entirely consensual and that the

story was a form of “revenge porn” against Ansari, and a sign that the #MeToo movement was spiraling out of control (Flanagan 2018). However, many women also publicly empathized with the story, and some commentators argued that the story gestured at the “vast gray area between assault and a skewed power dynamic” and thus prompted valuable discussions about the complexity of consent (West 2018; Hamblin 2018).

I view this story and its mixed reception as highlighting precisely the kind of epistemic ambiguity that is valuable in both countering testimonial injustice. The story draws out the difficulty of making clear epistemic judgements on numerous levels. For Ansari and for men more generally navigating heterosexual relationships, what comprises ongoing consent and how should one go about inquiring about this consent? For readers of the story, why might it be so easy to write the anonymous woman off as overly sensitive, and as making too big a deal out of nothing? The conversations that the article opened up regarding what ought to count as ‘normal’ sexual behavior and about the fallibility of men’s judgements on this front are important, and undermine dominant stereotypes in the social imagination about women’s behavior in sexual interactions.⁴

In sum, ambiguity both stresses the complexity of human interactions and encourages the practice of epistemic humility in navigating both fictional and non-fictional worlds, thereby mitigating the effects of testimonial injustice.

⁴ This is not to say that Ansari was treated fairly by the media, or to pretend that the media furore surrounding the article was always productive. Some articles and corners of social media unfairly treated Ansari as a moral monster, and some of the subsequent media discussion was sensationalist. However, I nonetheless hold that the prominence of complex discussions surrounding sexual consent in mainstream media was significant, and paved the way for further discussions in public forums.

2.4 – Storytelling and Representation

A fourth way in which stories 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 describes this attitude of optimism as a set of positive dispositions towards one’s abilities, methods of inquiry, and actions stemming from inquiry (2012, 243-244). The idea is that seeing members of your marginalized social group represented in rich and interesting ways in stories 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.

The importance of diverse representation in fictional storytelling is widely recognized, and increasingly prioritized in the mainstream in recent years. This is why television shows and films that feature diverse casts are often celebrated, and ‘first’ milestones (e.g. ‘the first Asian-American to be nominated for an acting award’, ‘the first time a television show portrays a queer relationship’, and so on) are frequently met with excitement. 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 fictional stories at large. Fictional stories might even offer alternative, positive identity stereotypes to members of marginalized groups. This is particularly evident in the way that children often interact with fictional storytelling, where they often try to emulate and copy their favorite characters. The capacity for children to recognize themselves onscreen is valuable, and members of marginalized groups who were unable to experience this as

children themselves often later speak about how difficult they found this (Gross 2021; Lawson 2018).

Representation is also an important aspect of storytelling in political movements, as the stories told as part of these movements often point to injustices faced by many marginalized people, and also often originate from marginalized individuals who are not commonly heard in mainstream venues. For example, before the sharing of personal testimony from Dreamers became more mainstream – to the extent that the *New York Times* ran an extensive piece in 2016 collecting together 125 such personal stories – the voices of undocumented immigrants were largely absent from public life (“American Dreamers”, 2016). The absence of such voices fed into a sense of shame about this immigration status for many undocumented individuals, and an inability to speak about this status that might then seep into a broader feeling of being unable to speak and express oneself freely. The stories of sexual harassment and assault that comprise the #MeToo movement also provide a good example of representation, as these stories bring into mainstream conversation experiences that many women have had, but that they often feel reluctant to disclose openly for fear of being ridiculed, or of receiving a credibility deficit. In this particular case, the sheer volume of #MeToo stories that were shared in 2017 enabled women to speak out who might otherwise not have, for fear of being seen as a liar, or as overreacting.

To conclude, the capacity of storytelling to represent the experiences and lives of marginalized groups contributes to the blocking of a kind of pre-emptive self-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 doubtful that they will be listened to. Note that while Fricker acknowledges the possibility of ‘pre-emptive testimonial injustice’, she holds this to occur a person’s credibility has already suffered such a prejudicial deficit that their potential testimony

is not solicited at all (2007, 130). My analysis, on the other hand, focuses on a reflexive form of pre-emptive testimonial injustice, whereby marginalized speakers internalize prejudicial stereotypes such that they inflict testimonial injustice to themselves. The suggestion is not that fictional or political storytelling alone are sufficient to restore and sustain self-trust, as other material changes and actions are likely necessary for this; but stories are certainly a good start.

3 – The Advantages of Storytelling

Having outlined the role that storytelling can play in countering testimonial injustice, I now turn to the advantages that storytelling has in functioning as a corrective to testimonial injustice. The suggestion is not that storytelling is always the most appropriate corrective, or that stories alone are sufficient to tackle testimonial injustice. Instead, I propose that stories have certain advantages over other more traditional or confrontational methods, which are more likely to provoke antagonism and less likely to actively engage the listener; and that they have these *because* of their status as stories. In this section, I first delineate some general advantages that storytelling and stories *in general* share regarding the rebuttal of testimonial injustice, with reference to both fictional and political stories. I then turn to these two kinds of storytelling respectively, and articulate some advantages enjoyed by fictional stories in particular, as well as some advantages enjoyed by storytelling within political movements in particular.

3.1 – The General Advantages of Storytelling

An advantage that storytelling has is that stories can *show* instead of simply telling when imparting ideas, therefore prompting empathy, sympathy, and the engagement of emotion to a high degree.⁵ Key to countering prejudicial stereotypes and thereby eventually transforming the social imagination is interaction with the concrete, complicated details of particular lives. Stories are exceptionally well-placed to counter testimonial injustice through contact with concrete lives – whether fictional or real – since they encourage close engagement and provoke their consumers to reach conclusions independently.

Indeed, regarding fiction it is arguable that one of the defining characteristics of the category is its capacity to intimately engage us. Author Ian McEwan has remarked that the pleasure of reading is “[t]o be so engrossed you barely know you exist”, and film director David Cronenberg has commented, “I think people go to the movies to live other lives” (McEwan 2012, Thielman 2007). It has been persuasively argued by Martha Nussbaum and Gregory Currie, amongst others, that the way fiction enables sustained exploration of particular lives allows it to deepen and expand our moral understanding; my contention is that it can also enrich our epistemic capacities (Nussbaum, 1992; Currie, 1995).

As for political storytelling, the capacity of stories to show rather than to simply tell is precisely why stories often hold such a central place in social movements – because in showing rather than telling, they have the capacity to highlight injustice in a unique way. Being told that an injustice exists and what it entails and hearing a story in which a victim of said injustice recounts their experience are entirely distinct experiences, with the latter usually proving more

⁵ Not only are stories capable of showing rather than telling, but it is often said that the former is preferable to the latter in terms of artistic merit and depth, and in order to properly engage an audience.

memorable and potentially more likely to prompt an epistemic change. For example, before the #MeToo movement bloomed in 2017, the fact that women disproportionately experience day-to-day sexual harassment and misconduct was hardly a secret. Yet for many men, seeing the influx of #MeToo stories was eye-opening and shocking; there was a collective force in these combined stories, in *showing* the extent of sexual harassment.

The capacity of storytelling to show rather than tell points toward another advantage of stories, as already touched on in previous chapters – that stories are particularly well-equipped to engender empathy in audiences. As defined in Chapter Two, empathy fundamentally involves a kind of first-personal projection: imagining ‘what it is like’ to be in somebody’s else’s shoes.

For example, *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. Here, and in fictional stories 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. Similarly, in political storytelling like the personal testimony given by Dreamers, such stories invite listeners to see the world through the eyes of Dreamers, and to imagine what it might be like to live in a way that feels so precarious. Such personal stories often include concrete details of Dreamers’ lives, such that it is easier for listeners to understand their experiences and to thus empathize with them. For storytelling in general, even when an audience is unable to identify with a character or individual quite this closely, they might still experience a sympathetic reaction in the form of sustained positive attitudes or emotions towards the person.

Both fictional and political stories are exceptionally well-positioned to enable this exercise of perspective-taking, albeit in slightly different ways. Fictional stories can directly describe characters' mental states, and audio-visual media can achieve a similar effect using narration. The ability that creators of fiction have to imaginatively evoke embodied perspectives lies behind the praise that was lavished upon Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and its autistic first-person narrator, both by literary critics and medical professionals. A review in *The New York Times* applauded Haddon for "bring[ing] us deep inside Christopher's mind and situat[ing] us comfortably within his limited, severely logical point of view", such that we begin to question our own intuitions and habits of perception (McInerney 2003). Since they are first-personal in nature, political stories are well-situated in prompting empathy because they allow their speakers to directly relate their lived experiences in an authentic way. This authenticity is often what makes political storytelling its most successful – stories that 'go viral', for example, tend to be stories that are compelling for their raw details, and for the admirable vulnerability involved in their disclosure.

A further feature of the perspective-taking evoked by stories – something not easily shared by direct conversational approaches to tackling testimonial injustice – is that it facilitates the consideration of multiple perspectives. In §2.3 I argued that ambiguity lends itself well to countering testimonial injustice, since it encourages the thought that it is difficult to make judgements in a clear-cut way; and I hold that stories often allow for more ambiguity than more direct methods of tackling epistemic injustice. One way in which fiction encourages ambiguity is by showing 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, and so on. By urging an agent to empathize or sympathize with different

perspectives, ambiguity and a corresponding epistemic humility are encouraged. Likewise, effective political storytelling – that is, storytelling that succeeds in furthering the interests of the marginalized group at hand – is usually unable to be efficient without the capacity to present different viewpoints within a given marginalized group. This is why dissident Dreamer narratives came about: for immigration advocacy to authentically capture their experiences, Dreamers started to tell stories that contained nuance and that portrayed varying points of view. Many Dreamers found that complex forms of storytelling, particularly non-narrative forms of storytelling – as discussed in §2.1 – was a particularly good way to convey different perspectives among different undocumented individuals.

A final notable feature of stories is that they involve their consumers in *compelling* way, such that they engage the imagination and linger in the mind. When we hear or see or read stories, we often cannot help but be drawn in – we have emotional responses towards and on behalf of characters or individuals, and we get attached to the depicted people and settings. Stories are thus particularly liable to ‘live on in the imagination’, in a way that is more difficult with non-storytelling means of countering testimonial injustice. Upon finishing a story – whether that story is fictional, or found on a news website – we might talk about it with friends, recommend it to others, read opinion articles about the central figures and events, rewatch or reread certain portions of the story, and so on. The epistemic correctives provided by stories are not imparted only in the precise moment that one watches or reads a story – they rely too upon reflection after the fact.

3.2 – The Advantages of Fictional Storytelling

In general, many of the advantages that fictional stories enjoy in countering testimonial injustice – particularly regarding perspective-taking – stem from the way fiction actively engages the imagination in transforming the social imagination. That is, fictional narratives *involve* the audience in a way that non-fictional sources do not, since they ask audiences to construct the depicted experiences for themselves. Regarding testimonial injustice, it is not just that fiction can promote familiarity by dispassionately informing you about certain lived experiences: fiction encourages audiences to reflectively and self-consciously participate in the stories they tell. As Currie puts it, in making the case that fiction can enrich our moral values and reasoning, fictions can serve as guides to the imagination, eliciting us to construct and weave together complex imaginings, and potentially “bring us to the point where we can make imaginative leaps for ourselves” (1995, 254).

This marks a difference from the kind of interactivity one might experience with non-fictional frameworks such as documentaries or autobiographies, wherein the experiences portrayed might be equally – if not more – vivid, and yet one’s imagination has less license. The imaginative flexibility of fictional is demonstrated by the divergent responses that Malorie Blackman received to her *Noughts and Crosses* series. Her novels take place in a parallel, segregated Britain, and detail an alternative history in which the positions of African and European people were reversed. Whilst she specifically intended to explore racism through her depiction of a segregated Britain, Blackman recalls readers reaching out to ask if her books were about the Protestant/Catholic situation in Ireland; or about separatists in Spain; or people from Israel asking if she was talking about Palestine (Flood 2008). I suggest that the dynamic open-endedness of imaginative

engagement with fictional stories is hugely productive, and makes fiction particularly apt to challenge and transform the social imagination.

Another advantage that fictional storytelling enjoys in correcting testimonial injustice 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 testimonial injustice are often met with hostility. 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.⁶ 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.

One final noteworthy feature of fictional stories as a medium of storytelling, is that it can sometimes be less risky or emotionally demanding for its marginalized storytellers. This is because fictional stories can provide intimate access to the thoughts of individuals who are ultimately *fictional*, and who do not actually exist in the world. Of course fictional characters are likely based at least to some extent on authorial experience, or on individuals that an author is close to or encounters; but there is not a one-on-one mapping. In reality, of course, epistemically marginalized individuals rarely provide willing insight into such personal information outside their closest relationships. Furthermore, if marginalized individuals *do* provide such insight into their lives outside of their close relationships, it can compound their feeling of marginalization,

⁶ This is not to detract from fictions that do condemn specific members of social groups, or as a claim that fictions should always de-radicalize until acceptable to a mainstream audience.

by asking them to perform their experience for the education of others, and exposing them to potential dismissal (Berenstain 2016) – a fictional character risks no such negative effects.

3.3 – The Advantages of Political Storytelling

A major way in which political storytelling is advantageous for countering testimonial injustice – when compared with other advocacy methods used within political movements – is in its *echoability*. I use this term as coined by José Medina, who argues that for an action or activity to effectively bring about social change, that action must be echoable: there must be potential for it “to become part of a performative chain of resistance with transformative potential” (2012, 245). The thought regarding epistemic injustice is that for any politically organized activity to successfully transform the social imagination and the stereotypes embedded in it, that activity must be memorable and repeatable.

I contend that storytelling is particularly well-placed to bring about this kind of echoability – there are several reasons for this. First, stories are often memorable – perhaps because their content is sufficiently compelling, or perhaps because are told particularly well, or told in an emotionally compelling way. Indeed, it is precisely because stories have a reputation for sticking in the mind that advocacy organizations spearheading political change often intentionally put storytelling at the forefront of their movements. Second, stories are often likely to be repeated, retold to others, and shared across social media platforms. In other words, stories are memorable in such a way that often we *want* to share stories with our friends and colleagues, to discuss and engage with them. Third, in productive political movements such as the #MeToo movement, individual stories prompt others to come forth with similar stories. So the final aspect in which

stories encourages echoability is in prompting a chain of storytelling, the collective weight of which has the capacity to effectively pinpoint and counter prejudicial stereotypes. All in all, stories in political movements are often apt to ‘go viral’, and the wide reach that such stories can therefore have is precisely the kind of breadth required for a change in the social imagination.

Another way in which storytelling is a particularly effective means of transforming the social imagination and thereby combatting testimonial injustice is in its capacity to engender community amongst marginalized individuals. In fighting to share complex and multifaceted stories about their lives, Dreamers bonded with one another and formed political alliances of their own, separate from the mainstream advocacy organizations that had initially been collecting their stories. And in sharing their experiences of sexual harassment, women participating in the #MeToo movement found commonality and a sense of kinship with one another. Indeed, establishing some sense of community is crucial for stories to be echoable. As Medina puts it, actions cannot “become politically effective and transformative for as long as these acts remain isolated and disconnected” (2012, 247) – and without community bonds of some sort, individual stories remain isolated in this way. The activity of storytelling is an especially strong way to form community relations within a group precisely because of the empathetic nature of both telling and listening to stories. As discussed in Chapter Three, empathy is fundamentally relational, and in their aptitude for prompting such empathy, stories are therefore liable to enhance this relationality (Betzler 2019, 138).

The capacity of stories to promote community bonds among the marginalized is significant in countering testimonial injustice in three major ways. First, it creates the solidarity that is necessary for stories to become echoable such that they can actually effectively serve to influence the social imagination. Second, this communal solidarity is important since it can counter the kind of self-doubt and lack of faith in one’s own epistemic abilities that testimonial injustice inculcates.

Third, in encouraging marginalized individuals to discuss experiences of injustice that they might have in common, storytelling as a shared activity might lead groups to better be able to identify the particular stereotypes that perpetuate their prejudicial treatment. For example, the #MeToo movement enabled some women to identify and condemn stereotypes of women as hysterical or over-emotional; and dissident Dreamer stories allowed Dreamers to push back against stereotypes that earlier Dreamer stories had not viewed as pernicious, but that they thought should be recognized as such.

Conclusion

In this chapter I delineated some of the ways in which storytelling can provide epistemic correctives to testimonial injustice, by countering prejudicial stereotypes and transforming the social imagination. Stories can familiarize audiences with individuals from marginalized social groups; bring about higher levels of self- and other-awareness; emphasize epistemic ambiguity and fallibility; and provide representation for marginalized groups. Furthermore, storytelling is in some respects particularly well-positioned to serve these functions. Among other things, this is because stories *show* rather than tell, and are particularly well-placed to prompt empathetic and emotional engagement with marginalized individuals' social identities.

To wrap up, I want to flag two upshots of stories' potential to counter prejudicial stereotypes. First, my account lends support to the argument that it is important regarding fiction for members of marginalized social groups to be afforded opportunities to author their own stories. This is because to effectively counter prejudicial stereotypes, a fictional story must portray somebody's experiences in a nuanced, authentic way. Given their lack of direct access to the

experiences of others, members of dominant groups are less likely to succeed in accurately depicting such experiences, and more likely to invoke stereotypes – thus deepening testimonial injustice, rather than countering it. Of course, this does not mean that creators can *only* write about social groups that they are members of; but it does suggest that when writing about other groups, they have a responsibility to ensure that they are not ‘speaking for’ that group in a distorting way.⁷

Second, and on a related note, my account of the epistemic potential of stories endorses the existence of *numerous* and *varied* stories about social identities. Given the diversity of experiences within any social group, it is important to recognize that both fiction and personal testimony about those groups must therefore also be diverse, to avoid simply replacing old prejudicial stereotypes with new ones. Indeed, expecting any singular story to capture and adequately represent the experience of a marginalized group for all members of that group is itself highly suspicious. Any story – including all of the examples in this article – might be promoting epistemic correctives in some ways and for some people, whilst simultaneously perpetuating epistemic harms in other ways and for other people.

Whilst the social imagination clearly contains the root of numerous insidious epistemic injustices, we have reason to believe that it can be reformed for the better.

⁷ For more on the various dangers of speaking for others, see Linda Martín Alcoff’s “The Problem of Speaking for Others”.

Chapter Five – Storytelling and Personal Identity

Storytelling plays a role in personal identity for both individuals and groups in general, and I contend that stories can serve important functions regarding identity formation for members of marginalized groups. Personal identity can be understood in various ways, but my focus is on identity as a matter of characterization, and of ‘who’ a person is – of how we understand ourselves, and how we are seen by others. This is distinct from the question of metaphysical personal identity, wherein the focus is on what makes a person the same enduring person over time. The separation of metaphysical and normative senses of personal identity can be found in the work of both Marya Schechtman and Christine Korsgaard, and I follow them in focusing on the latter sense of identity. Schechtman demarcates the philosophical investigation of these two senses of identity into the reidentification question and the characterization question, where the latter investigates a person’s values and commitments, and what they are *like* (1996). Korsgaard refers to the matter of characterization as a question of ‘practical identity’, which she delineates as “a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking” (1996, 101).

Thus, my claim is not that stories are central to making one the same person over time; it is that stories are fundamental to the self in a normative sense, and that stories contribute to making any given individual the particular kind of self-consciousness that she is. In particular, storytelling and stories are fundamental to any given individual’s self-understanding, and the way they navigate their own goals and commitments. Furthermore, I contend in this chapter that the vital role stories play with regard to the self means that storytelling can serve important functions in the formation and maintenance of marginalized identities.

This chapter is split into two major parts. In §1, I introduce the idea of stories as fundamental to the self through the examination of Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of narrative self-understanding. Through a critical discussion of his account, in which I identify both the aspects of MacIntyre’s account that I find sympathetic and those that I find lacking, I posit my own account of the relationship between stories and the self. In §2, I then delineate two concrete ways in which I hold that storytelling can serve important functions in the cultivation of marginalized personal identities. First, I argue that storytelling is crucial for repairing damage that interferes with self-understanding for members of marginalized groups. Second, I claim that stories can contribute to the formation of new, potentially liberating identity categories for oppressed groups.

1 – The Relationship Between Stories and the Self

In philosophical discussions of personal identity, as well as in discussions in other academic disciplines, the notion that our sense of self is in some way informed by and reflective of stories is commonplace. As Marya Schechtman puts it, “[t]he idea that our lives are in some sense story-like runs deep in our everyday thought” (2011, 394). The way in which this link between stories and the self is spelled out, however, varies hugely; and explicating my own way of making this link that be my focus for the first major part of this chapter.

I find that there are two major theses in philosophical discussions of the interaction between stories and the self – I will demarcate these as the *intelligibility claim* and the *constitutive claim* respectively.¹

¹ This is not exhaustive – there are other ways in which stories might be said to influence personal identity, which might be of equal philosophical interest. However, for my purposes in this chapter, these two claims are my focus.

The intelligibility claim is that our sense of self – and correspondingly, our values, goals, desires, and what we consider to be ‘a good life’ – is comprehensible only by attending to the stories that we grow up with, and that provide the backdrops to our lives. This claim can be made in different ways, but the core of this idea is that stories from the societies or communities to which we belong are essential in determining our identities. In other words, self-understanding arises in a given context, and the stories present in one’s particular context in some way influence and constrain this selfhood.

The constitutive claim, on the other hand, concerns first-personal storytelling and the way that seeing one’s life as story-like actually *generates* the self. This is at heart the idea that storytelling is itself necessary for the formation of personal identity. Again, this can be cashed out in different ways. The strongest form of the constitutive claim is that one’s sense of self is dependent on seeing one’s life as having the structure of a story, such that our lives can be seen as organized in the same way that stories are. A weaker form of the constitutive claim would contend that one’s sense of self is dependent on being able to articulate life experiences and aspects of one’s life in story form, but might not insist on the identification of one overarching life story. I will ultimately argue in favor of the weak constitutive claim, as I find the strong constitutive claim unrealistic for most lives, and perniciously reductive for the lives of marginalized individuals.

It should be noted that while differentiating between the intelligibility claim and the constitutive claim is theoretically useful, the relationships they post between storytelling and the self are not distinct from one another. Holding that the self is only intelligible within context means that the stories that are then seen to constitute the self are inevitably stories drawn from this very context. In particular, the distinction between these two claims is useful for my analysis

of Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the self as it relates to stories, since it allows me to critique different aspects of his account in turn. For the rest of this section I discuss the intelligibility claim and the constitutive claim respectively, using MacIntyre as a starting point in each case. I focus on MacIntyre because his analysis of stories and personal identity in *After Virtue* has been highly influential, and set the tone for much of the subsequent discussion (1984). My own understanding of the links between storytelling and personal identity will emerge through critical engagement with his account.

1.1 – Stories and the Self: the Intelligibility Claim

The intelligibility claim asserts that our selfhood as individuals is only comprehensible in relation to communities and the social groups to which we belong – and in particular, in relation to the stories and storytelling practices of these social groups. This claim is not focused on the subjective constitution of selfhood for each individual, and is instead focused on the lucidity of an individual's selfhood. That is, the thought fundamental to the intelligibility claim is that both from the first-personal and the third-personal perspective, somebody's personal identity can only be understood by examining the communal stories surrounding them.²

In what follows, I will explicate three main aspects of Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the self as it pertains to the intelligibility claim. Each aspect offers helpful insight into the relationship between stories and the self, but for each I propose amendments to MacIntyre's

² The claim that one's subjective experience of one's own selfhood is constituted by stories found within their background is to some degree assumed by the intelligibility claim – but explicating the details of this falls to the constitutive claim, which I discuss in the next subsection.

account such that the intelligibility claim can better accommodate the nuanced way in which stories interact with marginalized identities.

The first aspect of MacIntyre's account that is worthy of note is its emphasis on relationality – the idea that personal identity depends importantly upon one's specific social location. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre pushes back against an atomistic view of human life by arguing that a given individual's human action can only be made intelligible when attention is paid to narrative history – to the setting or settings to which a person belongs, and to the role this individual plays in that setting or settings. To understand who someone is, and thus why they act the way they do, particular actions must be put “in the context of a set of narrative histories... both of the individuals concerned and of the settings in which they act” (1984, 212). MacIntyre is here stressing that understanding someone's sense of self is vital to understanding their actions, since their actions are underwritten by intentions and values; and that to understand anyone's sense of self, their contextual setting is of utmost importance. To render an individual's behavior fully intelligible, then, a context of intersecting stories relevant to her life must be attended to. For example, to make sense of a woman's decision to divorce her husband, a number of stories are relevant: the story of the couple's lives together, stories about their lives as distinct individuals, stories about marital arrangements within their given society, and so on.

I find MacIntyre's emphasis on the self as being embedded within a social context in which interaction with others is seen as formative very useful. This aligns with much feminist scholarship wherein it has been persuasively argued that seeing the self as relational allows individuals to be productively situated within their interpersonal settings (e.g. Alcoff 2006; Brison 2017; Butler 2005; Mackenzie 2014). The thought is that bringing an individual's social and political context to the fore allows for a conception of personal identity that accommodates

discussions of the way that factors like culture, societal inequality, and the body influence our self-understandings. MacIntyre's manner of seeing the self as shaped by narrative history certainly allows for this, as it encourages consideration of the influence of community-specific stories on sense of self.

However, I object to MacIntyre's insistence that a given individual's context and relational situation is intelligible only in relation to *narrative* stories, as I think this neglects the role of non-narrative stories in both individual lives as well as within societal histories. As I argued extensively in Chapter One, I hold that philosophical discussions of stories frequently prioritize narrative at the expense of non-narrative; and that since rigid criteria are usually applied to determine what counts as a narrative, this is pernicious. While MacIntyre's understanding of narrative differs from the accounts I examined in Chapter One, I maintain that it demands a similar level of structural organization, and is thus subject to the same objections. This structural organization, for MacIntyre, takes the form of a "narrative quest", as he puts it; he argues that each life narrative is geared toward a particular moral goal or set of goals, and that stories that feed into the self are unified in some way by this (1984, 219). Chapter One argued that the exclusion of non-narrative stories from philosophical accounts is particularly pernicious for marginalized storytellers, as stories told by members of marginalized groups are in some ways more likely to break with narrative norms than other stories. I offered three arguments to support this, and hold that these arguments also bear on MacIntyre's account, with its focus on narrative stories. First, that some lived experiences of harm or trauma result in memories that are fragmented in nature, and thus in histories that are most accurately relayed by non-narrative stories (Brison 2002). Second, that non-narrative depictions of certain societal injustices are best encapsulated by purposefully describing them in ways that lack narrativity, such as in Claudia

Rankine's portrayal of American racism in *Citizen* (Rankine 2014). Third, that viewing narrative as definitive of storytelling is a dominant Western view, but that some indigenous and other marginalized communities have favored non-linear and non-narrative forms of storytelling for a long time (Hester 2004). With these arguments in mind, MacIntyre's assertion that an individual's context is best understood with relation to the specifically *narrative* histories that they are embedded in is unnecessarily rigid. Instead, I suggest that the focus be shifted from narrative to a broader category of storytelling. This aspect of the intelligibility claim is thus best expressed as follows: an individual's sense of self is only comprehensible in relation to their contextual history, and to the stories told within the communities to which they belong.

The second aspect of MacIntyre's account I'd like to draw out is that in emphasizing historical and social context as fundamental to the self, MacIntyre foregrounds the ways in which our self-told stories and our identities are *constrained* by our contexts. As he puts it, "we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives", since "[e]ach of our dramas exerts constraints on each other's" (1984, 213-4). So holding that personal identity is dependent on one's social context is not to say that any of us are able to completely free to pick and choose which historical stories contribute to our self-understanding – not all stories will be available to us, and the way we interact with the stories around us is affected by the people around us, and the way that *they* interact with and offer up such stories. Holding that personal identity is relational means that not only do the stories we tell about ourselves come from our communities, but also that the stories we are able to tell are constrained by those communities and its storytelling resources. This acknowledgement of MacIntyre's is very important for the discussion of marginalized identities in particular, as it is common for members of marginalized groups to face oppression that inhibits their stories and thus in some ways their identity

formation. A view of the self that emphasizes its vulnerability to the interference of other people's stories provides the resources to properly analyze the injustices implicated here.

It is worth noting, however, that when MacIntyre refers to the ways in which individuals are constrained by the stories of others, his primary interest appears to be in the way that singular individuals can encroach on the stories of other singular individuals, rather than on more systematic constraints. He gives as an example an individual who holds themselves to be Hamlet in their own story, but explains that to someone else this individual might merely be 'a gentleman', or some other non-descript figure (1984, 213). Yet for many marginalized individuals, the main constraints their storytelling might face is not from other particular individuals, but from broader and more systematic obstacles. For example, Hilde Lindemann Nelson argues that 'master narratives' – understood as distorting stock plots from a community's socially shared understandings – often interfere with the efforts of marginalized individuals to tell their own stories (Nelson 2001).³ For a more extreme example, consider the case of Jang Yeong-Jin, who has publicly written about his struggle to understand himself as a gay man after spending the first few decades of his life in North Korea, where stories of homosexuality simply did not exist (Lee 2021). My point here is not that MacIntyre's account intrinsically lacks the philosophical resources to explore ways in which marginalized groups' storytelling practices are liable to be distorted or suppressed, but just that his account should be more widely applied for this purpose. While MacIntyre himself focuses on the way that individual agents' stories can constrain the storytelling capacities of other individuals, this does not mean that his account cannot accommodate the examination of systematic, non-agential constraints.

³ I discuss the notion of master narratives in more detail in Chapter One.

The third and final aspect of MacIntyre's intelligibility claim that I want to highlight is his contention that a given individual's social location and history is comprehensible by attending to *stories* specifically. As I already mentioned, there are numerous accounts of the self as relational in nature, and as depending on social context for its intelligibility – but not all of these accounts agree with MacIntyre that this context is best understood with regard to stories. In MacIntyre's words, perhaps the most notable component of his view is its insistence that the best way to understand any society is “through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources” (1984, 216). I am in agreement with this central feature of MacIntyre's account, as I hold that stories are better than descriptive propositions at capturing the relationships between people, settings, and institutions across time.

The only amendment I offer to this aspect of MacIntyre's intelligibility claim is to posit a more pluralistic understanding of which stories we are to see as characteristic of any given community. For MacIntyre, it is notable that he holds any given society to have a fairly determinate ‘stock of stories’ by which one can make sense of that society. This is again too rigid a set of criteria for understanding the stories present in any given social group – especially a group as large as a society. The assumption that a society will have a set of stories that are consistent and non-contradictory is overly idealized, and I instead suggest that the stories held to be foundational to any society are likely to be deeply contested, and to constantly shift as different groups within a society argue in favor of or against certain stock stories. Attending to the deeply contested nature of societal storytelling is particularly important in discussing marginalized storytelling and marginalized identities, as it is often marginalized groups that have the most reason to contest dominant stories within society. Indeed, the most mainstream stock stories in societies often serve to distort the experiences and storytelling practices of

marginalized groups – think for example of mainstream stories in the US about the American dream, or about the nation’s history with regard to its Native population. My contention is that a more pluralistic understanding of societal storytelling – in which it is acknowledged that the stories in a society are constantly ‘up for grabs’, constantly shifting, and often concealing unequal power dynamics – would enhance MacIntyre’s account.

Furthermore, in discussing a given individual’s historical context, MacIntyre’s tendency is to emphasize the importance of that person’s place within their particular society for rendering their personal identity intelligible. I suggest that this manner of explicating a person’s context could also be made more pluralistic. Instead of always seeing a given society as a comprehensive whole, I think there is a lot to be gained from recognizing the abundance of subgroups and smaller communities that constitute most societies. A person’s personal identity is made intelligible not only by attending to the society they belong to (if indeed, they belong only to one such society), but also to the numerous overlapping communities within that society that they belong to. Each such community is likely to have stories and storytelling practices of its own, and these might be just as important for the proper comprehension of someone’s sense of self as their society at large; indeed, some of these smaller communities might exist in direct opposition to the mainstream understandings of the larger society.

1.2 – Stories and the Self: the Constitutive Claim

While the intelligibility claim primarily concerns the notion that personal identity cannot be made comprehensible without reference to stories from the communities that an individual belongs to, the constitutive claim concerns stories that are specifically *about* a given person’s

life. In short, the constitutive claim holds that one's sense of self emerges from a story or from stories that describe their life – their experiences, their relationships, their goals, and so on. This claim has been articulated in a variety of ways by philosophers and other scholars. In the philosophical literature, the most common form the constitutive claim focuses on narrative stories, and their interaction with what has come to be known as ‘the narrative self’ (e.g. MacIntyre 1984, Schechtman 2011, Taylor 1989). Indeed, for such accounts the supposedly narrative structure of stories is essential, as the self is understood to in some way emerge from a sense of one's own life as following a singular narrative structure. I will discuss MacIntyre's account in some detail, and raise two objections to this commonplace version of the constitutive claim. I then posit a more moderate constitutive claim, wherein I reject the singular narrative structure and argue that personal identity is formed by stories in a more pluralistic fashion.

MacIntyre's account of the narrative self holds that narrative structure of a certain kind is central to any given individual's unique personal identity. In his own words, his view of the self is one “whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end” (1984, 205). For MacIntyre, both our metaphysical personal identity and the matter of personal identity as characterization (how we understand ourselves to be) are settled by viewing an individual's life as a singular story. The self is thus constituted by the story that encapsulates each individual's life, where each such story has a distinct narrative structure, with the end of the story being that individual's death. This view of personal identity is not fundamentally dependent on first-personal awareness or realization. That is, the unified story that is constitutive of an individual's self does not have to be fully known to or expressed by that individual herself to play the necessary constitutive role. It is fully possible for someone to be mistaken about the shape of her own life, or simply to pay little attention to it.

To fully appreciate MacIntyre's account, it should also be noted that his view of the self is embedded within a project to revive a form of virtue ethics, and as such his view also has a normative feature. He argues that to lead a life at all is to aim for some end or goal – so it is not just that there is an overarching story that captures each of our lives, but that each of these stories is further unified by the particular end that an individual seeks throughout their life. The way an individual understands herself relates to her values, and to the overall end that she seeks; as MacIntyre puts it, human life is made intelligible by “the unity of a narrative quest” (1984, 219). The particular end that each life is oriented toward might be different for everyone – and given MacIntyre's commitment to the intelligibility claim, will be hugely influenced by the communities and the communal stories that someone is embedded in.

My first objection to MacIntyre's account concerns his emphasis on narrative structure – in essence, I disagree that for the self to be coherent someone's life must be seen as having with a beginning, middle, and an end. I see there being two strong reasons to resist this aspect of MacIntyre's constitutive claim. First, some people simply do not view their own lives in this way, and might actively resist this suggestion; and second, that insisting upon narrative structure might be actively harmful for some individuals and groups.

Galen Strawson is perhaps the most notorious critic of narrative accounts of the self, arguing that thinkers such as MacIntyre falsely assume that there is universal agreement that life feels narrative-like in its organization. Strawson calls his own understanding of his personal identity ‘episodic’ by contrast, and baldly states that he has “absolutely no sense of [his] life as a narrative with form” (Strawson 2004, 429). Instead, he argues that while he recognizes his past as his own and as connected to his present, he sees himself as a different experiencing subject. Indeed, I suspect that many people would anecdotally agree with Strawson on this front, and

attest to seeing their own lives as less densely connected than MacIntyre's account implies. People who have lived particularly turbulent lives, for example, might struggle to describe their lives through a narrative structure, arguing that this structure is overly rigid. There are many reasons that someone's life might count as turbulent, in the way I mean – someone might have been geographically displaced upon one or more occasion; someone might go through a number of transformative career changes throughout their life; someone might suffer chronic illness that overturns their life; and so on. The fact that many individuals might struggle to see their own lives and make sense of their own personal identities through narrative structure at the very least offers a *prima facie* reason to be skeptical of this component of the narrative self.

However, this point alone is insufficient to damage MacIntyre's view. After all, MacIntyre does not require the narrative structure of someone's life to be apparent to them in order for that narrative structure to nonetheless exist, and to form the foundation of the self. Those individuals that live so-called turbulent lives might nonetheless be viewed as having lives with clear narrative structure, even if it not evident to them – geographical moves can be wrapped into a narrative, and constant career changes might themselves form a pattern that make narrative sense. Yet I do not find this a particularly compelling defence of MacIntyre's view, as it renders his account damagingly impersonal. If there is a supposedly narrative structure to someone's life but they either do not see it, or outright reject it, the account of personal identity we end up with is quite paternalistic. Of course human beings are fallible, and many of us make mistakes regarding our self-understandings, and fail to perceive ourselves as we actually are – I do not mean to deny this. Nonetheless, an account that implies that a number of people might be *persistently* self-deluded regarding who they are, and what their personal identity consists of, is uncomfortable.

Furthermore, since MacIntyre holds that it is a “narrative quest” or a moral unity that ultimately holds a life – and thus a self – together, ending up with an account according to which this narrative quest is frequently opaque to the protagonist of the quest is unappealing. An account of personal identity with regard to the question of characterization ought to be informative to someone about ‘who they are’, and offer the potential for increased self-understanding. Yet for people who do not see their lives as a narrative, and who reject the idea that they are guided by an overarching goal or end, MacIntyre’s version of the constitutive claim can offer little in terms of theoretical resources. This is especially worrying when one bears in mind the arguments offered throughout this dissertation – particularly in Chapter One, and also in the previous subsection of this chapter – which claim that members of marginalized groups are in some ways particularly likely to eschew linear, unified narrative structures of storytelling.

My second objection to MacIntyre’s account is closely related to my first, in that it also critiques the level of cohesion and unity that his account holds our lives as having – here my complaint is that seeing every life as best represented by a singular story is erroneous.⁴ For MacIntyre, there is *one* narrative story that most appropriately encapsulates a person’s life, and thus constitutes their personal identity and explains their sense of self. This is particularly evident in his discussion of the English archbishop and martyr Thomas Becket, wherein MacIntyre raises the topic of genre, and comments that the genre of Becket’s story must be settled before the particularities of his life story can be understood (1984, 212-213). He acknowledges that Becket’s life has been described in many ways, but ultimately declares his life to fall within the genre of tragedy, and rejects viewing it as a saga or as hagiography. However, it

⁴ Note that this objection – that a given individual’s life should not be represented by one singular story – is ultimately applicable to most accounts of the narrative self, not just to MacIntyre’s. While these accounts differ in many of their finer details, they do tend to agree that some kind of overarching story is the fundamental basis of one’s personal identity.

is not self-evident to me that such a definitive answer is available when competing stories are offered about a particular life. Attempting to determine the ‘one true story’ of any given individual seems to me to require a metaphysically spooky level of insight, especially when that person is a historical figure, such that information about their life can only be accessed through external sources. There are open questions about the extent to which Becket’s overarching life story should rely upon his interior life, on the way he is perceived by others, and on his place in a historical timeline. Yet even placing this question of metaphysical vagueness to the side, the major point I’d like to make is that seeking a definitive answer – an overarching life story to any given individual’s life – is not ultimately philosophically constructive.

I contend that, contrary to MacIntyre’s account, seeing an individual’s life and self as comprised by multiple – potentially contrasting – stories about an individual’s life is theoretically beneficial. This is because I take it that seeing someone’s personal identity as constituted by a plurality of stories is meanings-laden, and has the potential to give a richer and more nuanced understanding of their life as a whole. For example, I hold that viewing Becket’s life through multiple genres might be informative – a story about his life in the form of a saga might reveal different aspects of his personality and his view of himself than a story in the form of a tragedy. I see it as a tension in MacIntyre’s own analysis of the self that while he takes pains to emphasize that a multiplicity of overlapping stories must be attended to in order to understand someone’s historical context and societal location, that person’s particular life is then best understood as one singular story. If a plurality of stories are needed to make sense of community ties, it seems to me that such plurality might offer similar theoretical richness when it comes to personal identity.

Seeing the self as formulated through a multiplicity of stories is particularly important for those with complicated social identities, who might be part of multiple subordinated or privileged social groups. For those with intersectional personal identities, singular stories are especially inadequate, as they cannot capture the experiences of navigating different social settings and of the changes in self-understanding and self-expression that might occur across such settings. As Mariana Ortega argues, the “particularities of... raced, gendered, and classed everyday existence” are bypassed when the self is assumed to originate from some kind of unity (Ortega 2014, 6). She holds that all human lives straddle numerous social groups or social worlds, and that only by attending to the ambiguities and contradictions that arise from the movement between these different social worlds can an individual be understood. Ortega urges that it is especially important to attend to the multiplicity of marginalized individuals’ lives, since the tensions that arise from the interaction of marginalized identities make people particularly vulnerable to injustice (2014, 51). I therefore maintain that viewing the self as constituted by a singular story does a disservice to both the lived experiences and the self-understandings of many marginalized individuals. An insistence that complex lives in general should be understood as complying to one unified story is likely to do more harm than good, and to erase meaningful aspects of people’s lives.⁵

⁵ For examples to back this point up, see Mariana Ortega on selfhood, and the inadequacy of singular stories to accommodate the experiences of those who live on the margins (Ortega 2014); and Tod Chambers, who argues in the bioethics context that it is both morally and practically damaging when doctors adopt a unified ‘life story’ view of patients (Chambers 2009).

1.3 – Stories and the Self: A Pluralist Account

My own view of the self draws on MacIntyre's account in part, but aims for a more flexible, pluralistic understanding of the relationship between storytelling and personal identity. I see the self as comprised by numerous, overlapping, and potentially ambiguous stories. These stories are told both first-personally and third-personally, and are inevitably influenced and constrained by a given individual's socially situated location.

My main point of agreement with MacIntyre is his view of human beings as being fundamentally shaped by storytelling and stories from their backgrounds and communities. In MacIntyre's own words, he sees the human being as "essentially a story-telling animal", such that we both learn our place in the world through stories and also learn to navigate and challenge the world around us using stories (1984, 216). The stories that we hear from others are crucial in forming an understanding of events, people, and scenarios around us, and it is through such stories that individuals can glean their own role in relationship to these things. Furthermore, first-personal storytelling is important in the determination of personal identity, as through forming self-directed stories we can understand our own roles in relation to the events, people, and scenarios around us. Indeed, it has been argued by some that the process of storytelling is essential for any individual to develop as a moral agent, capable of self-examination and of forming justifications for action (e.g. Tirrell, 1990).

The main departure I make from MacIntyre is in adopting a broader, more inclusive version of both the intelligibility and the constitutive claim. Regarding the intelligibility claim, I concur with MacIntyre that the stories that make a given person's life comprehensible come from their socially situated context, and from the communities they are part of; but I widen his focus

by including non-narrative stories, and emphasizing the ways in which the stories we have access to might be constrained by systematic prejudices and exclusions. This deepened attention to oppressive constraints on storytelling is important in providing the theoretical resources needed for §2.1, where I discuss the capacity of stories to repair some of the damage done to the self by such oppression. As for the constitutive claim, this marks my largest departure from MacIntyre's account. I do not see the capacity of stories to constitute personal identity as relying upon such stories maintaining a linear narrative structure, and I also do not hold that each person's self corresponds to a singular and unified story. Instead, I maintain that by adopting a more pluralistic understanding of stories, wherein one's self-understanding is constituted by numerous strands of storytelling, the resulting account of personal identity is both more realistic and more informative regarding marginalized identities. It is more realistic for the reasons outlined by Ortega – for those with complex social identities, a singular well-organized story seems unlikely to fully capture their range of experiences and values. It is more informative since, as I have already argued, conflicting stories about a given person or event are meaningful, and juggling these stories is meaningful. As I will argue in §2.2, this pluralist account also better allows us to understand how marginalized individuals can use conflicting stories to transform their self-understanding, and develop new hermeneutical resources through which to define themselves.

In large part, my account of the interaction between stories and personal identity is in line with the account posited by Hilde Lindemann Nelson (Nelson 2014). She views personal identity as constituted by stories from and about one's history, as well as forward-looking stories about one's future actions, intentions, and goals. In her own words, our identities “consist of tissues of stories and fragments of stories... that cluster around what we take to be our own or others' most important acts, experiences, characteristics, roles, relationships, and commitments” (2014, 4).

This account acknowledges that identity is constituted by both stories told by others and by ourselves, such that the process of storytelling about a person is deeply relational, and involves a lot of give and take. People tell stories about an individual, and the content of these stories affect the first-personal stories they tell about themselves; which in turn might change the stories that are told about them, and so on. I particularly appreciate Nelson's emphasis, in this account of personal identity, upon the importance of tissues and fragments of stories. Stories that concern personal identity are often not linear or unified, and indeed might not even be fully formed.⁶ Although Nelson herself does not explicitly discuss this, I also find that her account can accommodate Ortega's insight that the self is multiplicitous. An individual might have numerous 'most important' roles, relationships, or commitments, and there might be numerous stories about them that are incommensurate with one another, yet each vital to that person's self-understanding.

Equipped with this more pluralistic understanding of the way that stories and storytelling feed into personal identity, the rest of this chapter outlines two functions that storytelling can serve for marginalized individuals, where these functions specifically relate to identity.

2 – Two Functions of Storytelling

Given a view of personal identity on which stories of various forms are constitutive of one's sense of self, it thus follows that certain forms of storytelling have the capacity to *do things* to the self; to transform the self in different ways. Of course, the self might be transformed for the

⁶ It is worth noting that despite this emphasis upon tissues and fragments of stories as constitutive of the self, Nelson does still assume that these stories are all nonetheless narrative in form. I do not take up this aspect of her account, for the reasons outlined in §1.2.

better or for the worse – while my focus here is on the positive effects that storytelling might have on personal identity for marginalized individuals, it goes without saying that storytelling is also perfectly capable of inflicting harmful effects. In the second half of this chapter, I delineate two functions that stories can serve for marginalized groups regarding personal identity. In §2.1 I argue that storytelling can serve a reparative function regarding injustice or damage that interferes with the self. Then, in §2.2 I contend that storytelling can aid in the collective formation of modified or novel identity categories.

2.1 – *Storytelling as Reparative for the Self*

My main claim in this section is that storytelling can serve a significant reparative function for members of marginalized groups whose identities have been in some way damaged by prejudice or injury that they have suffered at least in part *because* of or related to their membership in this group. A whole other dissertation could be devoted to the task of outlining the ways in which oppressed groups' identities are damaged by injustice, and I will thus only focus on two illustrative case studies here. These two example cases – repairing damage to the self caused by severe trauma and by testimonial injustice respectively – have already been discussed in some detail in previous chapters, and so should already be familiar. The hope is that by discussing a couple of ways in which stories can serve this function, I can at least indicate the wider potential of storytelling as reparative for oppressed personal identities.

Severe trauma provides a particularly apt case study here because the damaging effects of traumatic experiences on the self are widely noted. While trauma can obviously be experienced by individuals regardless of their social location, often members of marginalized groups are more

likely to suffer trauma, or might experience trauma that is somehow specific to their social identity. In characterizing trauma, Susan Brison emphasizes the effect that traumatic experiences have upon one's personal identity, and one's sense of their place within the world (Brison 2002). Trauma might be seen to damage the self in two major ways. First, trauma often affects the way that someone sees themselves – it might lead an individual to question aspects of their personality, it might sever the comfort that they feel in their own body, and it might distort many of the stories that they tell about themselves. Second, trauma damages the self by interrupting the connections that one has with the world around them – trauma might create a distance between an individual and the communal stories that they had previously aligned themselves with, and often creates a sense of isolation in victims.

Storytelling can play a crucial reparative function for victims of trauma, helping them both to repair their own sense of self, and also to repair their relationships with others and with the world at large. Most centrally, the development of first-personal stories that recount traumatic experiences is often key to the recovery process for victims. Brison argues that the telling and retelling of past events allows victims to gain a sense of control over both their traumatic memories and themselves (Brison 2002, 54). This control partly stems from the fact that stories are the results of choice and interpretation – how much information to disclose, which words most appropriately describe the experience, and who to impart the story to. Storytelling thus allows individuals to in some way integrate their traumatic memories into the rest of their life, slowly restoring or constructing a sense of self.

This reparative function of stories is dependent on the stories in some ways receiving appropriate uptake – on empathetic others listening and responding to these stories.⁷ If a trauma story is rejected or resisted by others, it is much harder to see how a victim could use that story to regain a sense of control and of identity; indeed, such a rejection might simply double down on the damage inflicted on their sense of self. This is perhaps most evident in rape cases, where those subject to sexual assault often subsequently have their testimony ignored or belittled, which debilitates their capacity to meaningfully recuperate and feel comfortable in the world. Indeed, empathetic engagement with trauma stories is also key in repairing those aspects of personal identity that are bound up with relationships with other people and with other social groups. Having one's stories taken up, empathized with, and responded to by others allows victims of trauma to reintegrate themselves into otherwise damaged relationships.

It is important to note that making sense of the recuperative function of trauma storytelling on the self *requires* a pluralist account of the self, rather than a more unified account such as MacIntyre's. This is because to the extent that trauma shatters or destroys the sense of self that a victim might have had prior to their traumatic experiences, demanding that this victim must regain a unified and linear sense of self is overly onerous. On MacIntyre's account, for a victim to fully repair their personal identity after a traumatic event or series of events, they must be able to tell a singular, coherent story about their life that incorporates both the traumatic event and the happenings of their life prior to the event. Yet when one has suffered trauma, one might be particularly likely to embrace a view of the self as multiplicitous, and to insist that no singular story can best represent their traumatic experience, let alone their whole life. This is particularly

⁷ Note that what counts as 'appropriate uptake' will vary depending on both audience and context: empathic listening will involve different requirements and constraints if one is engaging with a trauma story as a friend, a jury member, a therapist, and so on.

so because of the importance of retelling trauma stories – that portraying trauma in different, potentially conflicting ways can be a meaningful way to repair one’s sense of self. MacIntyre’s emphasis on the unity of first-personal storytelling pulls away from this, and fails to accommodate Brison’s claim that recovery might entail “facing the fact that there never was a coherent self (or story) there to begin with” (2002, 116).

The second example case I postulate concerns the reparative work that stories can provide for the damage to the self as inflicted by testimonial injustice. Systematic testimonial injustice picks out the phenomenon whereby a speaker tells a hearer something, but is not believed because of the interference of a negative identity prejudice, which leads the speaker to suffer a credibility deficit (Fricker 2007, 28). As discussed in the previous chapter, there are various harms involved in Miranda Fricker’s conception of testimonial injustice. The primary harm is epistemic, and concerns an individual being undermined in their capacity as a knower; the secondary harms might be practical or epistemic, and include emotional or physical injury, career impediments, and loss of epistemic self-trust.

It seems to me that all of these harms fundamentally concern personal identity, since many of these harms involve the deflation of potentially central aspects of people’s lives. Fricker’s argument regarding testimonial injustice’s primary harm is that this is particularly pernicious because being a knower is essential to human value; indeed, having epistemic expertise or insight over certain domains is of central value to most of us. Of the secondary harms, the potential loss of self-trust – as emphasized by Karen Jones (Jones 2012) – seems particularly pertinent. Given the view of the self as constituted by stories, many of which are first-personal stories, damage to one’s self-trust in forming stories will inevitably damage one’s sense of self more broadly. In the cases involving the most severe damage to personal identity,

individuals might internalize some of the prejudicial stereotypes attached to their social identities, thus creating a disassociation between them and the stories of the communities to which they belong.

Stories can counter testimonial injustice in numerous ways – indeed, the previous chapter outlined various ways in which storytelling can counter the prejudicial stereotypes that undergird testimonial injustice. Here, it is my contention that stories can also contribute to repairing the damage done to the self by repeated instances of testimonial injustice. For those whose self-trust has been undermined by repeatedly being denied due credibility, collective storytelling efforts in concert with other individuals who suffer similar credibility deficits have the capacity to bolster self-trust. These collective storytelling efforts might involve storytelling about the credibility deficits themselves, and involve the sharing of stories about how different individuals have themselves experienced testimonial injustice. This kind of storytelling highlights the prejudices that lead to undermined self-trust, thus hopefully loosening the power that such prejudices have on people’s sense of self. This is the thought that underpins various workshops and support groups that meet to engage in storytelling exchanges. For example, many universities hold imposter syndrome support workshops, in which people who commonly experience imposter syndrome – feelings self-doubt and inadequacy – can gather to discuss the way this affects them. Those who experience imposter syndrome are often members of marginalized groups, as in settings such as academia, they might often find themselves under-represented compared to their peers; and as such, these individuals are more vulnerable to testimonial injustice. By gathering together either in one-off workshops, or ideally in ongoing semester-long working groups, students have the chance to discuss their feelings of alienation, thereby to some extent mitigating their self-doubt.

Furthermore, stories that push back against a dominant but prejudicial portrayal of one's group membership can be very empowering, and essential for creating solidarity and a sense of community in many marginalized groups. The idea that a group is not what they are often portrayed as (e.g. that women are not meek, that trauma victims are not invisible, that immigrants are not a burden, and so on) can be galvanizing for community-building and identity formation within that group. Importantly, this manner of stories feeding into group identity is not properly accommodated by MacIntyre's account of the self, as his version of the intelligibility claim holds that one forms one's identity from largely positive stories within one's own community. In doing so, the way that stories might be formed within a community specifically as stories designed to negate the power of other, damaging stories from the society at large is obscured. This further highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the formation of both stories and of group identities, as I argued above.

Collective storytelling to counter the damage of testimonial injustice need not explicitly highlight instances of prejudice themselves, but might instead involve a marginalized community sharing stories that would otherwise be subject to prejudicial scrutiny within a more closed off hermeneutical space. The existence of discursive spaces in which marginalized individuals can exchange stories without the fear of being subject to testimonial injustice is crucial to undermining deflated levels of self-trust. Insofar as self-trust requires, in Karen Jones' words, "an attitude of optimism" about one's own competence given domain of knowledge, having the freedom to tell stories without large amounts of external pressure or review attached eases this burden (Jones 2012, 243). Furthermore, since – as per the intelligibility claim – personal identity is only comprehensible in relation to stories from the communities that any given individual is

part of, it stands to reason that participating in collective storytelling within one of one's communities strengthens at this aspect of the self.

Just as the reparative potential of stories for trauma victims requires empathetic engagement, I maintain that regarding testimonial injustice sufferers too, empathetic uptake is essential. This is particularly evident in the examples of reparative storytelling above, since these forms of storytelling are *collective* in nature – that is, they exist within communities in which individuals share a marginalized social location. The thought is that empathy is easier to obtain within such a community, because imaginatively projecting oneself into another's experiences is easier when that other shares certain identity features with you. Indeed, if empathy were absent in the collective storytelling described above, and responses to storytelling were hostile, then low self-trust would likely be enhanced instead of discouraged. The importance of empathy for stories to serve a reparative function is perhaps not surprising, as on both MacIntyre's and the pluralist account of the self, interpersonal relationships are fundamental to the formation and maintenance of personal identity. If this personal identity is damaged, it thus stands to reason that interpersonal relationships ought to be leveraged sympathetically for stories to serve a therapeutic role.

Although I have only discussed two examples in which storytelling might be seen to serve a reparative function for a damaged self, I hope these examples signal the wide applicability of storytelling in this role. Since stories are foundational to a given individual's sense of self, when the self is damaged one's capacity to freely tell or accept certain stories about oneself is damaged. This damage might be addressed by attending to alternative forms of storytelling, which are usually collective in some manner, and involve strong empathetic connections with other listeners or other storytellers.

2.2 – Storytelling as Enabling Novel Identities

A second function that storytelling can serve regarding the transformation of the self is in paving the way to the collective formation of new identity categories. These new identity categories might be a response to more rigid identity categories that some individuals feel are unable to fully capture their sense of self, or worse, that misdiagnose or distort their sense of self. My claim is that marginalized individuals who share frustrations with pre-existing, overly narrow identity labels are able to access or to formulate new, more appropriate identity labels through processes of collective storytelling. In discussing this function of stories, I will focus on two main examples. First, the move of some individuals away from the traditional gender labels ‘woman’ and ‘man’ towards alternative, more fluid gender labels. Second, the move of some Dreamers – a certain category of young undocumented immigrants – away from this ‘Dreamer’ label and towards more radical ‘undocuqueer’ label.⁸

The first step, as such, towards the formation of novel identities is the fermentation of discontent with already existing identity categories – and storytelling can play a large part in cultivating this discontent. This is because stories can highlight the inadequacy of existing concepts in mainstream society to capture all experiences. In other words, stories can make the flaws of existing identity categories visible, thus opening up the theoretical and discursive space in which new identities might be formed. I hold that problematic identity labels – problematic in that they fail to accurately capture the personal identities of all those who supposedly have that identity – are damaging to some individuals because they are assumed to be hegemonic. That is, it is assumed that all human beings have a gender, where the mainstream assumption is that one

⁸ This is in some ways a continuation of the discussion of the Dreamers from Chapter Four.

is either a man or a woman; and with immigrants, the mainstream discourse often assumes that there either ‘good immigrants’ or ‘bad immigrants’, and that Dreamers are the former. The role of storytelling in destabilizing these identity categories is thus to unseat this hegemony, by showing that some lived experiences push against these mainstream assumptions. In a sense, it is helpful here to see storytelling here as parallel to consciousness-raising, a type of feminist activism wherein personal testimonies from a marginalized social group are shared to reach political conclusions. Sally Haslanger describes consciousness-raising as aiming to disrupt dominant categories by critiquing existing schemas, and defines a schema as “concepts and shared background beliefs that make certain phenomena salient” (Haslanger 2013, 8). The schema being disrupted in the cases I am interested in are those schema related to identity labels.

To destabilize existing identity categories, then, storytelling can demonstrate that these identity labels are not exhaustive, and do not accurately capture all lived experiences. One way in which this is often done – as with consciousness-raising – is simply through the exchange of stories within a community, where many of the members of that community are dissatisfied with a given identity label or schema. For Dreamers, this involved a number of young Dreamers forming communicating among themselves, rather than communicating primarily via mainstream advocacy agencies that were keen to stress how alike these young people were to ‘regular Americans’ (Fernandes 2017, 127). Once Dreamers had formed social groups among themselves, they exchanged stories about their frustrations with the methodology of this advocacy approach, and with the way it encouraged them to distance themselves from significant aspects of their parents’ cultures, and the identity-constitutive stories within them. This storytelling exchange brought the dissonance between the ‘Dreamer’ and ‘good immigrant’ identity labels and the

actual experiences of young undocumented individuals to the fore; which later enabled the formation of a new identity label.

Note that it is also possible for third-personal stories to destabilize identity labels, and even for fictional stories to serve this role too. Regarding the inadequacy of standard gender labels to capture the experiences of numerous individuals, stories that depict the lives of other individuals who do not comfortably fit the labels ‘man’ or ‘woman’ can also create or reinforce this dissonance between existing labels and lived experience. Simply being party to someone else’s story that rejects this gender dichotomy might lead one to question the applicability of the dichotomy to their own life. As for fictional stories, I suspect that stories that hold ‘cult’ status in certain social groups often serve this kind of destabilizing function, and are held as favorites precisely for this reason. Take as an example Ursula K. Le Guin’s classic *Left Hand of Darkness* – a science fiction classic much loved in queer circles – which explores the planet Gethen, on which Gethenian individuals are androgynous and have no fixed male or female status. In the novel, a human envoy is sent to Gethen and experiences significant communicative difficulties, since his overt maleness is treated as a somewhat perverse oddity. In this case, a story creates distance between existing labels and the way people understand themselves by making these existing labels seem utterly bizarre. As Fricker puts it, “[f]inding something potentially authoritative to be absurd gives one critical courage”, and the simple fact of finding something ridiculous can trigger action-guiding deliberation (2007, 167). In this case, this deliberation opens up the space for the formation of new identity concepts.

In order for stories to actually succeed in transforming the self in some way, the destabilization of existing identity categories is not enough – stories must also contribute to the generation or reconstitution of new, alternative identity categories. To return to Haslanger’s

terminology, in addition to disrupting dominant or hegemonic identity terms, an actual change in schemas is also required (2013, 8). In addition to critiquing existing identity labels, new – or at the very least, reconstituted – identity labels can be formed through processes of storytelling.⁹

The label undocuqueer emerged from the Dreamers movement, as queer undocumented youths became more influential and started to assert their voices to a greater degree (Fernandes 2017, 127). This new label was a form of protest against the more conservative start of the Dreamers movement, in which young Dreamers were encouraged to primarily discuss their lives in ways that made them appear sympathetic to a supposed everyday American public. Such presentations of Dreamer identity not only denied much of the cultural context to the lives of Dreamers, but also did not leave space for LGBTQ+ Dreamers to openly disclose this aspect of their identities. The label docuqueer emerged as numerous queer Dreamers shared their stories with one another, and their frustrations at the narrow Dreamer label and the ‘good immigrant’ narrative that it espoused. Alongside the popular slogan ‘Queer, Undocumented, and Afraid’, understanding themselves as a community of undocuqueer youths allowed many Dreamers to reject the more rigid identity labels they had been urged to inhabit previously.

To explain the mechanics through which storytelling enables the formation of new identities, such as in the case of the Dreamers and the undocuqueer label, Catriona Mackenzie’s account of self-transformation is highly illuminative (Mackenzie 2008). Mackenzie sets out to provide an explanation of how individuals make use of stories and of the imagination to make self-transformative decisions; decisions which often involve significant conflicts “within the self” (2008, 129). She discusses a range of self-transformative decisions, including career

⁹ In gesturing at the possibility of reconstituted identities here, what I have in mind is the process by which existing identity labels are given new meanings, or reclaimed in some way by the groups they refer to. The labels ‘queer’ and ‘slut’ are two potential examples of this phenomenon.

changes, relationship changes, and value changes; and it is my contention that formulating and then adopting a new identity label is a paradigmatic example of a self-transformative decision. Mackenzie posits that when an individual is considering making an important change to the self, they make this decision by adjudicating between different alternative futures – more specifically, different *alternatives of oneself* (2008, 129). This notion of an alternative of oneself is in sharp contrast to the notion of an *alternative for oneself*, since the former notion involves a fundamental change in personal identity whereas the latter does not. Mackenzie claims that in making a self-transformative decision, an individual will imaginatively project herself into different possible futures “through a series of different stories” narrated to herself, and perhaps to others (2008, 130).

I contend that Mackenzie’s account can explain the adoption of new identity labels through storytelling; although I think more emphasis ought to be placed on collective storytelling and decision-making. In the case of the undocuqueer label, then, this label might be adopted by a Dreamer when they imaginatively project into a possible future with the existing Dreamer identity, and then compare this to a possible future in which they have this more radical identifying label. However, Mackenzie’s account very much focuses on individual decision-making and storytelling; but I hold that identity *formation* is not intelligible unless both of these processes are recognized to be fundamentally collaborative and cooperative. The existence of the undocuqueer label depends upon stories that are told by Dreamers in concert with other Dreamers. Furthermore, the decision to adopt this identity is only coherent as a collective decision – if only one Dreamer adopts the label, it does not then count as a new and alternative identity label, it’s just one individual’s own quirky self-identity. Without collective projective imagination, it seems unlikely that the undocuqueer label could exist at all; and without this

collective support, Dreamers might not have judged their ‘good immigrant’ label as unwanted, since the solidarity of the Dreamer movement enabled the destabilization of the category in the first place.

It is also worth noting that, yet again, a pluralist understanding of the personal identity is necessary to properly discuss this function of storytelling as transforming the self. This is because seeing the self as made up of multiple stories, and of different strands of communal storytelling, is key to understanding how individuals can choose to adopt new identity labels. When an individual abandons an aspect of their social identity in favor of embracing a new identity label, they usually do so by drawing on other stories or fragments of stories about themselves. When someone eschews a traditional gender label in favor of something more transgressive, they usually do so because there are other stories they tell about themselves that seem incompatible with them straightforwardly being a woman or a man. And when a group of Dreamers formed the undocuqueer label, they drew on existing stories about their own queerness and about their cultural contexts in order to generate this new identity category. On a less pluralist account of identity such as MacIntyre’s, these messy and potentially not internally inconsistent alternative stories that constitute part of people’s identities are paid little heed. In short, his account does not have the theoretical depth to explain how multiple stories about someone’s life might be combined in such a way that they can engender new stories and meanings. As Ortega puts it, a “tolerance for ambiguity and contradictions” is often key to understanding how marginalized groups can bring about transformation and resistance (2014, 28). The whole *point* of the undocuqueer label in some sense is to resist the existence of singular stories that can sum up one’s life, and those choosing to adopt the label do so with the hope that

it highlights the multiple, potentially contradictory facets of the lives of Dreamers. With its insistence on singularity, MacIntyre's account of the self cannot adequately describe this.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on the way that stories and storytelling can serve a useful function regarding identity formation for marginalized groups. By critically adapting Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the self as shaped and constituted by stories, I posited an understanding of storytelling as contributing to the self in pluralist and multiplicitous ways. I hold that this account of the self offers the theoretical resources necessary to explain how stories can positively influence and repair the self-understanding of oppressed individuals. Furthermore, storytelling practices can contribute to the formation of novel identities and conceptual resources for understanding oneself and one's group identities. While I focused on two particular functions that stories can serve in relation to the self in this chapter, I think we have good reason to believe that storytelling can be utilized by marginalized groups in other, additional ways. Further philosophical analysis of the relationship between stories and the self is thus called for.

Concluding Remarks

In this dissertation, I hope to have demonstrated the need for a pluralist account of storytelling, and the subsequent richness of philosophical analysis that adopts such an account. I began by providing various arguments against the contemporary prioritization of narrative in the literature on stories and their effects, and argued in particular that forms of marginalized storytelling are penalized by this prioritization. I then went on to posit an account of empathy based on Adam Smith, and demonstrated that both the telling of and the reception of stories are deeply connected to acts of empathy. This empathy is key to the functions that stories can serve for marginalized groups, as the later chapters of the dissertation argued. In turn, I unpacked the capacity of storytelling to diagnose and counter contextually-specific moral harms; to counter prejudicial identity-based stereotypes and mitigate testimonial injustice; and to contribute to the repair of marginalized identities and to the formation of novel identity categories.

Throughout the course of the dissertation, one of the major themes that has emerged is the importance of multiplicity and pluralism in analyzing stories and their functions in the lives of the marginalized. Most explicitly, the need for recognition of multiplicity was outlined in Chapters One and Five respectively, where I argued that without this recognition the storytelling practices of oppressed groups are distorted. In Chapter One, I contended that unless we construe stories as taking numerous forms and having varying organizational structures – some rigid and some much looser – it is inevitable that stories originating in marginalized groups will be overlooked or misconstrued. In Chapter Five, I argued that the self as constituted by stories must be seen as multiplicitous, since marginalized individuals who belong to multiple social groups are otherwise unable to account for their complex and multi-layered lived identities. In essence, I

have argued again and again that since human lives – *especially* the lives of those on the margins – are themselves multiplicitous, any philosophical analyses that are not pluralistic in their approach are thereby theoretically inadequate.

However, even beyond these explicit discussions of multiplicity, the notion that both storytelling practices and human lives are pluralistic rears its head across all chapters of this dissertation. In Chapter Three, while investigating the ways in which stories can diagnose contextually specific moral harms, I cited as examples stories that offer multiple, sometimes competing views on a harm. For example, Alexis Wright’s novel *Carpentaria* details the lives of rival indigenous groups, who disagree about the content of the harm inflicted by white settlers on their land (Wright 2006); and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* provides a depiction of the veil as both an imposition on Iranian women yet also a potential tool for resistance (Satrapi 2007). In Chapter Four, while examining the way that storytelling can counter testimonial injustice, I also drew upon stories that offer multiple meanings. For example, I observed that #MeToo stories like the one recounting the controversial Aziz Ansari date are often interpreted in very different ways, such that the notion of consent and what we build into it is called into question (e.g. West 2018; Hamblin 2018). In these cases, as across the dissertation, it is clear that multiplicity is necessary for the full complexity of lived experience to be appreciated; and that embracing multiplicity is importantly meanings-laden. Seeing a moral harm, or a story, or a life from different vantage points is crucial to gaining a full understanding of it; and failing to recognize this results in reductive philosophical analysis.

The recurrence of multiplicity and pluralism across the dissertation also signal the value of open-mindedness; something that is key for the successful operation of any of storytelling’s constructive functions. As I argued in Chapter Two, approaching the stories of others with an

open mind is necessary for acts of empathy to be successful in general, as it is the best way to ensure that one does not merely project one's own values and judgements onto another person. Once multiplicity enters the picture, open-mindedness becomes even more important, since without open-mindedness the depth of both stories and human lives is liable to be disregarded. It is easy for us as fallible empathizers to settle on a single story or interpretation; the recognition of multiple meanings, stories, and facets of identity takes work. While this dissertation does not provide a full account of what open-mindedness requires, I do offer some suggestions of what might be involved. Namely, I hold that key to open-mindedness is the tolerance of ambiguity. It is important to accept that there might not be a single story that best encapsulates a person's life or an event; that different stories about the same thing might impart different, sometimes contradictory meanings; and that a story or form of storytelling might not be straightforwardly constructive or destructive in its influence, but fall somewhere in between.

Moving beyond the dissertation, it is my hope that future philosophical analyses of stories – as well as philosophical analyses beyond the realm of storytelling – attend to the multiplicity and ambiguity of stories and of the lives those stories depict. The aesthetics and ethics literature that I began Chapter One by critiquing would be enhanced by discussing a wider range of stories and storytelling forms, and by bringing more marginalized stories and storytellers to the forefront. Indeed, the account I offer of the functions stories can serve for oppressed groups is far from exhaustive, and a fuller account could fill numerous books. In delineating several noteworthy functions here, and arguing for a pluralist conception of storytelling, I aim to have provided theoretical resources to enable and encourage further research in this area.

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