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Subject Appropriation in Fiction

This paper is interested in the questions at the intersection of cultural appropriation in the arts — specifically, subject appropriation in fiction — and the ethics of aesthetics. There are a number of questions that arise: Is subject appropriation in fiction morally objectionable in general? If not, why? I will first evaluate two of the arguments — on misrepresentation and authenticity — that James O. Young and Susan Haley put forth on subject appropriation in "'Nothing Comes from Nowhere': Reflections on Cultural Appropriation as the Representation of Other Cultures." I will then delve into unraveling an assumption that undergirds Young and Haley's defense of subject appropriation: that aesthetic success or merit can exempt a work from moral injunctions against cultural appropriation. I then ask: Why is aesthetic achievement a factor in the moral calculation of a work of art? Using the phenomenon of imaginative resistance, I argue that the capacity to make the reader imagine things inimical to their personal views and principles is an aesthetic achievement. An aesthetic failing would then make an epistemic shortcoming a moral failing.

In their essay, Young and Haley unpack why some instances of subject appropriation are morally objectionable while others are not. Broadly speaking, they define subject appropriation in a morally neutral way: it occurs when members of one culture ("outsiders") represent

members of other cultures ("insiders") or aspects of their culture. (268) Before delving into their arguments, we ought to consider if the ethics of subject appropriation are just part and parcel of more general normative prescriptions against *speaking for* (that is, on behalf of) others, as opposed to *speaking about* others. Yet, it seems difficult to specify where exactly the line of demarcation is. In the scope of this paper, and under the morally neutral definition of subject appropriation, it would seem that the there isn't a morally relevant distinction between 'speaking for' and 'speaking about' a group. Perhaps, some may argue that 'speaking for' has a normative connotation, that is, an author claims some normative authority to speak on behalf of a group. However, in directing the reader to imagine certain things, fiction, which this paper is interested in, necessarily blurs the line between 'speaking for' and 'speaking about.' Despite how it may seem that fiction as an intentional, representational act automatically 'speaks for' the aspects of social life it depicts, the normative force embedded in a work's *prescription* of imagining is a necessary condition of the utterances that compose a fiction. (Kathleen Stock in "Imagining and Fiction: Some Issues" seems to lend credence to this view.) Outside of this prescription, one work of fiction cannot inherently claim 'speak for' a group more than another — an authorial claim of normative authority is not possible by any intrinsic quality of the work. Why? Brandon Cooke explains in his essay "Ethics and Fictive Imagining" that the audience "prescinds from any alethic commitment" in the mode of fictive imagining. (318) As such, when taking the "fictive stance," the audience is *not* to make certain "nontrivial inferences" from the utterance (narrative) back to the utterer's (the writer's) beliefs. (Cooke 319) By default, when engaging with fiction, we refrain from making inferences about the author's beliefs. Therefore, more general normative prescriptions against speaking on behalf of others *do not* apply to fiction; neither do injunctions against 'speaking for' a culture group. How is this relevant to the morality

of subject appropriation in fiction? Bearing in mind that the nature of fiction precludes any external claims of normative authority beyond the prescriptive condition operative in fictive imagining, let's set aside the question of whether an individual has more normative authority to 'speak for' a cultural groups because such a work of fiction cannot claim to have more authority to 'speak for' a group more than any other work.

Consequently, when inspecting the arguments that Young and Haley make, I choose to focus on the ones that explore if fiction has a special epistemic status or artistic license that countervails or outweighs the *pro tanto* harm caused by subject appropriation. Out of their many arguments, the ones on misrepresentation and authenticity both pivot on and reveal Young and Haley's underlying claims about the nature of fiction and morality. While their other arguments (on assimilation, privacy, and accurate representation) focus more on exploring the morally problematic implications of subject appropriation (external in nature), the arguments on misrepresentation and authenticity look at whether some instances of subject appropriation *per se* are morally exempt because of an intrinsic aesthetic quality. We ought to note that this underlying claim about fiction — that its aesthetic quality can affect its moral status — functions as an assumption in their argument. I am interested in unpacking this claim.

On misrepresentation, the counterargument that Young and Haley dismantle is the injunction that subject appropriation is wrong because outsiders will harmfully misrepresent insiders. Such a claim rests on a further premise that outsider artists will misrepresent because they lack 'privileged knowledge' that only insiders will have. This is an *epistemic* claim. In response, Young and Haley have several rebuttals. One side reply is that more harm can be caused by omission (which will entail a misrepresentation of reality) than ignorance. Another more compelling one is that the privileged knowledge argument ought to cut both ways, thus

preventing all outsider representations (even when marginalized groups represent the West — for instance, some of V. S. Naipaul's works describe rural England). However, their main line of argument is to deny the privileged knowledge argument — that outsiders must necessarily misrepresent insiders. Their main premise is that there have been many "successful" outsider representations. What exactly is this 'success'? It's an "aesthetic success." (276) In fact, Young and Haley bring up Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* as examples of work that have "prejudices" in their representations of other cultures but do not suffer from any "aesthetic handicap." (276) Here's where Young and Haley's arguments become slightly contradictory. On their view, despite their prejudices, Conrad and Kipling' works are full of insights into another culture. Yet, they are also guilty of misrepresentations. (278) Such a reply does not go against the privileged knowledge argument. These works are simultaneously misrepresentations AND aesthetic successes. Young and Haley's verdict is that *Nostromo* and *Kim*, nonetheless, do not warrant the injunctions against subject appropriation. Crucially, the underlying assumption here seems to be that aesthetic success can exempt a work from moral injunctions against cultural appropriation, or countervail the *pro tanto* harm caused by misrepresentation.

On authenticity, Young and Haley once again focus on aesthetics. Injunctions against subject appropriation on the grounds of inauthenticity use the following line of reasoning. Works that represent other cultures are inauthentic. Therefore, they suffer from an "aesthetic flaw." (283) Young and Haley grant the premise but deny the conclusion. They readily grant that outsiders cannot produce authentic ("not genuine") expressions of insider's culture. (283) They, however, acknowledge that such works are still authentic in another sense — they are an authentic expression of the author's cultural perspective. In fact, they go a step further to make an

unsubstantiated claim: “works involving subject appropriation are often works of literary or, more generally, aesthetic merit.” (284) Young and Haley reserve most of the section for an argument against fraudulent representations of a work as authentic (artists passing themselves off as members of other cultures), which this paper is not interested in. What I would like to focus on is the aesthetic theory that they introduce: that the authenticity of a work of art is relevant to its aesthetic evaluation. At first glance, nothing seems wrong with this. After all, a replica of *Mona Lisa* would not be as great in aesthetic value as the original. But, the issue would then be a matter of fraud or plagiarism, which most injunctions against subject appropriation are not targeting. Is the inauthenticity in question only one of authorial identity? No. In the case of subject appropriation, the larger ethical stakes of authenticity seem to turn on the aesthetic achievements. Once again, there is the underlying assumption that the *pro tanto* moral harm caused by cultural inauthenticity can be offset by the aesthetic merit of artistic authenticity.

Thus far, the picture of subject appropriation that Young and Haley criticize is essentialist. On this picture, cultures are tightly bounded and only their members have privileged and exclusive epistemic access to their culture and, therefore, can represent them. It is only towards the end of the essay that Young and Haley finally challenge this accepted framework of essential distinctions between insiders and outsiders. Early on, in the section on misrepresentation, they quote Edward Said on the "overlapping and interconnected experiences—of women, of Westerners, of Blacks, of national states and cultures" to make the case for cross-cultural understanding. (276) On this view, cultures are not incommensurable monads but porous. In his *New York Times* article, “Go Ahead, Speak for Yourself,” Anthony Appiah criticizes the ‘as a’ locution. Part of his argument is that because of contingency and intersectionality, individuals in the same cultural group will not necessarily have similar experiences nor come up against the

same set of social constraints. Indeed, by denying the picture of strictly demarcated cultures, we can accept the possibility of enough commonality and epistemic access between cultural groups for them to productively represent one another. A later example of Salman Rushdie, an expatriate Indian who writes about India with "aesthetic success," is used by Young and Haley to demonstrate how an outsider with a creative imagination can "convincingly assume the persona of an insider and write about an insider's experience in the first person." (277) While Young and Haley still frame him in binary terms, one can't help but see how Said's quote is realized in Rushdie. Is Rushdie (someone who has spent more years in England than in India) any less of an insider than an Indian who has lived there for all his life? In an increasingly cosmopolitan world, we stand more at an intersection of identities that allow us to inflect singular, monocultural understandings with new valences.

However, I would like to refrain from just rejecting outright the 'privileged knowledge' argument. Instead, I concede that there are epistemic barriers to understanding members of another group: there are limits to what a man can know about the experience of a woman; there are limits what an American person can know about a Chinese person. Many arguments have been made about how the writer's creative imagination (backed by fastidious research in many cases) can bridge the gap. Beyond that, I would like to argue that fiction has a special epistemic status. What is "misrepresentation" in fiction? Cooke points out that a work is fictional not because of its truth value but because of its origin. (318) A work is produced "within a practice," and the appropriate response to the work requires recognizing that the rules of the practice are in effect and following them. In my earlier characterization of fiction, I briefly sketched the rules. In detail, the 'fictive stance,' the proper response to a novel, is "to make-believe (imagine or pretend) that standard speech act commitments associated with the sentences are operative even

while knowing they are not." (318-9 emphasis added) I am not suggesting here that writers can write anything they want without a care for logical consistencies or emotional affect. Instead, what invites readers to engage in the fictive stance is a shared sense of reality — what Kendall Walton calls the Reality Principle in "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality." Fiction represents real things, as Young and Haley also take care to establish. While the representation of reality may be indirect, veiled, and metaphorical, and fiction is not about empirical truths, works of fiction are not exempt from injunctions rooted in epistemic claims. Indeed, even works like *Nostromo* and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which are both set in fictional republics or unnamed towns, are not exempt from injunctions of "misrepresentation." Is it not true then that all works of fiction have the epistemic shortcoming of "misrepresentation" (perhaps, to varying degrees depending on genre)? So, when does a universal epistemic shortcoming become a moral defect? The conventional view is that only when in interplay with the background structural forces of epistemic injustices external to the work itself that the existence of certain "misrepresentations" as the singular or dominant representation becomes morally problematic. For instance, Western writing about the Orient has long enjoyed discursive dominance due to its hegemonic position in knowledge creation and dissemination. Consequently, no wonder that Young and Haley write that "any representation of a colonized culture may be ethically suspect." (283) But, that doesn't seem satisfactory to locate the moral harm outside of the work of fiction itself. Why are there works by colonial, Western writers about non-Western colonized peoples that are not seen as morally problematic (as Young and Haley argue)?

To answer this, we have to return to the underlying assumption that emerged earlier on in my analysis of Young and Haley's arguments, that aesthetic merit can outweigh or countervail

the *pro tanto* moral harm caused by subject appropriation. Bracketing the question of whether there is a *pro tanto* moral harm in the first place, the key question becomes: Why is aesthetic quality a factor in the moral calculation of a fictional work of subject appropriation? In short, I argue that the capacity to make the reader imagine things inimical to their personal views and principles is an aesthetic achievement. Correlatively, the inability to do so is an aesthetic failing. This aesthetic failing contributes to or constitutes a moral failing.

To start, I propose that we use what many philosophers call the phenomenon of "imaginative resistance" to think about the interplay between moral and aesthetic qualities of a fictional work of subject appropriation. In the words of Walton, the question is why we are "less willing to allow that the works' fictional worlds deviate from the real world in moral respects than in nonmoral ones." (35) More generally, the question is why readers encounter resistance in imagining certain fictional passages at all, including non-moral ones: for instance, "Nobody understood why she thought that global warming existed;" or "Since she has single eyelids, she's Korean." The particular subset of works by colonial writers tends to portray a set of moral principles (e.g. that it is right to subjugate a group of peoples on the basis of race for the ideals of 'progress') that are generally appalling to the modern-day moral sensibilities. Per the phenomenon of imaginative resistance, if a work endorses colonialism or invites or has a tendency to induce us to imagine accepting it, we may resist allowing that its propositions are fictional, unwilling to imagine what the work calls for imagining. However, is this resistance moral in nature? Do we object morally to recognizing it to be fictional that colonialism, slavery, or genocide is morally acceptable? Resisting imagining that colonialism is morally acceptable is not to find the work morally defective. But if the author meant for this view to be fictional, his failure to make it so would be *aesthetic* in nature. The very fact that an author tries to do

something he can't bring off can be disconcerting or unconvincing. Propagandistic fiction that features a flat protagonist promoting certain moral principles or a stereotypical villain that supports a certain moral agenda might find itself aesthetically defective. Similarly, works of subject appropriation found most morally problematic tend to feature characters who are more of racist caricatures, or to make claims about the place in which they are located. Such works use a character from another culture to make a point about race or reflect a dominant culture's value system. All of these are aesthetic failures. In such cases, the work of subject appropriation does not take off based on criteria such as emotional ferment, empathetic interpretation, imaginative capacity etc. As such, it remains at the level of the factual and the epistemic — we read their "misrepresentations" according to the sociopolitical realities and *retreat* back to our views and moral principles. Thus, for instance, we find a work that is racist to be as morally repugnant as we personally find racism. We may not get much out of such a work at the level of factuality beyond our intuitive moral objections, but that's because it has little to offer beyond that. Therefore, such aesthetically defective works of subject appropriation are morally objectionable.

Conversely, a work's ability to make the reader imagine things inimical to their personal views and principles is an aesthetic achievement. Works like E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* or Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are aesthetically successful *despite* their stereotypes, backward portrayal of natives, and other misrepresentations because somehow they keep the subjective, the affective, and the emotional alive. It may be the language — for instance, Conrad's use of stylistic impressionism and metaphor to narratively displace the reader — and it may be form. Often, it is through strong characterization. In *A Passage to India*, we find ourselves still able to understand (though not morally support) Miss Adela Quested who lies and accuses the local Dr. Aziz of sexual assault because of the insight into a nuanced interiority. The

aesthetic success of the novel lies in its ability to lure us into the position of engagement, empathy, confrontation etc. in the first place. The ethicality of literature is not that different from the ethicality of friendship (as David Hume would agree). We can choose to not work with an encounter with the mode of meaning or subject formation that the novel offers. After all, considering the phenomenology of the act of reading, the meaning is not immediately revealed, but inseparable from the entirety of expression. When successful, a great work deposits in the reader everything we will subsequently draw from it over time. We invest in it to unravel the meanings at the heart of the text, woven into the narration. Works of subject appropriation that allow us to enter into the psyches of characters we may find repulsive, ponder seriously the ethical stakes of their times, and even understand why repulsive things can become attractive successfully creates the norms within the narrative. We overcome our imaginative resistance to accept that it is fictional and engage with it in the fictive stance. The epistemic shortcomings of "misrepresentation" thus remain epistemic. For a great (aesthetic) work, we do not judge the provocative gesture of the literary on factuality but on how much it stirs us.

In conclusion, looking at the arguments regarding subject appropriation in fiction allows us to probe at something much deeper: why do we find some works morally unproblematic/unobjectionable? Probing at that brings us to the place where aesthetics and ethics converge. In contemplating a particular subset of works that tend to receive the most moral backlash (colonial writers writing about a colonized culture), we see how subject appropriation makes a work *more susceptible* to an aesthetic failing because of the challenges posed by the phenomenon of 'imaginative resistance.' A lot of potentially morally problematic content are prone to aesthetic failure because of reader reluctance to allow moral principles they disagree with to be fictional. That is why great works with aesthetic success — they allow the reader to

overcome this resistance — are deemed exempt from moral injunctions against subject appropriation.

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