Imagining Queer Worlds:

The uses of queer speculative fiction as a tool for personal validation, empowerment, and understanding

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines the potential of queer speculative fiction as a tool for queer readers to understand and affirm their own queerness. Through an interview-based ethnography of reading, I explore what makes speculative stories a unique category of literature, including the positive impact of reading escapist fiction and the possibilities of building narrative empathy between texts and readers. Speculative literature can provide queer readers with a much-needed break from their everyday lives, but it can also prompt them to reflect deeply on their own identity. These narratives can also create a sense of validation when readers see themselves in fictional characters, or even discuss their favorite queer stories with fellow fans in online spaces. In presenting this study of a small group of queer readers, I aim to provide a thorough discussion of speculative stories, queerness, and how imagined narratives can make us feel.

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Introduction

> "'I think people came here for the same reason we came here,' Dorian says. 'In search of something. Even if we didn't know what it was. Something more. Something to wonder at. Someplace to belong. We're here to wander through other people's stories, searching for our own.'"
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> — Erin Morgenstern, *The Starless Sea*, p. 297

Fiction has always fascinated me. The myriad possibilities of both the stories that are out there waiting to be read, and those that are still waiting to be written—all of them containing new worlds and perspectives. Speculative fiction in particular has drawn me in like no other category of literature, with its strange tales of magic and science and characters who find themselves in impossible situations. I understand the powerful relationship between fictional stories and readers on a very personal level and I am fascinated by it. As I have made my way through higher education, I've pursued a number of academic and professional opportunities related to literature. I interned at literary agencies, a publishing house, and a literary nonprofit, learning the behind-the-scenes process of how most popular books reach their audiences. When the time came to begin my bachelor's thesis, I threw myself into a study on the barriers faced by marginalized writers in U.S. publishing. I wrote about the long road the industry still has towards diversity, as well as the bridges being built towards that future by writers, industry employees, and even some readers. At the same time, I was also becoming increasingly involved in online reading communities, making friends with people from around the world who shared my passion for speculative stories.

I already knew there was something queer about me, but I was still working out the specifics of that at the time—as well as what it meant for my everyday life. Looking for references that might inform, support, and/or reassure me on that journey, I started seeking out more queer literature in general. As I dug deeper on the internet to find recommendations, I was especially excited to find representations of queerness in my favorite speculative genres,

even if these stories were still out of the mainstream and relatively few in number compared to non-queer ones. In the years since, I've watched more and more new stories be published, and the continued growth of online spaces to discuss queer speculative fiction.

Queer storytelling has remained an interest of mine as the years have passed, and ended up at the forefront of my mind during my time at CEU—partly due to my own journey as a queer reader and writer of speculative fiction, and partly because of the similar experiences I've heard about from other friends. I'm particularly intrigued by the impact of speculative fiction on readers, and especially so in the context of queer narratives. Rather than focusing on the literature itself, I'm interested in how readers respond to it. I've had countless long conversations with friends about our love of various queer characters in SFF, talking for hours about how fictional people and their fictional lives make us feel. While this thesis is by no means a comprehensive representation of all queer readers, I set out to investigate what draws us to these genres and what we get out of these stories. As part of my research, I aimed to address the following questions: How does queer speculative fiction serve as a tool for queer readers to find understanding, empowerment, and validation? What does queer speculative fiction offer queer readers that is different from other categories of literature? How does the escapist element of these works impact the reader? To what extent does queer speculative fiction impact queer readers 'knowledge of and/or comfort in their own queer identity?

My goal with this thesis is to investigate the potential of queer speculative fiction as a tool for queer readers to understand and affirm their queerness. I want to explore what this category of literature has to offer that others may not, as well as whether these stories play a role in individual queer people's journeys towards fully realizing and feeling comfortable in their identities. First, I started off by delving into the category of speculative fiction itself—how people define it, what genres it includes, the unique features it provides for readers, and its queer potential—as well as my plan for conducting an ethnography of queer readers. Next,

as I began examining the findings from my interviews, I discussed the concept of escapist literature as it pertains to queer speculative fiction, and what kind of escape it provided for the people interviewed. In addition to escapism, I also addressed the possible ways in which queer speculative fiction can impact readers' understandings of their own identity and feelings of comfort and/or empowerment. While my primary focus in this research has been on the relationships between readers and texts, I know from my own experiences—and those of many close friends—that reading is rarely as a solitary an act as it may seem. Engagement with larger communities of other readers, whether in a local book club or an online forum, can also influence your experiences of reading. Since this thesis itself has been a research effort conducted entirely online, I was curious about participants' thoughts on online spaces and explored the variety of responses I received.

In the context of this paper, I use the word queer as an umbrella term to include anyone whose gender, sexuality, and/or romantic orientation exists outside of heteronormative, cisnormative, and amatonormative expectations. As Somerville writes, "[w]hile the term itself has a contested and perhaps confusing history, one of the points of consensus among queer theorists has been that its parameters should not be prematurely (or ever) delimited" (191). Although each queer person's identity is different, there is a certain shared experience of existing on the margins of society, and I believe the most useful interpretation of queerness is one which is not bound by specific semantic rules and can be inclusive to anyone who feels they fit within it. Beyond referring to individuals, I also use queer as a descriptor when discussing various texts.

Queer can be a difficult term to pin down in any situation, but I found this to be especially true when determining what constitutes queer literature. There are endless factors to consider. Is a work queer if it only includes a queer side character, or does it need to include a queer main character? Is a story inherently queer if it is written by a queer author? What if we

don't know anything about the author's gender or sexuality? What about narratives that weren't explicitly intended to be queer, but include subtext that has resonated deeply with queer readers? For instance, many queer readers may interpret Ursula K. Le Guin's celebrated science fiction novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, as an exploration of trans and nonbinary identity due to the ever-shifting genders of its characters. However, from reading Le Guin's own discussions of her book, it's clear that her intention in writing the novel was more about making a feminist statement than an explicitly queer one. (Le Guin 160-172). A vast array of arguments can be made in response to these questions. My own—still very loose—definition in this thesis includes any text that has at least one queer protagonist, and from discussions in interviews most participants seemed to have a similar idea. Rather than defining what I considered to be queer fiction in detail before we spoke, though, I decided to leave it open to see what participants would choose for themselves and what stories they would want to bring up.

This thesis has been a lengthy exploration of speculative stories, queerness, and how printed words on a page or a screen can make us feel. In presenting this limited project working with a small group of queer readers, I hope to open a discussion on how these varied topics align.

1. Speculative fiction and research design

1.1 What is speculative fiction?

Speculative fiction is by nature a rather broad category comprising a number of literary genres—from fantasy and science fiction to horror and alternative history. As a result, it can be quite a complex task to pin down its exact definition.

Most of the time, speculative fiction is explained by positioning it in contrast to so-called realistic fiction. In *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Challenging Genres*, Paul L. Thomas defines speculative fiction as works that reshape and reimagine our world in some way, prompted by either magic/supernatural forces or imagined versions of scientific developments (20-24). In "The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction", Russell B. Gill proposed that "speculative fiction envisions a systematically different world" from the one we live in—an "alternative reality" for the reader to inhabit for the duration of the story (73, 78). Joanna Russ, a science fiction writer herself, has also written at length on such genre classifications, and she refers to speculative fiction as stories of" life-as-it-might-be" rather than the realistic works of fiction that show "life-as-it-is" (11). All of these texts maintain a strong focus on the setting, or world, in which speculative fiction is set, emphasizing its difference from our reality as a key marker of the genre.

Science fiction critic Marleen S. Barr takes a similar approach, noting that speculative fiction allows writers and readers to be placed in a different time and/or place from their current reality. However, she also mentions that in inventing new worlds, speculative fiction texts can be further defined by a key expectation they require of their readers: an acceptance that in these narratives, the unusual has become the usual (Barr 4). In sum, it seems to be generally agreed upon that works under the speculative fiction umbrella usually require a certain degree of "estrangement" (Gill 78). This concept was brought into the study of speculative literature most notably by the work of Darko Suvin, whose *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* defines

"cognitive estrangement" as a logical process in which readers accept factually incorrect or unrealistic elements of a story because these are expected fabrications within the genre (4-6). This is similar to the suspension of disbelief expected when one is reading any work of fiction, but estrangement occurs to a further extent due to speculative fiction's "non-naturalistic" genre conventions (Suvin 11). Russ also claimed that it is often easier for a reader to suspend their disbelief while reading fantasy fiction than while reading more realistic fiction. Fantasy stories, after all, do not pretend that they are true stories that are happening in our world—since their very purpose is to tell a narrative that is obviously fictional, the reader has no preconceived assumption of realism to expect and can more easily allow themselves to accept the fantastical (Russ 18). This simultaneous distancing from and acceptance of the unusual settings of these works allows them to serve as both a foray into an unfamiliar world and a mirror in which to reflect on our own lives. In picking up a story of magic or science from a fictional world, a reader may find an escape from reality, an opportunity for self-reflection, or both.

In addition to addressing definitions of the category, it also seems relevant to discuss the fact that speculative fiction is genre fiction. Most of the fantasy and science fiction novels available can be classified in this way—as can other not-necessarily-speculative genres such as romance or thriller novels—because they meet certain conventions that we expect from these genres in commercial publishing. For example, works of science fiction are expected to center on some type of scientific advances, or at least to be set in a technologically advanced or unique world, while works of fantasy literature typically involve some element of magic, fantastical creatures, or the supernatural. Naturally, though, there's still a wealth of diversity within genre fiction categories, and their boundaries are also still somewhat nebulous and malleable.

However, the fact that speculative fiction exists in this category influences how people interact with it. As genre fiction, speculative works are often dismissed as a form of literature that has little worth, and that contribute nothing of value to their readers or society at large.

Thomas also noted that even some of the most prominent writers of speculative fiction over the last 50 years—such as Kurt Vonnegut and Margaret Atwood—have been dismissive of genre fiction, voicing their disappointment in seeing the term "science fiction" applied to their work (15). In her own essays on genre, Ursula K. Le Guin has criticized this deeply rooted disdain and contempt for fantasy literature. According to her, this attitude stems from the moralistic idea that everything you spend your time on should better you as a person, and in turn the assumption that fantasy literature is not educational and thus a waste of time (34-35). These criticisms are unfounded—speculative fiction is no less useful or significant to readers than literature that claims to present an entirely realistic mirror of the world.

Although opinions vary slightly, speculative fiction is mostly agreed upon as fiction that introduces the reader to a new world or an altered version of reality. It is strange and unusual, which is in fact what piques most readers' interests, and despite the criticisms of genre fiction it has quite a lot to offer audiences.

1.2 Speculative fiction and queer potential

What is the point of reading speculative fiction, then? As Le Guin explains, these stories are of course intended to provide" pleasure and delight" to readers, but "the use of imaginative fiction is [also] to deepen your understanding of your world, and your fellow men, and your own feelings, and your destiny" …" the reader should expect to be entertained, but should also expect to travel on unfamiliar ground" (38, 237). I find these quotes rather useful in presenting the experiences gained by readers. There is opportunity for more simple enjoyment, but there's also opportunity for self-reflection. Many people are drawn to speculative fiction because it promises them an entertaining escape from reality for a short time—a trend that emerged in my own research and that will be discussed further in the next chapter. In taking these opportunities to escape into different worlds, though, they may encounter narratives that prompt intriguing, exciting, or frustrating reflections on reality.

This feature of speculative fiction is particularly interesting to me where it intersects with representations of queerness. As a category, speculative fiction is, above all, a literature of imagination. It's fundamentally concerned with challenging our preconceived assumptions about how the world works and what could be achieved through hyper-advanced science or magic. Yet even within this genre of unlimited potential, many of the most well-known works still tend to envision worlds centered around cishet white men. While prior movements in feminist science fiction brought in radically new perspectives on gender equality, they still had their shortcomings and were not always inclusive of queer people (or, for that matter, of ethnic and racial minorities).

Studying and thinking about queerness specifically calls into question underlying ideas about heterosexuality and the gender binary, and deconstructs assumptions about them being central to human development and experience (Breger 341-342). Countering normative ideas about sexuality and gender can provide us with new ways to envision and experience the past, present, and future. When combined with speculative fiction there's an incredible potential there, since speculative fiction is an ideal genre for critiquing societal issues (Hollinger 24). Alexis Lothian's book, *Old Futures*, puts forth her own version of this argument. When reading speculative fiction one is already in a world removed from our reality, and as such, "the cognitive estrangements of science fiction might render the genre's readers ready to be queered, preparing them for visions of widely varied social and sexual practices" (Lothian 141). She goes on to suggest that while narratives of coming out and dealing with queerphobia will always be important stories, "[i]mages of different worlds can be transferred into life narratives more complex than 'it gets better,' to shape readers' queer futures as easily accessible books become portable queer worlds" (Lothian 148). Queer speculative stories present a chance to build entirely new worlds and social structures not based on the pervasive homophobia, aphobia, and transphobia we are constantly struggling with, or alternatively, the chance to tell

stories about queer people using magic, science, or other unusual forces to defend themselves and resist oppression. In writing this thesis, I wanted to draw on interviews with queer readers to learn more about what they gain from reading queer speculative fiction and how its queer potential impacts them.

1.3 Parallels with feminist sci-fi

In order to reflect on this potential, I also want to look back on a previous trend that addressed similar issues. There is still quite limited research on queer speculative fiction, but I've noticed many parallels that can be drawn between it and the widespread discussions of feminist science fiction beginning in the 1970s. The proliferation of this subgenre encapsulates the capacity of speculative fiction to draw inspiration from contemporary or historical events and create fictionalized allegories to reflect on political and social issues (Thomas 25).

Feminist science fiction writer Joanna Russ noted that the majority of science fiction written by men failed to critique the deeply ingrained sexism of society, and simply carried on the same sexist structures into their imaginings of the future (135). In response, a surge of feminist science fiction writers in the 1970s and 1980s challenged this through their alternate conceptualizations of society, incorporating a variety of themes that include communal and cooperative living, unconventional family units, little to no class division, women in all kinds of professional positions unconstrained by gender roles, more sexually open societies, less violence and more accountability for harm, etc. In sum, these stories tend to envision women who can live their lives unconstrained by the same structural sexism that we face in reality (Russ 134-139). Barr followed the same line of reasoning, and claimed that narratives like these presented an avenue for women to leave behind the patriarchal society they live in, to imagine a world where they do not have to be docile wives and mothers but are allowed to be complex and powerful people (24-25). According to Barr's analysis, this uniquely feminist perspective also influenced how female authors approached common plot devices in science fiction. White

male writers the genre have typically portrayed aliens as a threatening or terrifying Other, while feminist writers—and especially writers of color—have been more likely to write stories sympathetic to these outsiders ʾperspectives, presenting more nuanced depictions of both humans and aliens living on the margins of society due to fear or oppression (Barr 98). Furthermore, many works of feminist science fiction deeply celebrate "the joys of female bonding" in a way that prior literature by men had not, providing a new literary space to explore relationships—both queer and non-queer—between women through this imaginative genre (Russ 142).

This increase in feminist sci-fi coincided with the height of second wave feminism in the U.S. and the U.K., and occurred alongside the production of plenty more feminist literature in other genres. However, it was the first time that science fiction stories (and the women writing them) gained wider recognition for their feminist potential. This era of feminist science fiction was a powerful outlet for women to critique misogyny and reconceptualize the role of gender in society, all through speculative literature. It's also rather fitting for these women writers to have utilized genre fiction, a type of media that is seen as lacking artistic value, un-intellectual, and frivolous, as a medium to explore these topics, considering how often women's creative efforts are dismissed using the same reasoning.

I hope to show in my own research how queer speculative fiction has served somewhat of a similar purpose for queer readers. Rather than focusing only on science fiction, though, I believe that all of the speculative categories of queer literature (primarily fantasy and sci-fi) have an interesting potential.

1.4 Theoretical framework

Itʾs often suggested that only the most highbrow works of literature can have an impact on the ethics of readers, but the empathy we have for fictional characters in escapist fantasy narratives is just as strong—it can cross from other worlds into ours to impact our feelings and

perceptions of our own reality. Both Suzanne Keen and Sue J. Kim acknowledge that empathy is a not a simple phenomenon to pin down: no one person's reading experience can easily indicate a universal trend and no single work of fiction will impact every reader. However, Keen writes that "[n]arrative empathy involves the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (124). In her own analysis of reader-text relationships, Catherine S. Ross wrote that "[w]hen the right match is made between reader and story, readers use the text to create a story about themselves. They read themselves into the story and then read the story into their lives, which then becomes a part of them" (793). Reading can be an exceptionally personal experience, in which readers feel what happens to characters as keenly as though it had happened to them personally.

These authors also assert that narratives can provide key starting points for understanding how certain groups of people (for example, people of queer sexualities and gender identities) are impacted by works of fiction (Keen 135). Who we empathize with when reading is further influenced by our own identities and experiences—thus, it makes sense that queer people experience narrative empathy in similar ways and respond similarly when reading stories that reflect aspects of their own identity (Keen 142, Kim 164). These theories of narrative empathy posit that not only do readers develop strong emotional connections to fictional narratives, these connections can then have a significant impact on how they understand themselves and their identities. In many ways, this means that queer speculative fiction can be considered a counterstory. Coined by Delgado in his work on representations of racial identity, a counterstory is a written narrative that highlights a marginalized perspective to challenge deep-seated biases, and serves both to empower marginalized readers and deepen outsiders 'understandings of their communities (2412-2415). While the focus of my research is quite different, I want to apply a similar approach to investigating the impact of queer

speculative writing. Additionally, while race is not the focus of my research question it does frequently impact experiences of queerness and other marginalized identities.

As such, in addition to incorporating theories of narratology I also found it important to include decolonial theory in my framework. After all, the crafting of narratives has historically been a key element of maintaining imperial power and alienating marginalized people. In addition to her work on narrative empathy, Kim has also written at length on the implications of decolonization within the study of narrative theory. In "Decolonizing Narrative Theory", she critiques the colonialist tendencies of narrative theory, and advocates for looking deeper into how gender, sexuality, culture, and other identity categories constitute critical elements of narratives and influence how readers receive them. Narratology has traditionally based its concept of narrative on prominent classic literature from Europe and the United States, and as a result is not as well-equipped to interpret and assess stories from marginalized perspectives (Kim 235-236). Still, Kim argues that there are more and more recent scholars whose work has focused on adopting a more intersectional approach—interrogating the ways in which gender, sexuality, culture, and other identity categories are also critical elements of narratives, and can have a strong influence on how the audience receives them (235-236). Of course, because of its origins, Western narratology has certain limitations that remain ingrained within it, but this is all the more reason to continue engaging with decolonial theory and texts. We live in a postcolonial world and have an obligation to incorporate decolonial theory into all areas of research, including narrative theory.

Keeping Kim's ideas in mind, I have aimed to remain critical of generalizations about narrative structures and texts that only center a Global North perspective, as well as incorporating a discussion of how ethnicity, race, nationality, and other identities intersect with a reader's queerness to influence how they read and receive a story. As Alyosxa Tudor argues in their article "Decolonizing Trans/Gender Studies", gender studies and feminist scholarship

on the whole only stand to benefit from combining decolonial and feminist methods. Decolonial conceptions of gender and sexuality frequently challenge the hetero- and cis-normativity spread across the world through Western European colonialism, so it is both useful and necessary to incorporate methods from both disciplines (Tudor 11). Having previously studied decolonial research methodologies during my bachelor's degree and then delving into feminist research methodologies during my gender studies MA at Central European University, I've found both critical to my own research.

My education in feminist research has stressed a number of key tenets. As Linda Bell writes in *Feminist Research Practice*, there is an emphasis on centering the researcher's ethics in designing any ethnographic project (82). Paying close attention to the level of care and inclusion with which participants are treated, and the respectful handling of the information they provide, is a key element of this process. While this may not seem overly connected with gender from the perspective of an outsider, a more emotionally attentive approach to research can facilitate a more open interview environment. This, in turn, allows for a deeper consideration of how gender, sexuality, and other identity categories impact participants' experiences and perspectives—in a way that has been left out of previous qualitative research and ethnography dominated by white male researchers (Bell 83-85). Nancy A. Naples presents a similar case, emphasizing the need for research that is empathetic and understanding of people's positionality, caring for the situations of all participants (17-26). Feminist research emphasizes bringing in an understanding of how gender impacts every aspect of life, and queer feminist research has expanded this to include studies of queer sexuality and gender identities.

Interviews in particular are a key site for implementing these ideas. As Joan Sangster writes, the interview is a "document created by the agency of both the interviewer and the interviewee", one which encourages researchers to see interviews as "cooperative" efforts rather than transactional ones (10-11). While planning and carrying out the interview-based

sections of my research, I also found Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* immensely helpful. Tuhiwai Smith is an indigenous Maori professor and researcher whose work has long critiqued the inherent racism of academic writing conventions and institutions of the Global North, especially in the context of ethnographic research. Tuhiwai Smith argues that these long-established approaches to interview-based research reinforce a deeply unethical power dynamic between the researcher and their participants, in which the researcher holds all authority over how the information shared is interpreted and used (3-8, 62-75). This has historically been especially true in the cases of white researchers studying indigenous peoples, or any other context in which the researcher is from a highly privileged group and the participants are not. As Sium and Ritskes put it quite nicely in an article on indigenous narratives, "stories are decolonization theory in its most natural form" (ii). While focusing on queer narratives, I have aimed to keep in mind this radical potential of storytelling as a decolonial practice and do justice to each perspective shared with me.

When conducting interview-based research that deals with personal topics, it can be more harmful than helpful to be personally detached as an interviewer. Ruth Behar's moving story of keeping one's personal experiences and background at the forefront of one's work as a Cuban American anthropologist has stayed with me since I first read *The Vulnerable Observer*. Since, she proposes, interviews are almost universally a vulnerable experience for the interviewee, the researcher should not hold back from being vulnerable as well in the interview—and in the writing that follows (Behar 6-13). Being open and willing to share your own experiences can help to break down this power imbalance and lead to better communication in interviews, and I aimed to bring this practice into my work on this paper. I approached my meetings with participants as semi-structured interviews that left plenty of time to linger on each person's interests, and often ended up with what felt like more informal

conversations. After all, we frequently had a lot of common interests and experiences, so it felt fitting to share my own thoughts and feelings in return.

In designing my own research, I was guided by each of these scholars' recommendations for interview methodology. Overall, they advocate for treating participants with a great deal of care and consideration, as well as considering them equal and continual participants in the work you are doing—rather than part of only a brief exchange. I wanted my participants to feel that they have agency over their role in this project, and that their safety and comfort matter. This may be my thesis, but I have immense respect for and gratitude towards all of the people who have shared their thoughts and experiences with me. I take seriously my responsibility to ensure that their stories are represented faithfully here.

1.5 Research methods and limitations

In designing my research, I was interested in speaking to queer people who consider themselves avid readers of queer speculative fiction to discuss their feelings on it and experiences with it, in order to assess what these particular narratives tend to offer queer readers. Building on the key concepts discussed in my theoretical framework, I constructed a semi-structured interview-based study, with interview questions that fell roughly into several general categories. The first type of question inquired about why the participant enjoyed speculative genres, and drew comparisons between speculative fiction and realistic fiction. The second variety of question asked about participants 'personal connections to these stories and characters, as well as whether they feel queer speculative fiction has played any role in helping them to feel more comfortable in or to better understand their own queer identity. I was also curious about how readers' experiences with queer representation was similar or different to their experiences with representation of other less-represented identities they shared—such as race, ethnicity, religion, disability, etc.—so I also asked their thoughts on this. Finally, I expected that since I was recruiting participants online via social media that they would likely

be involved to some extent (or at the very least, familiar with) online reading communities, and possibly some in-person ones as well. I know from personal experiences and the experiences of many friends that these communities can have an influence on your reading experiences, awareness of less mainstream literature, and more, so I also included a question inviting participants to share more about their engagement with these communities.

In total, I conducted 11 interviews with individuals who self-identify as queer and consider themselves readers of speculative fiction between the spring of 2020 and the winter of 2020-2021. Most participants were in their 20s, but a few were in their 30s or their late teens. Participants were recruited via social media, primarily through Twitter and a Google form that provided details about my research project and collected contact details. In total, the form received 25 responses from people interested in participating, but I was unable to meet with everyone due to mostly time constraints and occasionally technical issues. All interviews were conducted online via video or voice calls on Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts, and WhatsApp, which allowed me to speak with participants all around the world as well as ensuring the safety of everyone involved during the COVID-19 pandemic. While interviewing online is definitely a different experience from in-person, I don't believe it had any negative impacts on my interactions with participants, especially given the ways in which virtual meetings have become the norm over the past year. Additionally, it provided the option of either talking face-to-face (via the screens) or just on an audio call, so that participants could choose the format with which they were most comfortable.

Since my research deals with queerness, and incorporates questions related to homophobia, aphobia, and transphobia, it was also important for me to manage the ethical considerations of this work carefully. I drafted and provided my own informed consent forms to all participants before interviewing, and received documented permission to include our discussions in this research. To ensure the safety of interviewees, everyone involved was also

provided with the option of participating anonymously, and was free at any time to withdraw that participation for any reason. Following the interviews, recordings and transcripts have been stored safely and privately. While at the time I began this research in 2020 there was not an ethics review committee available to MA students at CEU, I discovered in 2021 that one had been recently created in the Department of Gender Studies. Although my research had already been conducted and this thesis mostly written by that time, I provided a review of my ethics and consent strategies to receive approval before submitting this project.

Still, there are a number of limitations to my work. First and foremost, my pool of 11 interviewees is a relatively small group. It is my hope that the interview responses discussed here have some indications of broader trends and discuss experiences shared by other queer readers of speculative fiction, but of course they will not be relevant to everyone and are all based on individual contexts. The 11 interviewees who participated in this study come from 10 different countries, but the majority of participants are from North America and Europe (North America: 3; Western Europe: 4; Eastern Europe: 1; North Africa: 1, Middle East: 1; South America: 1). Additionally, I am researching and writing this thesis in English, and the vast majority of my personal and professional experience is with English-language publishing in the U.S. and the U.K. The majority of participants do speak other languages as well, but we primarily discussed English language works and that is the scope of this research. Furthermore, my efforts at genre definition in this chapter are based on the English-language and primarily American tradition of speculative fiction in the past century.

2. The escapism of queer speculative fiction

With each participant I interviewed, the discussions would linger to some extent on different subjects, or bring in fascinating and entirely new points that they found relevant to their own experiences. Still, many questions raised in interviews yielded similar responses from the majority of participants. This chapter will offer an exploration of one of the most striking commonalities across all 11 interviews conducted. When asked what they felt drew them to genres of speculative fiction, all participants noted the sense of escapism they find in these narratives. Eight out of 11 actually used the word "escapism" or "escapist" directly, while the other three offered more abstract descriptions of enjoying the chance to enter a new world or experience an alternate reality.

2.1 Escapism in literature

Escapism is a broad concept that can be applied in a number of situations and subjects, and it generally refers to some form of activity that allows one to momentarily leave behind their reality and escape to a different one. In the context of literature, then, this would refer to the act of reading a text that has this effect. Escapism is not unique to speculative fiction by any means, and since it refers more to the experience of the reader than any particular qualifications within the text it can be found in any genre. In fiction especially, it is possible to consider any work an example of escapist literature since, after all, each presents its own imagined narrative (Heilman 443). Unfortunately, "escapist literature" has frequently been seen in a less than positive light, as some kind of negative influence to which people can become addicted (Heilman 447). This view of escapist fiction seems quite similar to the attitudes toward genre fiction mentioned in the previous chapter—in general, both are often disparaged by many for being a waste of time or distraction merely because they are something people enjoy that doesn't pretend to be in service of any lofty intellectual pursuit. In line with Le Guin's comments about critiques of speculative fiction, Janice Radway makes similar points about

escapist fiction in her book, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature.* Under a capitalist society, leisure activities such as reading genre fiction are seen as unproductive and a waste of time that could be spent making money or at the very least developing one's education (Radway 89-90). This focus on labor and productivity above all else fails to recognize the personal benefits of reading for pleasure. People often are dismissive of how useful this escapist literature may be.

So, what are the possible effects and benefits of these literary escapes? There are many things that people could be seeking escape from when reading, as well as many potential results for readers. A few hours spent in the alternate world of a fictional story may offer a respite from real-life problems that were causing distress, a new understanding of one's perspective, or an outlet for experiences that the reader cannot have in their everyday life (Heilman 455). Radway discussed escapist reading at length in her study on the experiences of women who read romance novels. She wanted to understand what they enjoyed about these stories, and how they were impacted by them. While her work centers on a different genre, I believe that this "ethnograph[y] of reading" serves as quite a useful reference for my own research (Radway 5). In particular, Radway's interviewees often focused on the transportive nature of romance novels, and how they provide an "escape" for many people who read the genre (87-88). Many of the readers she interviewed were full-time mothers and housewives, and the escape these novels provide allowed them to have experiences outside the usual routines and settings of their daily lives. These brief escapes even went so far as to ease the frustrations and tensions the women felt living in a patriarchal society, letting them momentarily leave behind the immense pressure put on them to conform to gender roles and carry out the emotional and physical labor of taking care of their homes and families. As Dorothy Evans, one of Radway's participants, said, "…I think my body is in the room but the rest of me is not (when I am reading)" (87). Literary escapism can be a powerful experience for many readers that transports them away

from their present surroundings. In doing so, it can also be especially significant as a means of providing enjoyment, relaxation, and the chance to lessen stress or take one's mind off of negative experiences.

2.2 Escaping through speculative fiction

While escapism can be found across genres, it does often lend itself especially well to speculative fiction. As discussed in the previous chapter, speculative literature by nature seeks to represent an alternate version of the world or an entirely new world in which readers can find themselves. Lubomír Doležel divided texts into two categories: "I texts" or "world imaging texts"—more commonly known as nonfiction—that are about our world and draw directly from it, and "C texts" or "world-constructing texts"—all categories of fiction—that create worlds that did not exist before being written into the book (24). Nonfiction or "world-imagining texts" recognize our reality as their primary referent, whereas fictional texts have more autonomy to bend and break expectations of reality. In this thesis, I am interested in how these "world-constructing texts" can be further divided into realistic fiction and speculative fiction. Where realistic fiction is still somewhat bound to presenting itself as a possible narrative within our reality, the genre conventions of speculative fiction do not have the same restrictions. Speculative fiction is a distinct type of literature in that the construction of new and unfamiliar worlds is central to its definition. Its ability to create these narratives is effectively restricted only by the need for it to remain accessible to readers through our use of language and semiotics—while the world of a fantasy novel may be entirely different from the referent of our reality, it must be written in a way that "actual persons" can understand and connect with (Doležel 20-22). These constructed speculative worlds thus have their own unique ontology that readers learn and accept as the norm—for example, in the setting of a speculative novel it may be considered ordinary for animals to speak with humans, or for vampires to exist.

As a result, it seems that many readers turn to speculative fiction in particular because it provides a more all-encompassing escape than realistic fiction. As Chaima puts it,

> I'm constantly longing for that escape hatch in reality, and I feel like I connect more with characters in sci-fi and fantasy more than I do in contemporary and literary fiction. I just feel more like I am part of things, which is kind of a paradox because it's fantasy/sci-fi, but I feel like I am more involved in the story, moved by the same current as the characters. … It's like my soul is drifting among fictional souls in a mist somewhere between fantasy and reality.

Many other interviewees also expressed similar sentiments, noting that they tended to gravitate towards speculative literature over other genres because they felt it had a greater potential to provide that quintessential escape of entering another world—or at the very least, an alternate version of our world. Cam placed a related emphasis on feeling drawn to these different settings: "What I really enjoy is mostly the world building. I don't know how to explain it—different societies that … yes, also have dragons and magic, but are essentially the same as [ours]. It adds different stakes to the story while still having the same emotional core." These discussions also matched up with observations Radway made in her study of escapist reading, as interviewees specified that they appreciated the escapism of fiction because it allowed them to leave behind the stresses of real life for a short time. Cebrina explained, "I think a big part of it is that you just want to get out of your head, especially in this day and age. You just want to read about something that isn't the world burning down around [you]…"

These particular quotes were fairly representative of the participants 'responses, which almost universally indicated that the element of escapism was a major reason for wanting to read speculative fiction. Most participants also noted that they found it easier to "escape" into speculative stories than into realistic ones, enjoying the type of estrangement that came from entering a different reality. There were a few exceptions, though, as some participants mentioned additional books or genres that also provided some form of escape. Interestingly, the non-speculative novels that interviewees mentioned were almost all romance novels—the subject of Radway's book and another genre very closely associated with escaping day-to-day

life—and they were queer as well. Erin said that one of her favorite recent reads had been the contemporary romance *Red, White, and Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston, a novel about the relationship between the son of an American president and a prince of Great Britain. Alyazia mentioned that they especially enjoy reading historical romances such as those by Cat Sebastian and K.J. Charles, both of whom have written a number of queer historical romance novels mostly set in England several centuries ago. Even though these romances may take place in our own world and are free of any supernatural or futuristic elements, Erin and Alyazia mentioned that the characters and/or settings still felt quite removed from their everyday lives due to location, time period, culture, and the general conventions of the romance genre (unlikely situations, ideal love interests, famous/wealthy protagonists, etc.). As a result, these exceptions still seem to fit into the same escapist category as works of speculative fiction, since they're also described as distinct enough from one's everyday routine to provide a new and exciting experience.

2.3 Speculative worlds and queerphobia

While every individual reader may have their own reasons for wanting to escape into a work of fiction, I was curious about the similar factors that might drive queer readers to seek out speculative fiction in particular. As an avid reader of speculative fiction as well as a student of gender studies, I always find it interesting to see how stories set in fictional worlds choose to deal with sexuality and gender. Although these fictional worlds are clearly distinct from our own, they usually draw on our reality as a referent to varying extents. Despite the fictional settings, though, it's exceedingly common to find the systematic homophobia, aphobia, and transphobia of our world replicated within them. Often, and especially in works written by cisgender white men, this is the case because hetero-, amato- and cis-normativity (as well as sexism, racism, xenophobia, etc.) are viewed as fundamental parts of any social structure. In recent speculative fiction, though, I've noticed that a lot of novels tend to make one of two

choices in regards to how they factor queerness into their worldbuilding—some writers choose to replicate the structures of inequality and discrimination we know so well, while others craft a society where gender and sexuality themselves are conceived of and expressed in fundamentally different ways, and do not serve to restrict anyone's potential.

As a category of literature that, by definition, works to reinvent worlds and is not restricted to mere reflections of reality, I am fascinated by its potential when it comes to representations of queerness. Breger writes that this form of "world making" shows a potential of narratives to make space for "otherness" and incorporate queerness into new visions of society (344). After all, the creation of worlds in fiction reflects our perceptions of our own world, and influences in turn how we reflect on our reality. In a 2013 speech, scholar of both science and science fiction, Donna Haraway, also touches on this point. As she pointed out, "it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with…It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (Haraway "SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far"). The parts of our world that writers choose to incorporate into the possible worlds of fiction matter because they reflect back on how we understand the structure of reality—what aspects of it we take for granted, and what elements we might realize are unjust or nonsensical. Haraway uses the example of science fiction stories about cyborgs: the cyborg is not just a fictionalized creature, but a vehicle for questioning our concepts of what makes a person human, constructions of the Other, and our imaginings of what science will be capable of in the future. Thus, fictional world-constructing texts are more than arbitrary fantasies—they can possess a unique power to challenge injustices of our world, and envision a reality without them.

Alexis Lothian concurs in *Old Futures,* writing, "the narrative tactics of science fiction, a genre whose most popular literary and media versions have tended to proffer timelines reliant on unmitigated heterosexuality, can turn against assumptions that the future must be straight,

or at least arrived at through heteronormative reproductive logics" (130). In *Fear of a Queer Planet,* Warner put forth similar ideas about how future understandings of queerness rely on diverse conceptualizations of identity in the present. The heteronormative "totalizing tendency… can only be overcome by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world" (8). While he is concerned first and foremost in this book with discourse and identity in our reality, he emphasizes the influence that queer imagination—and by extension, narratives and storytelling—can have on real-life understandings of queerness. Lothian's text takes these speculations a step further, though, by analyzing existing works of queer speculative fiction that she argues are driving this shift, "creat[ing] timelines that mingle the old and the new, while refusing to be coopted in the service of a future that will look just like the past" (126). Studying queer speculative texts from writers of color such as Octavia Butler, Jewelle Gomez, and Samuel R. Delany, she holds up their work as examples of narratives that "trace worlds and futures in which reproductive heterosexuality and white supremacy do not dominate constructions of sexuality and race, crafting alternative formations through speculative bodies, lives, cities, planets, and galaxies" (Lothian 132).

Although my research focused on readers rather than writers, I think these points are still quite relevant. While all speculative fiction can be considered a kind of "escape" from one's reality, I was curious about how queer readers responded to speculative fiction that still included homophobia, aphobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination that are all-too-common in our world. Most participants agreed that because they tended to enjoy speculative fiction as a form of escapism, they had mixed feelings about fantasy worlds that featured the same queerphobia they encounter in everyday life. In fictional worlds where magic is real or where science is capable of astonishing things, many saw this as disappointing, potentially triggering, and "a lack of imagination" on the part of the writer (Cam). Mary Katerine explained that they understood the inclusion of homophobia if it was an important element of the plot,

but otherwise, "I don't see the reason to put it in there…I live in the real world, I don't need more homophobia" Cebrina pointed to feeling a sense of unease—"There's often this underlying tension. You're always waiting for [the story] to somehow turn on you in a way, you're always waiting for queerphobia of some kind to jump out." It's understandable in any reading experience that one might feel a strong emotional response when something negative and harmful happens to the characters—this is a result of the narrative empathy a reader feels when deeply engaged in a story. However, it's also clear that this empathetic reaction can be further heightened for queer readers reading about queerphobic violence, since the fictional events may be very close to real events that have happened to the reader, or at the very least other queer people who share their identity.

However, these responses typically still acknowledged that participants sometimes found value in speculative narratives when they were thematically centered on overcoming discrimination. As Erin explained,

> This depends a bit on my mood at the time [but]…there are definitely moments where it's cathartic to still see characters struggling with some of the same things that we struggle with. In stories where the society does still have homophobic, biphobic, transphobic tendencies, to see the characters still trying to throw out that… there's a cathartic element of that that I think can equally be powerful.

Speculative stories about discrimination can certainly be valuable to some readers, and the next chapter will address in more detail how readers utilize fiction to understand and come to terms with their queerness. Still, it seems that these kinds of narratives are less likely to provide the escape from real life that is often the goal when reading speculative fiction. In a 2004 study that interviewed young queer women in Canada about their reading interests and habits, Paulette Rothbauer also found that her participants expressed a desire for stories that didn't center on the discrimination they already had to face regularly. One interviewee, Nicky, expressed, "I don't want to read about homophobia, I'd rather not because it's not the biggest issue in my life…Show me the possibilities! Show me that someone can be gay and lesbian

and in love and do the things other people do in books, because I couldn't relate to straight characters in books. I wanted something that was me and showed me the possibilities that were available to me" (Rothbauer 64).

Interestingly, Radway also observed similar reactions in her discussions with romance readers, in regards to the inclusion of misogyny and violence against women in the romance novels they read. Most of the women interviewed expressed that they disliked reading novels that included overt sexism and/or sexual violence, precisely because they turn to this genre for its promise of escape from the sexism they already deal with in real life. One of Radway's participants, Susan, said, "We want something that's light because we're trying to get away from our problems. And that's why we read books. And we don't like to read books and have those kinds of problems because then we're not escaping. We're right into that kind of problem again. It's no enjoyment" (159). There is an acknowledgement that instances of sexism or assault may sometimes provide a cathartic reading experience, but that these elements are usually unwanted when one is reading for pleasure and escape (Radway 157). Being confronted with the harsh realities of misogyny in romance literature provoked reactions among Radway's interviewees strikingly similar to Rothbauer's interviewees, as wells as those I heard from some of my own participants about queerphobia in speculative fiction. In all three case,s it seems that readers seeking an escape may be upset or frustrated to encounter fictionalized depictions of discrimination.

In comparison, participants responded much more positively overall to speculative fiction set in queer-normative worlds that envision a setting free of homophobic and transphobic systems, ideas, and attitudes—which does fit with the escapism readers hope to find in this genre. As Lena put it," I can choose a queer fantasy or science fiction setting where I know that the author included no discrimination…and then just for a time pretend that this is it. That you can just be queer, you can be out there with your identity and you don't have to

deal with all the idiots. It can be a bit like a warm hug." Alyazia had a similar perspective, commenting," I think it gives me a sense of wish fulfillment, to put myself in the head of [queer characters in fantasy fiction]… because for example, it's not safe for me to identify [as queer] as openly as they would in this fantasy setting." There's a sense of comfort and safety that many queer readers are finding in speculative stories in which queer characters are able to live their lives unhindered by prejudices or violence. Chaima also mentioned having a strong preference for queer-normative worlds in speculative fiction." I'm more drawn to stories where queer characters exist, and that's it. You know what I mean? They fight in intergalactic wars, they're involved in some magic, they're villains, they're heroes, who just happen to be queer."

2.4 Queer speculative fiction as a reparative reading

As these responses and others suggest, it's possible for queer escapist stories to provide queer readers with a great deal of satisfaction and comfort. In his writing on the emotional impact of fairy tales, Bettelheim argued that "while the fantasy is unreal, the good feelings it gives us about ourselves and our future are real, and these good feelings are what we need to sustain us" (127). Furthermore, Radway's work on the benefits of escapist reading also found that interviewees felt that reading about heroines with greater agency, intelligence, and confidence prompted some of them to feel as though they could also view themselves that way and take greater control of their lives (103). In this sense, both stories that envision the world without queerphobia and those that show characters triumphing over it could potentially constitute a type of "reparative reading", of the sort proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Sedgwick positions this concept as both a critique of and a response to what she terms "paranoid reading"—an experience that leaves the reader in a place of fear and insecurity. Paranoia has historically featured heavily in all manner of fictional and real-life queer narratives, taking the shape of queer people's fears of being caught, outed, and/or harmed due to their identity (Sedgwick 126). Since these themes are often represented in fiction as well,

queer readers are left with a frequent need to grapple with and defend oneself against potentially harmful subjects in literature—such as the promoting of queerphobic ideas, or advocating for the repression of queer identity. As illustrated in the previous section, participants in my research often cited their reluctance to read realistic fiction for these very purposes—because they could never be quite sure if they would encounter "jarring" homophobic/transphobic content or plotlines (Sîan), this genre made them paranoid that they would be confronted at any time with the issues that they already have to fear in everyday life. As Mary Katerine stated, "it's refreshing when you're not stressed by the fact that the characters could experience hate crimes because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. … They can go through enough without experiencing that." Olivia also expressed a desire for more stories that focus on the positive parts of queer lives rather than the more stressful and often negative experiences such as coming out: "I must admit that I'm reading fiction for … an element of escapism, so I do appreciate seeing worlds where homophobia isn't a thing …. But I just feel like a lot of queer stories, especially in film or TV, are always about coming out. And we get it, we have to come out at some point. But could we not just have stories about where we just live and have a life together?"

In contrast, Sedgwick puts forward her concept of "reparative reading" as a strategy that discards this constant suspicion and instead emphasizes seeking pleasure, comfort, and affirmation in texts, trusting that one will not blindsided by violence (144). She explains, "the desire of a reparative impulse, on the other hand, is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self" (Sedgwick 149). This type of reading strategy involves focusing on hope rather than fear—seeking comfort, affirmation, and understanding in narratives as a means of self-preservation, repairing the damages caused by prejudice, and focusing instead on using the act

of reading as a part of one's own healing. Naturally, it follows that reparative reading would manifest in regards to queer narratives as a kind of openness, calmness, or even celebratory attitude towards queer identity.

It's this type of reparative approach that seems to draw most of my research participants to queer speculative fiction, as they've noticed these stories are less likely to involve plotlines around the continuing harmful issues faced by queer people in daily life. Reading speculative fiction felt safer in many cases because they could feel more confident that they would not be hurt by the same prejudices, and that speculative stories would usually explore different topics. In this sense, queer speculative fiction seems to be a largely reparative category of literature itself. These books do not pretend that everything is perfect and they do not avoid negative and/or queerphobic storylines altogether, but they do involve a privileging of optimism over paranoia—which allows some queer readers a glimpse of hope or a sense of affirmation in a world that is often less than kind.

In this case, escapist reading is a kind of gift to oneself—a pleasant experience, an act of self care, a comforting and solitary activity. It makes sense that readers may often prefer escapist stories that make them feel better and allow them to leave behind their everyday problems and conflicts. To return to Radway's study, the women interviewed stated that they "…believe romance reading enables them to relieve tensions, to diffuse resentment, and to indulge in a fantasy that provides them with good feelings that seem to endure after they return to their role as wives and mothers" (95). Radway also refers to these types of books as "compensatory literature" that provides emotional relief and satisfaction, a strikingly similar concept to Sedgwick's reparative reading (Radway 95). Erin summed this up well, stating that "it's kind of nice to settle into that kind of book and know that there isn't necessarily going to be any queerphobic violence that comes against the characters…just sort of the elements of

envisioning this world where things are a little bit better, where things are sort of normalized… that can definitely be a powerful experience."

3. Personal identification with narratives

Previous chapters have explored how the fantastical narratives of speculative fiction can have a very real impact on how readers think and feel in the present, and especially how these windows into alternate worlds may impact us positively. However, while many readers do seem to benefit from escaping into a story for a time and avoiding reflection on reality, queer speculative fiction can also provide a space that prompts us to look inwards and think about who we are. The experience of seeing elements of ourselves in a character or storyline can have a profound impact on us, in terms of how we understand our own identities as well as how we fit into wider communities and the world.

3.1 Queer narrative empathy

As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, this phenomenon has been examined at length by many scholars of narratology who focus on narrative empathy. It is well-established that the shared feelings and ideas created between readers and narrators, known as narrative empathy, can provide a basis for studying how certain groups of people (for example, people of queer sexualities and gender identities) are impacted by works of fiction (Keen 135). Psychologists have also established that while narrative empathy is a complex experience, readers frequently mimic the actions, expressions, and emotional responses of fictional characters (Keen 128-129). This draws as well on Mark Davis ʾidea of "fantasy empathy", a specific type of empathy that arises from imagining oneself in a fictional situation (Keen 134). While the concept is designed to apply to individuals ʾimaginings, it can also correspond to readers empathizing with the situations that they encounter in a work of fiction. Which characters we empathize with most when reading is typically shaped by our own identities and experiences, and in reading a story it can feel as though one has forged a bond with its character(s) (Keen 142). This bond can be influenced by the reader and the character sharing similar experiences or identities such as, in the case of queer narratives, sharing the same queer

identity or having gone through similar experiences with relationships, gender, solidarity, discrimination, etc. As a result, it's possible for many queer readers of queer speculative fiction to experience narrative empathy in similar ways, appreciate similar storylines, and respond to similar narratives.

In focusing on queer speculative fiction in this thesis, I don't want to suggest that queer realistic fiction is not capable of evoking empathy, or of providing valuable opportunities for reflection and understanding of one's own identity. The way these categories of literature do so, however, is often quite different. So, how is the narrative empathy created by queer speculative fiction unique from that of queer realistic fiction? As discussed in the previous chapter on escapism, since realistic fiction mirrors our reality much more closely it often offers a depiction of queer experiences that are closer to the lives of queer readers. These can be positive experiences, such as this one described by Siân: "One of the things I get from realistic queer fiction is that, because I did figure out [my own queer identity] quite late … I kind of get that high school queer experience I never had. I never really went through any of that … So I think it's kind of nice, every now and then, to touch on reality to get that experience myself."

However, many readers may be less interested in realism because realistic queer stories often include, to some extent, depictions of the discrimination faced by queer people. As a result some they may prefer to avoid such narratives, since they stir up more negative memories of being closeted, struggling to understand their identity in their teenage/young adult years, and/or dealing with bullying, harassment, or violence. Erin explained," Queer realistic YA tends to get my hackles up a little bit … if [the characters are] existing in a world that is so entirely different than our own I don't have to worry about that kind of thing as much, and it doesn't bring up some negative experiences from my own high school life." Lerina specifically noted that for a long time she had difficulty reading queer coming-of-age stories:

> When I first was kind of coming to terms with my sexuality …. It was harder for me to read contemporary stuff about characters because it would hit really hard. It would hit

> way too close to home and I almost would have to put the book down for a while, sit with myself and realize how I wasn't okay … It was interesting how I could totally read it in fantasy and I couldn't read it in contemporary for a while. I kind of preferred having a completely different world from my own rather than reading something based in my world.

As a result, the escapist spaces of queer speculative fiction can feel like a more comfortable setting for many readers to reflect on both queer identity in general as well as how queerness features in their own lives.

3.2 Learning from queer literature

As I discussed with Haraway's writings on the the creation of worlds in fiction, fictional narratives can influence our perception of our own world and how we reflect on our reality. Peel also explores these relationships of causality between readers and texts, and suggested that queer narratives could be an important tool for readers to learn about queerness (349-352). While her work did not exclusively refer to queer readers, Rothbauer's did, and her interview-based research suggested that reading is an under-studied factor in how young (between 18 and 23 years old) queer, lesbian, and bisexual women navigate their sexualities (53). She found that her participants found reading queer stories as a "non-risky way to explore alternative possibilities" to heterosexuality (Rothbauer 53):

> [P]articipants wanted books that informed their perspectives on their present and future understanding of what it meant to claim a lesbian, bisexual, or queer identity. They wanted to read materials that expanded their understanding of their social worlds and their possible movements through it …. Readers were looking for models of identity, examples of behavior that reflected possibilities for their own lives. Participants talked about reading as a way to centre their own experiences…by showing them that there were others such as themselves, others who felt and acted in similar ways, and others who gave them permission to act as they did… (63-65)

This examination of the role of reading in the lives of these queer young women illustrated how queer fiction could constitute a means of both learning about queerness and resisting the heteronormativity around them.

I asked my own participants about their earliest exposure to queer literature and whether they felt it impacted them. Most participants agreed that beginning to read queer literature

prompted a process of gaining interest in the subject, learning more about and empathizing with queerness, and eventually assisting to some extent in their own personal queer journey of self-understanding. Lerina said that her earliest memories of reading queer books were from

> "before I was ready to have a conversation with myself about anything queer to do with myself. [But] I definitely think that having those characters in there kind of reminded me … even just in the back of my mind … you know, this is acceptable. This is something that is good and is loving, and stuff like that definitely like helped me when I got older and [began thinking about her own queerness]."

Cam also explained that while they had not yet begun to understand their own queerness at the time, reading popular young adult and middle grade urban fantasy series such as *The Mortal Instruments* series and the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series—which are about demon hunters and demigods, respectively, and both feature queer minor characters—were important in that they provided positive representations of queer people to counter negative ideas and stereotypes Cam had noticed elsewhere. Those two series in particular were mentioned by multiple participants (four mentioning *The Mortal Instruments* and two mentioning *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*) as some of the earliest examples of queer representation they could recall reading. Other interviewees had similar responses, such as Alyazia describing that they see queer literature as "an eye opener to different possibilities, different types of characters and different types of identities", and Mary Katerine mentioning that when reading Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*—the first queer novel she had read—she did not at the time consider the possibility of her own queerness, but did feel more aware of the opportunities for queer storytelling that are out there. Erin also mentioned *The Song of Achilles*, as one of the first novels she read featuring queer main characters—it's a popular historical fantasy novel that retells Homer's *Iliad*, centering on the ultimately tragic romance between Achilles and Patroclus.

Rachel felt that since the first book they read about queer characters was *Carry On* by Rainbow Rowell—a loose parody of the *Harry Potter* series that features a romance between

the two boys vaguely inspired by Harry and Draco—was not written by a queer author, they didn't feel as strong of a reaction to reading it as they might have. "It couldn't really tell you all that much about queer identity other than, this is a white straight woman writing gay characters. Cool. But as I went more deeply, reading books by Leah Johnson, by Rin Chupeco and Adam Silvera and all those amazing queer, LGBTQ authors, I started to think, 'Huh, I don't feel straight completely. Nor do I feel completely female.'" Realizing their own queerness was a more gradual process that came about as they read a more diverse range of queer fiction, both realistic and speculative, that was written by openly queer authors.

While not every queer book mentioned by participants fell into the category of speculative fiction, the majority did. My research only includes a small pool of participants so I can't extrapolate their responses to wider trends, but it was interesting that even when asked about queer literature of any genre, many of their earliest memories of reading about queer characters came from minor characters featured in a few particular popular fantasy series. It's also intriguing that these first exposures occurred while reading books geared towards a younger audience—while it makes sense given the enormous popularity of the two series mentioned and the age of the participants that these would be some of the earliest queer characters they came across, I also wonder about the possible impact of first coming across queer representation as a teenager or child versus first coming across it as an adult. This was not an explicit question I asked in interviews, but nearly everyone I spoke to mentioned having been a reader of speculative fiction since childhood and that it was their preferred type of fiction to read. I'm curious about to what extent this lifelong interest impacts queer readers engagement with queer speculative fiction as an adult, as I imagine it might offer an even greater sense of emotional validation and support for queer readers to see people like them play the main roles in the kinds of fantastical stories they had enjoyed since childhood.

Three of the interviews also touched specifically on ties between queerness and fairytales. The earliest memory Cam has of reading a queer story is about a fairytale they read as a child. It was the story of a girl, they explained, who wanted to become a knight and dressed as a man, and was eventually transformed into a more masculine body as well by a magical spell before marrying a princess. While they weren't sure what the author's intentions were behind this very queer-coded children's story, Cam mentioned that the memory of reading it really stayed with them, although they didn't quite understand why until reflecting back on it now as a nonbinary lesbian. Sîan had a similar story of reading a short story about mermaids as a young child, and coming across a scene that showed a potential romance between two young girls. She expressed appreciation for seeing queer representation in this particular category of fairytales and folk tales, since queerness is often considered an adult concept and it can be rare to see depictions of queer children. Cebrina also brought up fairytales, specifically in regards to the queer potential of retellings. In her own academic research she has studied several modern examples of these, and she enjoys seeing traditional stories she heard as a child reinvented in a more inclusive way.

This range of thoughtful responses illustrates the many ways that queer narratives can impact their readers: these stories may act as a tool for learning about the existence of queer people and identities, and in some cases provide support at a later time for those who do end up questioning their gender and/or sexuality.

3.3 Reading queer speculative fiction as self-affirmation

For some readers, the experience of reading queer fiction has had a more direct and immediate impact on how they see themselves, contributing to their own self-understanding and comfort in their identity. Several people I spoke with mentioned works of speculative literature that have helped them gain confidence in their queerness and provided a kind of affirmation. It can provide a deeply personal sense of satisfaction and validation for queer

people to read about protagonists that resemble them, and see themselves at the center of a story. For the people I interviewed, this seemed to mostly occur when reading queer lit that specifically represented their own identities—they enjoyed other queer narratives to varying extents, but didn't feel as deep of a strong personal reaction. For instance, Lena mentioned that the queer horror novel *Wilder Girls* by Rory Power helped her realize that she's bisexual: "It gave me a frame of reference and gave me the tools to see myself for the first time." In addition to appreciating this story as an example she could use to contextualize her own experiences, Lena also explained that they served as a sort of bridge towards further discussions of her sexuality with other people in her life, especially one of her closest friends:

> "I actually just started lending her all the queer books I had. At some point it became a bit obvious—'So, did you notice I only lend you queer books anymore, and that I only talk about gay books, and just queerness in general?' 'Yeah I thought there was something up with it, I thought you were a great ally.' … So that was a really great way to find the words and start the communication and coming out to her…"

Through recommending and discussing these fictional narratives, Lena was able to gauge her friend's reaction to queer topics and work her way up to coming out to her.

Additionally, multiple women mentioned primarily encountering queer fiction about male/male relationships at first, and not relating to these stories until they came across more works of sapphic fiction (depicting romantic/sexual relationships between two women). As Siân said," I'd read queer characters before but I've never really related to them. I think reading a story with [a romance between] these two women… I think it didn't really change how I how I saw myself, but it was one of the things that solidified my [queer] identity and reinforced how my identity still fit, and that I wasn't just imagining it." Of course, this connection to characters with similar identities was dependent on being able to find stories with such criteria. Since queer experiences are so vast and varied and frequently overlap with other parts of an individual's identity, several participants specifically mentioned that they have not yet found a story that closely reflects their own queerness.

As discussed in the first chapter, and as illustrated previously by studies on feminist science fiction, readers have a sense of satisfaction when they feel they can easily fit themselves into the position of the protagonist or narrator of a story. Claggett supports this idea, suggesting that this makes the reading experience more personal and it follows that these stories also function as a conscious or subconscious validation of queer people's identities (356-357). While characters are narrative devices, not people, they can have an impact on readers through the narrative empathy they inspire. Narratives can, in this sense, potentially serve as a tool to help queer people feel more secure in their gender and sexuality—another purpose they fill in their role as reparative texts.

3.4 Empowerment through reading and empathy

This process of narrative empathy and reassurance can thus also contribute to a feeling of empowerment. Queer narratives can be defined as examples of counterstories, a term first developed in critical race theory to discuss the unique qualities of stories about marginalized people. In his 1989 article, "Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative", Delgado defines a counterstory as a narrative from a member of an "out-group" that has the potential to challenge the status quo. "Counterstories," he writes, "…open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live" (2414). As such, they hold significant value for the members of the minority groups they represent. These "members of out-groups can use stories in two basic ways: first, as means of psychic self-preservation, and second, as means of lessening their own subordination" (2436). Through examples of storytelling from the perspectives of racial minority groups in the United States, he asserts that the narratives contribute to empowerment by reassuring readers that they are not alone in their experiences, and even giving them hope and confidence through stories of similar characters defying their circumstances and resisting the discrimination they face.

While Delgado's concepts and definitions are useful for discussions of narrative, his conclusions tend towards somewhat lofty overgeneralizations about the broader impact of stories. In" Empathy and 1970s novels by Third World women", Kim offers both a keen critique of this oversight and a strategy for incorporating greater nuance moving forward. While research on empathy has been driven by interest in its potential impact on morals and ethics, Kim stresses the need to acknowledge that this impact is not always a given result (149). So, what does empathy do? Some argue that since empathy produces a sense of sameness, it also serves to bridge the gap between different people. Kim explains that this is an oversimplification, as the process of creating a sense of sameness is not always useful, and often ignores the systems that construct and perpetuate difference between people (149). For instance, a white person reading a story about a Black character might feel empathy if both have experienced an abusive relationship, but the white reader could still fail to acknowledge the systemic racism that exacerbates hardships experienced by Black people. Characters whose experiences and behaviors do not fit neatly into dominant social narratives may also be less likely to receive empathy from readers in the first place if their ways of thinking, behaving, and narrating are different—Kim provides examples of autistic people who often do not respond to situations in the same ways as neurotypical people, or women of color who may be perceived as having less intellectual and emotional complexity than their male and/or white counterparts (Kim 151). These examples run counter to Delgado's idealistic vision of counterstories driving social change.

Still, Kim does believe that counterstories can be productive in some contexts. Her own studies examined the impact of novels by "Third World women" on readers—while "Third World" is considered by now an anachronistic, oversimplified, and unhelpful term, Kim's studies are primarily concerned with literature from the 1970s when it was more commonly used. According to reader responses, she writes that the narrative empathy can be shown to

have produced "notable social change by crossing and changing existing borders between different groups of women" (Kim 148). "Empathy in reading literature can produce meaningful social change when it is linked to an understanding that ostensibly individual emotions are tied to cognition, ideology, and social structures, as well as to social-political movements beyond the text, but to which the text refers and in which it participates" (Kim 151). How much narrative empathy can contribute to social change is shaped by the type of empathy, as well as the historical context, institutions, and other larger societal factors involved in the context of the reader and narrator. While the narrative empathy created by third world women's novels in the 1970s is not necessarily a direct tool for social change, Kim believes that it did create a sense of empathy and understanding within many readers of what this political category signified and the experiences that women with in it had had. In addition, the concept of empathy itself should be viewed as a broad and complex feeling, that can manifest to varying extents and impact each reader in different ways. Kim concludes that narrative empathy is a useful tool but not a universal rule, and should be considered in conjunction with other factors influencing reader response to narratives.

With this in mind, I looked at examples from interviews of specific stories that inspired strong empathy in readers. There were a number of moments when participants spoke passionately about how they felt a bond with the characters and/or stories through a sense of shared identity. For instance, Chaima mentioned that reading Anna-Marie McLemore's magical realism novels *Blanca & Roja* and *When the Moon Was Ours* was their first encounter with any content that portrayed nonbinary and transgender identity in a way that they connected to, and offered a more nuanced understanding of what it meant to feel as though you don't quite fit into your assigned gender.

> The fact that throughout the story, [one of the the main characters] Page constantly hardens himself by choosing to lock out everyone else, and you know, that ugly stripe of self-preservation that is often born out of disappointment and fear and weariness…And part of Page's arc is learning to stop layering cynicism and distrust

> upon her life, stop thinking it futile to alter a pattern when fear had already carved so deep a path…As a queer Muslim, this really struck me and it's still a lesson I'm turning over in my head, trying to learn the shape of it. And it was so, so validating and reassuring to know that there are characters that reflect real people that have struggled with the same thing and experienced the same thing. It's just really reassuring.

Mary Katerine described connecting deeply to *The Priory of the Orange Tree*'s queer main character with lifelong chronic depression. "As a person who has been depressed for, well, most of their life, it just comforted me to see myself in another character." While *The Priory of the Orange Tree*'s overarching plot may at first seem like a typical, vaguely medieval epic fantasy featuring dragons and adventures across continents and seas, the novel features a romance between two women at its center, with one of the women very clearly portrayed as struggling with lifelong episodes of severe chronic depression.

When asked about which characters she saw aspects of her own identity in, Erin pointed to the asexual representation in *Every Heart A Doorway* by Seanan McGuire:

> Nancy … is the protagonist of the first book, and they talk at some length about the fact that she is asexual and what that means for her. That was after I had realized that I was asexual so it didn't necessarily provide an element of self discovery necessarily, but it was a nice piece of like, 'Oh, okay, it's nice to see that like people like me exist in these fictional worlds.' Because I definitely grew up reading a lot of those fantasy (and science fiction to a slightly lesser extent) stories where all the characters basically were heterosexual. It's different being able to see yourself or people like you in a story for sure…

Although Erin came across this story after she already understood her own asexuality, she still found it rewarding to read because of how rarely asexual characters appear in fantasy (or, to be honest, in any genre).

A similar experience brought up by a few participants was the fact that they sometimes also felt a strong sense of connection to a book partly on the basis of knowing that the author is queer. They could find a sense of solidarity and comfort in supporting the work of a queer creator even if they didn't feel a sense of connection to the fiction narrative or the characters it contained. As Rachel mentioned, she only began to connect to queer stories on a deeper level when reading books by openly queer writers. Olivia also mentioned specifically that she often

will discuss and recommend books with lesbian content even if they aren't about a topic that typically interests her, as well as suggesting that when she reads speculative fiction by lesbian/sapphic authors, she feels more predisposed towards enjoying the book because of the underlying sense of common identity shared with the writer:

> I definitely very much enjoyed *Gideon the Ninth*. But there, it was more a connection to the author—Tamsyn Muir is a lesbian and she was at a convention in London that I happened to be at … and I bought the book to get it signed. I don't normally go for hyped books, but for this one the tagline was 'lesbian necromancers in space' and I was like 'Okay, sold, I need this book.' I met her and we talked for a few minutes. I really liked that book to the point where it's possible I wouldn't have liked it as much if I hadn't felt a connection with the author…

3.5 Comparison to depictions of other identity categories

As part of this research, I also wanted to give participants the chance to discuss any other types of representation—such as ethnicity, religion, disability, etc.— that had struck a chord with them in speculative fiction. Queer identity, naturally, doesn't exist in a vacuum, so I wanted to talk about how it fit in with and compared to participants' other experiences of literary understanding, empathy, and recognition. Many interviewees had a lot to share about this, and agreed that seeing stories in which characters shared multiple identities with the reader were even more impactful.

For example, both Cam and Lerina mentioned the many queer Latine main characters featured in the contemporary and fantasy novels of Adam Silvera. In Silvera's novel, *What If It's Us*, Lerina recalled a scene in which one of the main characters describes his experience of growing up as Puerto Rican in New York, and specifically the nuances of being a white-passing Latine person:

> …I look white but I also am, you know, a Latina … I benefit from that white privilege but also I don't want to ignore the other side of me and [this scene] really spoke to me, that's pretty much exactly my experience—I'm half Puerto Rican and half Irish. … I can pass as pretty much any kind of European descent person and I benefit from having a very pale face, but it also feels like a sort of erasure to say, "Oh yeah, I'm just white." I am very proud of my Puerto Rican heritage and that side of my family is visibly darker, they cannot pass for white. So I really enjoy kind of seeing that talked about in his novels as well … this is not only a queer romance book, we're also gonna talk about

> identity and ethnicity and things like that. …it includes so many magnitudes in 300 pages.

Although Cam is from Argentina, they still felt a level of connection to Silvera's queer Latine characters, explaining, "…[the characters] felt more like family, like I knew them. They were important to me because it was my community."

Cebrina spoke about a queer fantasy book inspired by a Danish fairytale that felt very close to her heart:

> I have this book called *The Raven and the Reindeer* by T. Kingfisher, which is a retelling of the Danish fairytale of. H.C. Andersen's "The Snow Queen". In this book the main character falls in love with [another female character]… and it was just great to see a fairytale that I read as I grew up because it's Danish, and I'm Danish, and H.C. Andersen is such a big part of Danish culture. Seeing this fairytale represent something that I somehow identify with is just really really great.

Quite a lot of English-language fantasy fiction is influenced by a Tolkien-esque idea of historical (and usually medieval) Europe that homogenizes a diverse continent into a narrow vision of the past. As such, much of what we consider European-inspired fantasy is merely that—a fantasy—and while European cultures are more often represented than those from areas of the Global South, literature that draws from individual European cultures is often still lacking. Although the author of *The Raven and the Reindeer* is American, Cebrina still really felt that the book was a well-written retelling that made space for queerness within the familiar setting of a story she grew up with.

Chaima had a lot to say in response to this question as well, beginning with a discussion of the queer Muslim characters in Kiersten White's *The Conqueror's Saga* that had had a powerful impact on them:

> Whenever I think about [that series] I just feel this sense of expansiveness in my chest that reminds me of how absolutely vital those voices are for readers like us. It's hard to capture that feeling in a few words. You know, the feeling of reaching and finding, and someone reaching out for you and finding you, too. … What I remember most about [the main character's] experiences as a Muslim, as a queer Muslim, is just that sort of weariness and churning fear that sits deep in your gut… This book introduced for me, for the first time, the possibility of having a happy ending when you are queer and Muslim…That was just earth-shattering.

Especially for people living at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, it can be rare to find narratives that portray characters like you not only existing but thriving and finding happiness. While *The Conquerer's Saga*, a series inspired by the real history of Vlad the Impaler, maintains its historical setting, it presents a speculative alternate history in which characters who are queer, Muslim, and female hold enough power to both shape the course of the world and build a supportive and loving found family.

Chaima also brought up Somaiya Daud's *Mirage* novels, a queer Moroccan-inspired sci-fi series that draws from recent Moroccan history. Morocco's "Years of Lead", lasting from the 1960s to 1980s under Hassan II, are known as a dark, oppressive period characterized, in Chaima's words, by "very violent crackdowns against democracy activism and dissent that ranged from poetic expression to insisting on the recognition of Morocco's many indigenous groups." Daud's novel incorporates elements of this history into a science fiction setting—a colonized solar system in which indigenous peoples are resisting harsh imperialist rule.

> [A]s an indigenous person as well as a Moroccan," Chaima explained, "[the novel] was very hard-hitting. *Mirage* was also interesting because it also addresses the enduring wounds of colonialism, and appropriation, and injustice, and suppression, and erasures. The experiences of prejudice and structural inequalities draw a very vivid parallel with our world. … It was good on many levels—the pacing, the compelling storylines…but [especially] the fact that it draws from my history, that it gives so much validation to indigenous groups.

As mentioned once before, this discussion also comes with the consideration that not all readers have had the chance to see themselves so clearly in a story, or have only found that in a very small number of texts. All of the participants that have, though, clearly had a strong emotional reaction to these narratives. These were powerful stories to come across, and the empathy interviewees felt for the characters seems to have contributed to creating the kind of affirmation, support and hope that Delgado suggests counterstories are capable of providing.

4. Queer speculative fiction and online communities

The action of reading words on a page may be a solitary experience, but most readers don't finish a book and then never speak of it again. Even if it's only to complain about the ending to a friend or recommend the book to a classmate, social interactions and community can constitute an important part of a reader's experience with a particular text. As part of the interviews I conducted, I asked participants if they were involved in any kind of reading communities, and where they went—or who they went to—to discuss books and hear other people's opinions.

4.1 The draw of online reading communities

Almost all participants had some level of involvement in online book communities, whether they only tend to follow a handful of reviewers or accounts or are actively involved themselves in discussing and recommending literature on social media and other discussion platforms. This was to be expected, since most of the participants were recruited through social media, but they often noted that before becoming active in online communities, they mostly were far less aware of the queer speculative fiction out there, and often didn't hear about books outside of the mainstream bestsellers. It's also common for queer people in general who feel isolated in their physical surroundings/location to seek out community and friendship online. Leanna Lucero's 2017 study interviewed queer teenagers regarding their use of social media, and her findings "suggest that social media have become a safe space for … LGBTQ youth to explore issues of sexuality and gender" (117). While she was focusing on social media more generally, her participants were overwhelmingly much more comfortable being openly queer and discussing queer topics online, and felt uncomfortable or unsafe doing so in person. Stephen T. Russell's research on the difficulties encountered by queer youth also emphasizes the importance of online communities, stating that "[t]he Internet has provided sexual minority

youth with a safe place in which to explore identities, come out to one another, and tell their stories" (261).

Since widespread use of social media is still a relatively recent phenomenon, this pattern of queer people using the internet to find community is most applicable for current and recent young adults and teenagers. My own results seem to fit into this trend. Most of the people I spoke to were young adults between the ages of 18 and 25, who pretty much all found their way into queer online reading communities to some extent around the time they also realized they were queer. These spaces can exist on reviewing sites such as Goodreads or Storygraph, on blogs or YouTube channels dedicated to book-related content, in social circles on social media sites like Twitter and Instagram, or in chat servers on the messaging platform Discord, among many more possibilities. Erin described, "A lot of my early forays into queer genre fiction were from recommendations from other people, whether that was people that I knew on Tumblr originally, now on Twitter… the social networks change over time." Chaima mentioned that discovering online reading communities through—at first—Goodreads was "groundbreaking" to them when they were learning about and trying to understand their own queerness, because the website provided both recommendations of queer books and reviews and discussions from other queer people. Finding this sense of community gave them "an outlet where you can let it all out" (Chaima). Other interviewees, such as Olivia, didn't join these communities until they were adults and already certain of their queer identity. Olivia explained that she first began reading online book blogs and reviews when she was around 30 and had already been out as a lesbian for some time. Most of her exposure to queer media before that had been with queer characters on television shows and in film, and she considers social media an important platform for finding out about new queer speculative books as well as for supporting queer authors.

Since speculative fiction tends to be more of a niche genre—and queer speculative fiction especially so—online reading communities have been useful in helping queer readers discover the literature that is out there. Interestingly, these patterns were quite similar to those that Rothbauer and Radway observed developing within in-person communities of readers. Although Radway's study of romance novel readers was conducted in the 1980s and centered on a group of women in a single town, some of her findings observed similar trends in how genre fiction readers in a particular location began sharing book recommendations, discussing their thoughts on what they had read, and coming together to build a sense of community (96-97). The women interviewed felt that both the literature they were reading and the discussions they had about it amongst themselves provided them with a greater belief in their own strength, and a sense of reassurance that they deserved to be treated with respect by their husbands and families. While these influences seemed to impact each woman individually, Radway noted that they seemed more likely to be thoroughly understood and recognized when they were also discussed within groups of readers. Rothbauer, on the other hand, was writing in 2004 when social media and online communities were still relatively small compared to today. Although she was focused on local, in-person communities of queer readers, her conclusions still feel applicable to the current reading communities that have developed online. "Reading is seen as a vehicle of access to community and to a related sense of social connectedness … These connections lead to a second reading ground: the creation of ideological space that permits the open expression and exploration of lesbian and queer identities" (Rothbauer 66). Clearly, these are quite different contexts compared to my own research, but nonetheless I was struck by the similar experiences of solidarity that participants found in communities of like-minded readers, and how these experiences seemed to enhance the escapism, understanding, and empowerment found in the narratives referenced.

4.2 Online reading communities as spaces for recommendations and discussion

For comparison, the primary reasons my interviewees participated in online reading communities were to get book recommendations from other like-minded readers, and to find spaces to discuss and share content related to the literature they had enjoyed. Every participant had some level of contact with online networks, communities, and forums for discussing books, and specifically with the niches of these online spaces where one can find posts and information about queer speculative fiction. At the very least, they sometimes utilized these websites or apps to keep up with popular reviewers, authors, and/or fandoms. For instance, Cebrina and Cam have a smaller amount of engagement online, following some reviewers and finding book recommendations from reviews but preferring to stick to "the sidelines" (Cebrina) and not post much themselves.

While for some interviewees, their participation in these communities is minimal, just over half of the participants (Rachel, Lena, Chaima, Mary Katerine, Olivia, Alyazia, Erin) are more active online—replying to reviews or blogs, creating their own posts and other content, and/or generally taking part in recommendations and discussions. Rachel spends time on a number of platforms, posting their own book reviews on Goodreads and getting recommendations from Instagram and Youtube as well. They also mentioned a NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month)-affiliated Discord server for writers, where they spend a lot of time chatting with other people interested in reading and writing queer fantasy fiction. In the future, they hope to publish a fantasy fiction podcast that they and their friends are currently working on. Lena also feels more comfortable engaging in discussions of queer literature online because it feels like a safe space to talk about queer content:

> I hang out a bit in the *Gideon the Ninth/Harrow the Ninth* fandom and *The Traitor Baru* fandom which sort of have started overlapping a bit. It's just a lot of people yelling over each other out of joy, you don't really know people but you just tweet at each other and it's like, I don't know you but you … are also a gay person who has found happiness in these books. This can be a safe place in a way, you can just be your full queer self without having to think about how others might react…

She went on to say that she really trusts the word of many people she knows/follows online better because of this space for open discussion:

> It's just nice to see people—when you know that they're queer or that they really have a great reading taste—when they recommend books it's always like, 'Oh okay, this is a safe recommendation.'… If a straight friend of mine recommended books to me I would not necessarily trust them to always identify issues and it could potentially be triggering and something I get upset about….

Some readers who become highly involved in reviewing and discussing books in these communities also end up building a large platform. Over the course of about four years of reviewing books online, Chaima now has a following of more than 170,000 across their Twitter account, Goodreads profile, and book blog. As they explained, their early engagement on these sites provided an important outlet for discovering more queer literature and figuring out their own identity. They found Goodreads and Twitter communities in particular to be a safe and anonymous space for learning about queer lit and queerness and later started their own blog, Books With Chaima:

> So I was sort of in the beginning just walking in the dark, fumbling in the dark, trying to understand who I am and where I stand. But now as someone who has a decent following…I don't only read queer books for myself but I also read it for an audience that needs it and hopefully finds comfort in it. And I make sure to tag which queer identity is mentioned, which representation is mentioned, and if it's main representation—whether the main characters are queer or just side characters. So now I feel this responsibility to introduce books to people that might need them, like I once was in need of these books to understand who I am and navigate my own identity.

As Chaima explains, their involvement with online reading communities has always been an important part of their experience as a queer reader, and the popularity of their posts and reviews does indeed benefit other queer readers. Two other interviewees—Sîan and Cebrina—mentioned Chaima's blog, Goodreads, and Twitter specifically among the main places they go online to get queer literature recommendations and generally see more posts about queer media.

4.3 Experiences in online vs in-person reading communities

While all participants felt that they had been involved to some extent in online reading communities, less than half also mentioned having a similar type of in-person reading community. Cam, Alyazia, Erin, Lerina, Lena, and Rachel mentioned groups, friends or courses in person that were also highly important for them in addition to online spaces. For Cam and Lena, both had a close friend who they usually talked about books with. In addition to their own involvement with discussions of books in online communities, Alyazia and Lerina both had some type of in-person book club. Lerina's book club includes a number of her friends, and often provides a space for her to discuss queer stories and characters in depth in a friendly, casual setting. Alyazia is the president of the reading club at their university, which has become a wonderful space for them to discuss queer stories with other queer people. "I've made a lot of queer friends who I didn't know were queer in my university, and was introduced to a lot of great fiction and poetry and prose and things that deal with the difficulties of living in a very private culture," they said. As mentioned, Rachel is currently writing a podcast with a group of friends, and Erin currently co-hosts her own reading podcast, Brodacious Book Club, with a friend, where they regularly share opinions about the books they read. Erin also pointed to a queer literature class she was able to take at university as a valuable experience in exposure to more queer stories.

Having an in-person community to share reading experiences with can be an important experience for queer readers. However, not everyone is able to find such a group. Some queer readers may simply not have friends with the same specific interests, while others may not feel comfortable broaching the topic of queer literature—and by extension, queerness itself—with their in-person friends. Although Lena has a close friend she feels comfortable talking with, she also mentioned, "It's definitely scarier in real life to just talk about [queerness and queer media] because online if there's a bad reaction I could just log off, never go on Twitter ever again. And it's difficult to do that with people [in person]." Mary Katerine explained that they

don’t have as much access to physical books in Romania, so online is how they get most of their recommendations. Since not many of their local friends share their interest in queer speculative fiction, they tend to mostly discuss books with friends online in different countries. Alyazia also discussed having very limited access to books for most of their childhood, and that it wasn’t until they were older and had more access to social media and ebooks that they became more interested in reading.

Online reading communities can be more accessible to many readers, as well as more comfortable for people who are closeted, still figuring out their identity and/or living in a place where it isn’t safe to be openly queer. Regardless of why readers seek them out, though, they can be an especially useful tool for finding trustworthy book recommendations, especially for queer speculative literature that rarely gains mainstream popularity. For some participants, these communities also seem to provide an extension of the kind of reassurance and comfort gained from reading the stories themselves—it can be a rewarding experience to hear from and communicate with other queer readers who also found solace and affirmation in realms of fantasy.

Conclusion

This paper has been a fascinating, exciting, and personal undertaking that I'm truly proud of. In writing this thesis, I set out to investigate what draws queer readers to speculative fiction, what they like about these narratives, and what they feel can be gained from the experience of reading. Conducting interview-based research necessitates a somewhat intimidating amount of coordination in recruiting participants, scheduling interviews, and transcribing data. The interviews themselves, though, were a joy to participate in. Especially in a year like this, the chance to speak with a group of queer readers from around the world about why stories matter to us was a lovely experience to have.

Everyone I spoke with was in agreement that speculative fiction is a unique category of literature in terms of the new worlds it creates and invites readers to step inside of. The desire to escape into stories of epic fantasy and futuristic sci-fi is a common one, and participants felt they could rely on speculative narratives to provide that break from reality. Although the concept of literary escapism may be dismissed by critics as a silly hobby or pastime, it can have very real benefits—giving queer readers a much-needed break from the harsher parts of life. While stories dealing with the heavy issues of queerphobia that they encounter in reality can offer catharsis and validation, many participants expressed that they find comfort and a sense of peace in reading queer stories that are more removed from reality. After all, if speculative fiction can imagine a world where dragons are real or people travel at light speed through the universe, why shouldn't some of these stories of infinite possibility envision a world where queerness is destigmatized, common, or even celebrated?

In addition to the desire for escape, though, I wanted to know if any of these stories did have an impact on how participants understood queerness in reality. When I asked, I received a wide range of responses. For some, they encountered queerness in books long before they recognized it in themselves, while others didn't come across queer written narratives until long

after they had come out. A few cited specific books as critical in helping them understand their sexuality, or even in helping them explain their identity to others. Another common thread through many of these stories was that reading about queer characters made them seen and comfortable in who they are, as well as forging a sense of solidarity with other queer readers and even authors.

I initially didn't intend to spend a whole chapter discussing online reading communities, but as I reviewed my notes from the interviews I noticed just how often the conversation touched on reading as a community experience rather than just an individual one. Internet communities are themselves a complex and still relatively recent phenomenon that I don't have the space to examine in depth here, but it seems that using online spaces to seek out both queer speculative fiction—and sometimes, online friends to discuss it with—is a more common experience than seeking out reading communities in person.

As I discussed in my first chapter, the surge in feminist science fiction is well-documented and sparked a proliferation of literature on what it meant for both science fiction and feminism. While there are many writers out there discussing the rise of queer speculative fiction, it's still a much smaller field of study and I hope to do my part in contributing to it. In researching relevant literature for this project, I also grew more intrigued by the concept of ethnographies of reading, such as Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*. As a lifelong lover of books trained in ethnographic research rather than literary analysis—as well as someone who has worked in book publishing for several years—I find myself drawn more to studies of readers than studies of texts themselves. This is a complex area of research that involves narratology, queer theory, ethnography, and so many more areas of study. If I have the opportunity for further research, I would love to survey a wider audience of readers on these subjects. In particular, I think it would be interesting to survey a larger group of readers active in online communities to see how their responses line up with this study. Because of my

professional background in publishing, I'm also intrigued by the idea of looking at this from a more business-minded, anticapitalist perspective—as more works of queer speculative fiction become mainstream bestsellers, how will this influence the kinds of stories and authors that get published? Furthermore, how might this impact the existing networks of small-scale indie publishers, self publishing, and the communities of readers who often play a major role in promoting these lesser-known books?

In addition to these considerations, there is a long and well-documented history of people seeking catharsis, utopia, and reflections of themselves through literature, and I especially wonder how true this has been over the past year as the world has dealt with an ongoing global crisis. As I came to the end of writing this paper, I was reminded of a virtual panel I watched last year, several months after CEU's classes had gone online and governments had imposed lockdowns around the world. Titled "Fantasy in Times of Crisis" and hosted (virtually, of course) at Pembroke College, Oxford, the event featured a number of prominent fantasy authors speaking at length on the connections between their craft and the state of the world. One of the remarks from Victoria Schwab, a queer fantasy author, has stayed with me and feels especially relevant as I reflect on this thesis and this year:

> I write to create mirrors and doors. I write to create doorways out of our world, and I write to create mirrors so that people can see themselves in positions of power—positions they don't already see themselves in. I think as dark as my stories are, those are very hopeful positions. And what we need in darker times, I think, is hope. … I'm finding a lot of readers reaching out to me right now, and they're grateful to have escapism [and] ways to step out of this world … My stories have been, and are, and I imagine for the future will be stories about taking people from the edges of the narrative and putting them at the center…. And growing up queer, growing up closeted and growing up not happy in your skin…I think that we need those stories. … I write what I want to read from a place of hope…. (Schwab 45:07-46:31)

Stories can be especially important to us in difficult times. They provide opportunities for escape, and opportunities for reflection. I can't speak for everyone, but in a year of grief and loneliness, I've found a certain amount of solace in narratives that imagine the world

differently, in which I can find people who live and love like me at the center of their own stories.

Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Out of the books you tend to read, can you tell me generally what proportion are speculative fiction/queer speculative fiction?

2. What do you enjoy about this category/genre of books?

3. Do you remember the first work of queer speculative fiction you read?

4. Did it have any personal impact on how you understood yourself, or queer identity more generally?

5. Have you come across any queer characters from speculative fiction you relate to, and why?

6. Are there any speculative fiction books that you feel helped you understand your own queer identity? What about other identity categories than queer (ex. religion, ethnicity, etc.)?

7. Do you react differently when reading speculative fiction set in worlds where discrimination against queer people doesn't exist as compared to ones where it does?

8. Do you feel that queer speculative fiction has a different impact on you as a reader from queer realistic/contemporary fiction?

9. Does your involvement in any reading communities (online or in person) impact your relationship with queer speculative fiction?

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