

Institution: SOAS University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 34 – Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
Title of case study: Enriching Fiction with Facts: Representations of African, Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures in Novels, Films and Television		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2005–2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Marloes Janson	Professor of West African Anthropology Reader of West African Anthropology Associate Director of Research (Research Ethics and Researcher Development)	2012–present
Dr Dina Matar	Reader in Arab Media and Political Communication Head of the School of Interdisciplinary Studies Chair, Centre for Global Media and Communication	2005–present
Dr Amina Yaqin	Reader in Urdu and Postcolonial Studies Chair, Decolonising Working Group Chair, Centre for the Study of Pakistan Director, SOAS Festival of Ideas	1999–present
Dr Griseldis Kirsch	Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Japanese Culture	2007–present
Dr Jieyu Liu	Reader in Sociology and China Studies	2014–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014–31 July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>Interdisciplinary research conducted at SOAS contributed to the creation of more accurate representations of non-Western cultures in popular Western works of fiction by providing the necessary cultural underpinnings. The research allowed best-selling novels, awarded films and TV programmes with very large audiences to feature complex depictions of Muslim women, Japanese characters, 1960s/1950s Chinese immigrants, and Palestinians' lived realities. Giving authors, TV producers and film makers expert guidance to help them ground their fictional creations in fact, the researchers' work allowed for a rich representation of African, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, enabling audiences worldwide to engage with true-to-life cultural diversity.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		

Ensuring that the rich physical and cultural diversity of the SOAS regions, past and present, is handed on to future generations – whether in terms of arts, texts, endangered languages, hidden archives, or preservation of memory – is a key priority for researchers at SOAS.

Dr Marloes Janson's fieldwork in the Gambia investigated the fate of the Tablighi Jama'at – a transnational Islamic missionary movement that calls for greater religious devotion and observance. The movement originated in India and has thrived in West Africa. Janson's research has provided insight into the challenges and aspirations of young Muslims in the Gambia, which is now one of the largest hubs of Tablighi activity in Africa. It illuminates the critical role of faith in the forging of modern, youthful and gendered identities. The research shows that in contrast to India, in the Gambia the Jama'at has grown into a powerful youth movement. Gambian youths, and women in particular, have adopted the movement to carve out a space for themselves in Gambian society in the absence of alternative means of reaching social maturity and a fulfilling life [3.1, 3.2].

Dr Griseldis Kirsch has worked on Japanese war memory and contemporary Japanese view on the war, through longitudinal Japanese media analysis since 2005, fieldwork and the review of media archives. The research has provided insight not only into how Japanese people view their own wartime history, but also into how popular representations of wartime Japan are used to generate narratives and myths about the Second World War. Her research has looked at how Japanese see themselves as victims of the war [3.3], as well as at the politics of memory behind such representations [3.4]. The research revealed that war memory is manoeuvred. On the one hand, Japan has seen the rise of an outspoken right wing that wants to rewrite history to make it fit with their vision and agenda. On the other hand, many Japanese would just like to remember the fact that there is peace now; they tend to focus on events detaching them from the context within which they took place.

Since 2014, **Dr Jieyu Liu's** research has focused on family dynamics in Chinese communities, in particular intergenerational relations as well as gender and sexual relations in the family setting. Liu spent 4 months living with Chinese families, conducting ethnographic observations about family activities and carrying out life history interviews with family members from different generations. Her work revealed that traditional filial piety has morphed into a filial support that emphasizes two-way exchange - the young versus the elderly - of support and care. The strengthened ties between married daughters and their parents have led to modifications to patrilocal and patrilineal customs. Liu's work identifies the divergent ways in which political, economic and cultural context has affected Chinese family life, revealing both the differing pace of change and the varying extent to which traditional hierarchies of gender and generation have been disrupted [3.5].

Dr Dina Matar's oral history-based research has focused on personal stories and memories as told by around 100 male and female Palestinians in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Occupied Territories and Israel – using in-depth unstructured interviews conducted between 2007 and 2009. Based on real-life experiences and self-narration, it offers a bottom-up account of Palestinian lives during critical moments in Palestinian history. Their accounts, drawn from their lived experience of these moments, challenge dominant representations about Palestine and its people, offering an alternative narrative as a form of knowledge that comes from below [3.6].

Dr Amina Yaqin's research has focused on how stereotypes that depict Muslims as a problematic presence in the West are constructed, deployed and circulated, producing a large gap between representation and a considerably more complex reality. In particular, in 2005, through an in-depth media analysis, Yaqin explored the phenomenon of the modest but fashionable Muslim lifestyle doll Razanne as a response to the framing of Muslim women in the West [3.7]. In minority contexts, Muslims feel obliged to perform their Muslimness through dress and other actions. The research argues that Razanne is a stereotype of a stereotype and has contributed to the homogenization of a transnational Islamic identity and to the conceptualization of a global Islamic community (Ummah) taking place over the Internet. This research has informed her collaborations as research partner and Deputy Director with the AHRC-funded

International Research Network 'Framing Muslims' (2007–2010 GBP49,500) and the RCUK-funded project 'Muslims, Trust and Cultural Dialogue' (2012–2015 GBP324,081), and associated publications including the monograph co-authored with Peter Morey, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- 3.1. Janson, M. (2013). *Islam, Youth, and Modernity in the Gambia: The Tablighi Jama'at*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (International African Library). ISBN: 9781107040574 Available on request **Nominated for the BBC Thinking Allowed Ethnography Award; winner of the 2014 RAI Amaury Talbot Prize for African Anthropology. Due to its sales figures, the monograph was re-published in paperback in 2017 (Cambridge University Press).**
- 3.2. Janson, M. (2016). "'How, for God's sake, can I be a good Muslim?'" Gambian Youth in Search of a Moral Lifestyle'. *Ethnography*, (17), pp. 22–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138115575655> **Peer-reviewed**
- 3.3. Kirsch, G. (2012). 'Memory and Myth: The Bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima in German and Japanese TV Drama'. *Contemporary Japan*, (24)1, pp. 51–70. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cj-2012-0003> **Double-blind peer-reviewed**
- 3.4. Kirsch, G. (2019). 'Recreating Memory? The Drama Watashi wa kai ni naritai and Its Remakes'. In: D.P. Martinez, B. Guarné and A. Lozano Mendez, eds, *Persistently Postwar: Media and the Politics of Memory in Japan*. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 85–102. Available on request. **Double-blind peer-reviewed**
- 3.5. Liu, J. (2016). 'Intimacy and Intergenerational Relations in Rural China'. *Sociology*, (51)5, pp. 1034–1049. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038516639505> **Double-blind peer-reviewed; published in a high-impact international journal. It has also been translated into Chinese and published in Chinese journal Social Governance.**
- 3.6. Matar, D. (2010). *What it Means to be Palestinian: Stories of Palestinian Peoplehood*. London: I.B. Tauris. ISBN: 9781848853638. Available on request. **Well reviewed in prestigious academic publications such as Oxford's Oral History Review on: Class and Race Journal.**
- 3.7. Yaqin, A. (2007). 'Islamic Barbie: The Politics of Gender and Performativity'. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, (11)2, pp. 173–188. <https://doi.org/10.2752/136270407X202736> **Peer-reviewed**

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Research conducted at SOAS between 2005 and 2020 by an interdisciplinary group of female scholars informed popular works of fiction, generating new and truthful forms of cultural representations. Through engagement with novelists, filmmakers and television producers, the group offered readers and audiences impactful, new ways of understanding underrepresented cultures in the non-Western world.

Impact on novels

Janson's research informed the 2016 novel *Swing Time*, partly set in the Gambia, by renowned author Zadie Smith. Smith wrote in her acknowledgement: 'I am indebted to Dr Marloes Janson, whose engrossing, thoughtful and inspiring anthropological study proved invaluable, bringing context where I had impressions, possible answers when I had questions, and providing many of the cultural underpinnings of this story, as well as helping create the feel and texture of certain scenes in the novel' [5.1]. As of October 2018, *Swing Time* had sold over 500,000 copies; it was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2017 and was one of the 100 top selling books for 2017 [5.2a and b]. It was translated into 24 languages. Kirkus Review credited Janson's anthropological study for the accuracy of the cultural representation of the Gambia [5.3 p3]. The publication of *Swing Time* coincided with the presidential elections in the Gambia, and in 2016–2017 Janson was invited as country expert to report on the political situation in the country twice on television, 6 times on BBC [5.4b] and also in *The Conversation* [5.4c]. There were also informal conversations inviting Janson to consult on a future TV adaptation of *Swing Time* [5.2a].

Yaqin's work on Razanne, the Islamic Barbie, led to her being sought out in 2014 as an adviser to author Naomi Foyle to shape the character Una Dayyani and her assistant Marti for the futuristic Gaia Chronicles book series (2014–2018), aimed at young adults. Foyle shared more than 30

pages for Yaqin to review; she later told Yaqin how this: ‘has already excited me about my revisions, in particular the opportunity to develop insights into the spiritual lives of the characters. I am thinking more deeply about comparative religion and will bring that aspect of the series into sharper focus for the next volume’. She subsequently wrote that thanks to Yaqin’s help, she felt ‘more confident about making closer allusions’ [5.5 p3] to relevant world religions in her science fiction series. In a public blog, Foyle wrote of the choice of seeking Yaqin’s feedback explaining ‘I hadn’t realised when I started The Gaia Chronicles just how deeply the series would require me to engage with contemporary cultures not my own’ [5.6 p1]. Yaqin’s work thus enabled the author to include non-Western female protagonists who are accurately and truthfully represented, and allowed both her and her young readers to engage with ‘other’ contemporary cultures.

Impact on feature films

Matar’s work informed the 2018 animated film *The Tower* by Norwegian director Mats Grorud [5.7 p2], particularly in representations of Palestinians in diverse locations post-1948, scripting tragedy in people’s lives [5.11a]. Premiered at the renowned Annecy Film Festival in June 2018, *The Tower* obtained very strong reviews, with the *Hollywood Reporter* describing it as ‘a well-researched and penetrating look at an ongoing crisis . . . allowing viewers, especially younger ones, to grasp the human repercussions of a never-ending conflict’ [5.8 p2]. As of December 2019, it had been screened 190 times at festivals and cinemas in more than 20 countries across Europe, Asia and the Middle East – including in Jordan, Turkey and Palestine. In particular, the film was shown in a number of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Palestine where viewers – especially child refugees – could relate to the story and its main character, Wardi [5.9]. In October 2019, the film was submitted for the 2020 Academy Awards, and in December 2019 it was nominated as ‘Best Animation Film’ at France’s Lumière Awards [5.10 p4]. Matar’s work proved influential in developing the scripts for the central story of the 2 key characters in the film, as well as in providing greater contextual detail to Grorud’s own experiences as he lived with Palestinian refugees for a year in Lebanon. Grorud explained that without the material and insights from the book [3.6], he would not have been able to make the film with the time and budget available to him [5.11b]. Audience feedback was overwhelming – for example, Grorud reported that a person from Palestinian diaspora found it very emotional because ‘it is hard for Palestinians to explain their hope to return’, adding that she hoped that it is this hope that would be ‘passed on to next generations’ [5.11b p3]. *The Tower* won prestigious awards at the Seoul International Cartoon and Animation Festival, at Skip International D-Cinema Festival in Japan, and at the Anibar Festival in Kosovo.

Impact on television

Kirsch’s research led her to act as consultant for series 1 and part of series 2 of the Amazon Original Series *The Man in the High Castle*, based on the 1962 novel by Philip K. Dick. Big Light Productions (co-producers of the project) contacted Kirsch to advise them on cultural and historical accuracy in the series, as they needed somebody with ‘a certain knowledge of Japanese culture, behaviour and history’ [5.12 p8]. Referring to Kirsch’s feedback, Sarah Wyatt, Script Editor at Big Light Productions, ‘found everything [Kirsch] said incredibly helpful in trying to make sense of the world we are creating’. Wyatt also stated that ‘Dr Kirsch’s advice and guidance was invaluable to our understanding of the Japanese characters and culture. We relished every moment she spent with us and every utterly fascinating email we received, with so many gems we could incorporate into our world’ [5.13]. Review-aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes listed an approval rating of the series of 95% based on 58 reviews, with an average rating of 7.54 out of 10. The *Guardian* praised the convincing depiction of ‘how society would have evolved under the Nazis [as] simultaneously obvious and somehow surprising’ [5.14]. Through this work, Kirsch was recommended as an advisor [5.15a] for a BBC/Netflix production, called *Giri/Haji* (Duty/Shame), which features the story of a Japanese policeman posing as a Yakuza (Japanese organised crime) gangster in London. Kirsch was asked to consult on the series (8 episodes) to ‘ensure that our depiction of Tokyo and of the Japanese characters (and their experience in Britain) ring true’ [5.15b]. Writing of Kirsch’s ‘insights into modern-day and traditional Japanese culture’, members of the writing room on this ‘bilingual project’ noted that they ‘really came to count on her and our writer & whole team found reassurance in knowing that

Griseldis was across such a fundamental element of our series' [5.15b]. The show aired on BBC2 in October 2019 and received rave reviews by critics.

Liu's research on gender and family dynamics in China enabled her to influence the script and production of an episode of Call the Midwife – a successful and critically acclaimed BBC series set in the 1950s and 1960s – focusing on a Chinese family in the United Kingdom. She was asked to provide advice on how Chinese families would have come to the UK in the 1950s as well as behaviours and habits they would display in that period [5.16]. Working closely with the script executive over a period of 5 months, Liu had heavily influenced the design of the episode covering from the overall feasibility of the story lines to the details such as dialogues, costumes and settings. The episode aired on 5 February 2017 and had an audience of more than 10,000,000 viewers, as revealed by the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board [5.17].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

5.1. Influence of Janson's research in Swing Time:

- a) Email correspondence with Zadie Smith.
- b) Acknowledgements page in Swing Time.

5.2. Evidence of sales of Swing Time:

- a) Email from Zadie Smith's agent
- b) 'Bestselling books of 2017: the top 100', The Guardian, 30 December 2017.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/30/bestsellers-2017-top-100-philip-pullman-jamie-oliver-margaret-atwood>

5.3. Kirkus reviews - Swing Time by Zadie Smith <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/zadie-smith/swing-time/>

5.4. Media coverage of Janson's research,

- a) Collated coverage of Janson's research
- b). Channel 5 News 18.01.2017
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEoerpi8ld8&feature=youtu.be> [00:01:19 – 00:01:35]
- ci) BBC World Service, 13.12.2016 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p04k9s34> [00:14:01 – 00:17:42] and cii) transcript
- d) Enough is enough Gambians put faith in democracy: The Conversation 02.12.16

5.5. Email correspondence with Naomi Foyle.

5.6. 'Flying Sparks: Taking The Gaia Chronicles Out For a Spin' Naomi Foyle, Quercus Books blog, 21 April 2015

5.7. Camp Evolved from Small Tents in 1948, to tall towers" Says Mats Grorud, Director of The Tower – Kawa, 5 March 2019 : <https://kawa-news.com/en/camp-evolved-from-small-tents-in-1948-to-tall-towers-says-mats-grorud-director-of-the-tower/>

5.8. 'The Tower': Film Review | Annecy 2018' - Hollywood Reporter 13.06.2018

5.9. Screenings of the Tower West Bank Palestine, 24 October 2019

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9S3AEkXjGiw&t=370s>

5.10. File of 'The Tower' nominations; a) Oscars 2020 – animated features submitted and b) 'Les Misérables' leads nominations in France's Lumière awards – Screen Daily, 3 Dec 2019

5.11. Letter from Mats Grorud and appended summary of post screening Q&A

5.12. Email correspondence with script editors – The Man in the High Castle

5.13. SOAS Japan expert consults on major new series exploring alternative post-Second World War history: SOAS 17.11.2015 <https://www.soas.ac.uk/news/newsitem107250.html>

5.14. The Man in the High Castle: the Nazis win, but so do viewers – Guardian 20 Nov 2015
<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/nov/20/the-man-in-the-high-castle-amazon-prime-nazis-philip-k-dick>

5.15. Evidence of contribution to Giri/Haji

- a) Introductory email from Script Editor, b) Conclusion email from script editor

5.16. Collated emails with script producers of Call the Midwife.

5.17. BARB Weekly top 30 programmes on TV sets Feb 2017.