

PhD thesis

Imagination at the progressive border: can fantasy literature foster a liminal space for social justice-oriented narrative-based belief change in the individual?

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**Imagination at the Progressive Border: Can Fantasy Literature Foster a Liminal Space for
Social Justice-Oriented Narrative-Based Belief Change in the Individual?**

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A thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of PhD in English Literature

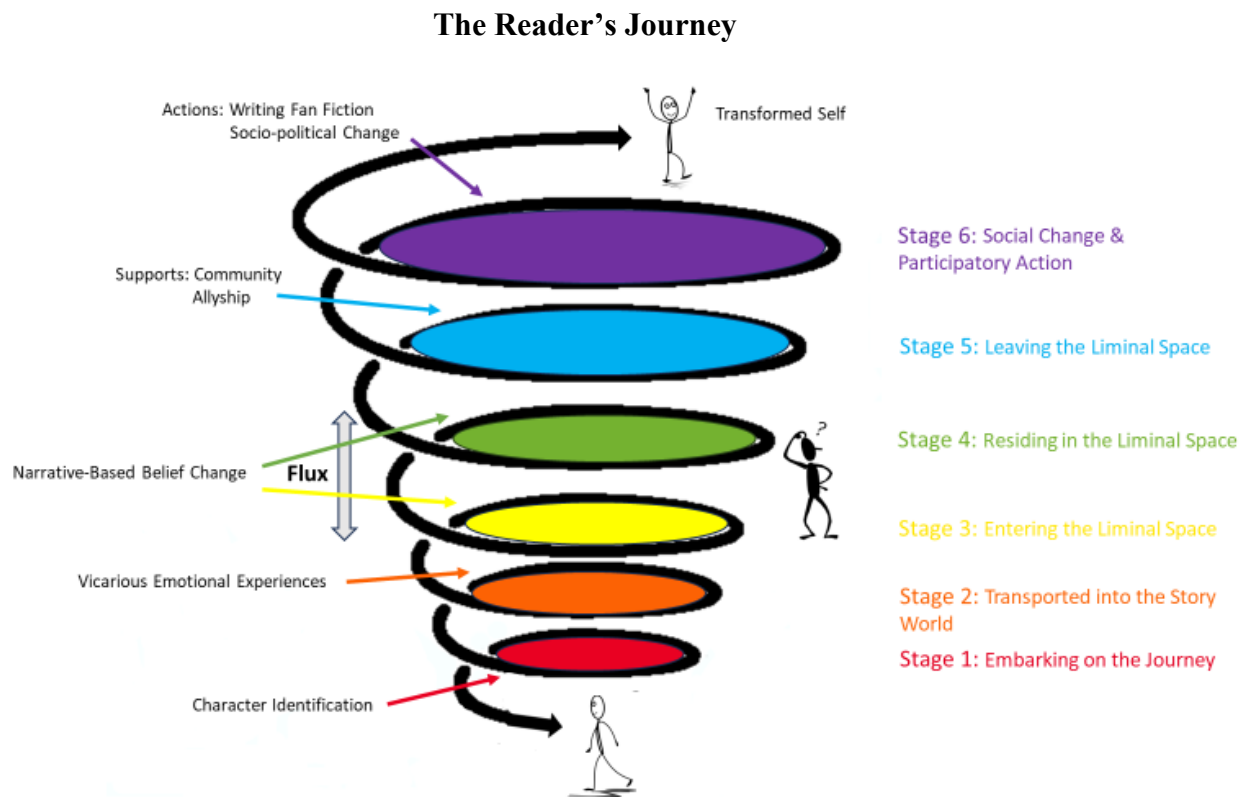
Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries

August 2024

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Abstract

Contemporary scholars such as Baker (2012), Bould (2002), Dalton (2019), Grifka-Wander (2019) and Trębicki (2011) have discussed how fantasy literature responds to the time in which it is created and the way in which it can introduce ideas about progressive change. Drobot (2019) also suggests that fantasy novels help us think about the past and how societal beliefs and values have changed and can still change. All of the aforementioned argue that fantasy stories can lead to shifts in what individuals and society believe.

In spite of these arguments, however, there is still a gap in researching *how* fantasy literature, specifically, can profoundly change readers and groups of readers. This current research, therefore, examines how fantasy novels create a space for readers to reflect and imagine. By getting lost in these stories and encountering new ways of thinking, fantasy readers can challenge their existing beliefs and imagine new possibilities for themselves and the world. This research explores how fantasy narratives help readers imagine “what if” scenarios, challenging their existing ideas and offering new perspectives on themselves and the world.

To investigate if this interaction with fantasy stories inspires people to make positive changes in the real world, this research focuses on modern examples of how fantasy literature motivates individuals and groups to take action for social causes. In addition, this study employed a qualitative mixed methodology, conducting thirty interviews with fantasy readers and authors of fantasy literature through a two-phase approach to address this question.

From these interviews, several recurring themes were found. In the first phase, fantasy readers described how they felt transported into the story world and how fantasy stories can introduce its readers to social justice themes. In the second phase, new themes emerged, such as: how fantasy readers feel when they finish a book, how young adult fantasy books often harbour messages about social justice, the relative importance or status of diversity and social justice in the publishing industry and how gatekeeping influences the potential for fantasy literature to change people’s beliefs.

These findings not only generated the key themes that are analysed in the thesis, but also led to the development of a new theory and model called the Reader’s Journey and the identification of a newly emergent subgenre of fantasy literature I have called Social Justice Fantasy. The research is concluded by discussing the study’s limitations and its implications for education, curriculum development and critical teaching methods.

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While writing is often considered a solo endeavour, this project has proven anything but. There have been some amazing people who have contributed in various ways to help bring this work to fruition, and to them I offer my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation.

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Mom, you have been my pen, my sword, my rock, my tree and everything in between.

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Definition of Terms

Fan Activism	Civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture (Carriere, 2018).
Fantasy Literature	<p>For the purposes of this research, I define fantasy as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a genre that stimulates the imagination through intricate world-building, evolving in tandem with its contemporary context. • a genre that is confrontational and reactionary. • a genre often containing expansive and speculative worlds that can encourage its readers to rethink societal norms and injustices.
Fantasy Reader	For the purposes of this research, a fantasy reader is defined as an adult (19 years of age and older) or young adult (12 to 18 years of age) who actively reads and engages with fantasy literature.
Liminal Space	A space of transition, not knowing and uncertainty which involves transformative learning and reflection (Crawford et al., 2015).
Narrative Absorption	Also known as feeling absorbed in reading stories, narrative absorption is defined as a psychological and experiential state that can emerge during the reading of a narrative text characterized by a reader's focused attention on the story world presented in the text, as a consequence of which readers become less aware of their surroundings and themselves (Kuijpers et al., 2017, p. 32-34).
Narrative-Based Belief Change	A process through which a person's beliefs or attitudes are influenced or altered by engaging with narratives, stories or accounts. It involves the process of how readers change their beliefs and attitudes in response to stories (Prentice et al., 1997; Appel & Richter, 2007).
Narrative Transportation Theory	Defined as a feeling of being immersed into a text. Narrative transportation allows a reader to become deeply immersed in a story which can lead to persuasion through reduced negative cognitive responding, realism of experience and strong affective responses (Green & Brock, 2002, p. 702).

Reader's Journey	A framework that builds on the theoretical underpinnings of narrative-based belief change, narrative transportation and the liminal space. This model elucidates the cognitive processes through which a fantasy reader might embark on a transformative journey that can lead to social justice activism. The RJ involves a six-step process through which a fantasy reader may experience a mentally perceived change in their preexisting attitudes, beliefs and/or values. Through these potential mental shifts, the RJ serves as a visual model for how a fantasy reader might experience narrative-based belief change thereby possibly motivating the reader towards social justice activism.
Social Justice	Involves a vision for society that is equitable, respectful of human diversity, physically, environmentally and psychologically safe, where individuals have a sense of their own self-agency (Bell, 2016).
Social Justice Activism	A form of action taken to address inequalities and discrimination in society by focusing on political or social issues.
Social Justice Fantasy	A subgenre of fantasy literature that potentially offers a critique of our current society. Novels of this genre can generate a critically reflective liminal process that prompts readers to re-examine their beliefs, values and assumptions by offering insight into the inequality and authoritativeness often at the core of mainstream worldviews and dominant ideologies. The aims of social justice fantasy as a genre are to include works that promote themes, plots and characters centred on diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice.
Social Justice Themes in Fantasy Literature	Themes that explore social and political issues related to power imbalances, oppression, privilege and discrimination. Themes that challenge prejudices and discriminatory attitudes by depicting fantastical societies where individuals with differing abilities, appearances, or backgrounds coexist and collaborate.
Theory of Mind	The cognitive ability to infer the thoughts and intentions of others. Also consists of a cluster of cognitive adaptations that allows individuals to navigate their social world and also structures that world (Mar et al., 2006; Zunshine, 2012).

Threshold Concepts	Defined as new and previously inaccessible ways of thinking about something operating within a liminal space. A threshold concept represents a new way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something leading to a transformed internal view of a subject, ideology, worldview, etc (Meyer & Land, 2003).
Transformational/Transformative Learning	A theory of learning that focuses on when an individual experiences a significant structural shift in the way they perceive and understand the world around them. It is a process that is conducive to a change in the individual's perspective and a re-evaluation of their beliefs, values, and assumptions (Mezirow, 1991).

Chapter 1

Introduction

A good book is a book that does not leave the reader intact; it is a challenge hurled at us to change something in ourselves and in the world. A good book is a book that reflects something more than ourselves or the art of the person who has written it: it is a *force*, a *tool* or *weapon* [italicised for emphasis], to make the dreams of today become the reality of tomorrow. (Garaudy, 1948, p. 64)

With these words, French philosopher Roger Garaudy captures the transformative power of literature. He suggests that a great book transcends mere storytelling; it shakes us to our core, urging us to reimagine our lives and the world around us. The idea of a great book epitomises Bakhtin's (1981) notion that novels can influence our imagination by reflecting and fostering tendencies towards envisioning a new world. Be it a force, tool or weapon, the image of fiction literature as an instrument for prompting social change is shared by numerous scholars. For example, Duhan (2015) describes literature as an entity reflecting society which can play a prominent role in propagating, imparting and fostering insights and values to see the world in a different way. Rockwell (1974) claims that at any time in existence there is a "large body of tendentious fiction, the literature of protest, exposé and social change" (p. 26) which can potentially incite notions of progressive transition within societal values, norms and social relations. Additionally, Novitz (1987) posits that the imaginative capabilities of fiction literature offer new ways of thinking about or perceiving aspects of our surroundings.

Many scholars have proposed that literature is a fundamental aspect of society and culture that actively shapes and is shaped by worldviews, ideological perspectives and current socio-political contexts (see Bina et al., 2016; Hanne, 1994; Howe, 1961). More to this point, Eagleton (1996) surmises that fiction literature has been premised as a social product and social force affecting society while continually involved in the process of social development. In the aforementioned context, Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'compromise equilibrium' (Hoare &

Mathews, 1977, p. 357-358) provides a framework for understanding societal paradigm shifts. Gramsci argues that dominant groups maintain their hegemony by negotiating with emerging counterforces, creating a balance that incorporates elements of change while preserving foundational power structures (Femia, 1981; Forgacs, 1988; Hall et al., 1977). In particular, literature can highlight the ongoing tension between those who seek to preserve the status quo and those advocating for social change (Mack, 2012; Lawler, 1980). According to Eagleton (1996), literature has the power to imagine alternative realities, allowing it to both reflect on and challenge the social and ideological forces Gramsci describes. Through its capacity to question dominant ideologies and present imaginative alternatives, fiction literature can reflect and inspire the renegotiation of societal norms and power structures (Albrecht, 1954). Yet there has been limited consideration of this effect, both academically and culturally, when it comes to fantasy literature

As a social work educator specializing in teaching anti-oppressive practice and social justice theories, my fascination with fantasy literature as a means to cultivate imagination and explore possibilities has always been of interest. While grading a former student's paper, I was struck by her creative use of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* as inspiration. She later revealed her own passion for the fantasy genre, sparking discussions where we shared our mutual admiration for its worlds, characters and narratives that incite us to contemplate "what if" scenarios and ponder potentialities. These conversations, not just with her, but with other students, prompted me to reflect on how fantasy encourages its readers to envision new realities – whether in ways of living, relating to others, or engaging with the world around them. This insight has led me to integrate fantasy literature into my teaching regularly. I believe that beyond helping students grasp connections between social work theory and practice, fantasy serves as a tool to engage

imaginatively with pressing social issues. Moreover, as a fantasy bibliophile, I argue for its academic merit and value. I see studying fantasy critically as a means to uncover its potential to challenge dominant, destructive ideologies and offer alternative perspectives. Furthermore, by situating fantasy literature within Gramsci's framework, it becomes clear that the genre operates within the tension of compromise equilibrium, acting as both a critique of existing power structures and a vehicle for envisioning new social configurations (Femia, 1981; Forgacs, 1988; Hall et al., 1977). Therefore, the aforementioned notions led me to consider how reading fantasy literature could foster social justice¹-oriented belief change at the individual and group levels.

Research has shown that "literature can be a disruptive force" that changes the way we think by interrupting our ways of seeing and doing things (Mack, 2012, p. 40). When it comes to fantasy, Baker (2012) asserts that the progressive² potential of the genre can direct the fantasy reader towards a new and radical subjectivity. Through the construction of possible worlds within fantasy, it creates a new version of what could be within the real world, thus positing

¹ For the purposes of this thesis, I refer to social justice as a concept relating to fair and just relations between the individual and society, measured by the distribution of wealth, opportunities for personal activity and social privileges (Sen, 2009; Young, 1990). At its core, social justice involves the idea that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities. Miller (1999) defines social justice as the distribution of benefits and burdens in societies in ways that follow principles of equality, need, entitlement and equity. Bell (2016) adds that social justice also involves a vision for a society that is equitable, respects human diversity, and is physically, environmentally, and psychologically safe, where individuals have a sense of their own self-agency. Scholars often emphasize the importance of structures that support human rights and dignity (Rawls, 1971). It extends to ensuring that individuals are not discriminated against based on characteristics such as race, gender, disability, religion or sexual orientation.

² Progressiveness refers to the support or advocacy of improvement or reform, as opposed to wishing to maintain the status quo, especially in political matters (Etzel, 2023; Giddens, 2003). This term often connotes movements towards greater efficiency, justice and welfare within a societal context (Giddens, 2003; Mitchell & Petersen, 2024). According to Bina et al. (2017), the progressive potential in fiction literature refers to the ability of a literary work to challenge the status quo, inspire change, and push readers toward more equitable and inclusive perspectives. With regards to this research, progressiveness (or the 'progressive potential') in fantasy literature refers to the genre's capacity to disrupt dominant ideologies, propose new or radical ways of being and encourage readers to question and potentially transform the real-world assumptions that shape their experiences. Rooted in the idea that literature can alter our perceptions and reimagine possibilities (Mack, 2012; Lawler, 1980), progressive fantasy works construct alternative worlds, cultures, and subjectivities that illuminate how oppressive hegemonic norms might be dismantled (Baker, 2012; Bould, 2002; Jameson, 2002; Wolf, 2012). Therefore, the progressive dimension of fantasy lies in its ability to disrupt the status quo, foster imagination and inspire social or political engagement in the real world.

fantasy as a category open to proposing progressive change (Baker, 2012; Bould, 2002; Jameson, 2002). Similarly, Wolf (2012) claims that fantasy's imaginary narratives allow us to engage with the political, social and philosophical thought experiments expressed in the genre's novels. Wolf (2012) further contends that fantasy's literary experimentation with the invention of new cultures, races and species whose very existence can imply certain ideas or outlooks, can also challenge oppressive hegemonic ideologies and worldviews in our current world. This capacity of fantasy literature to question hegemonic norms aligns with Gramsci's insight that cultural artifacts are central to the process of hegemony's renegotiation (Femia, 1981; Forgacs, 1988; Hoare & Mathews, 1977). The ability of fantasy literature to imagine alternatives and articulate resistance reflects its role within the broader societal struggle for equilibrium, where progress is negotiated within the constraints of existing power structures (Femia, 1981; Forgacs, 1988; Hall et al., 1977).

Wolf's (2012) previous statement also coincides with Lawler's (1980) claims that fantasy novels can offer human imagination the possibility of alternate worlds and experiences reminding us of options and life requirements different from what we currently know (p. 10). Additionally, Lawler (1980) states that reading fantasy can help its readers to live in a world in which the life of the imagination is nourished rather than strangled and where the "epistemic" benefits of fantasy, as they change our ways of imagining and the representations of collective imagination, can lead to possible "new realities" (p. 10-12). To further examine Baker, Wolf and Lawler's claims, Chapter 3 will analyse various fantasy texts as case studies, demonstrating that the genre possesses progressive potential and the capacity to inspire fantasy readers to engage with social and political movements.

It is important to note that not all works of the fantasy genre are created equally, nor do they possess the same progressive potential. Strange (2002) makes the argument that much of what comprises “fiction works are designed to entertain, enrich, or inspire without aiming to increase our knowledge or to alter our views of the world around us” (p. 266). For that reason, fiction narratives may provide “models of how to think about life’s situations without aiming to change what we think about life’s particulars” (Strange, 2002, p. 266). Based on Strange’s assertions, some fantasy stories as fiction narratives can therefore reinforce dominant positions and hegemonic ideologies. Sutherland (1985) claims these ideologies are from the author’s passive, unquestioning acceptance and internalization of an established ideology, which is then transmitted in the author’s writing in an unconscious manner. The ideological stance that Sutherland speaks to highlights Syverson’s (1999) notions that writing occurs in systems involving not only social, but environmental structures that constrain and enable what writers think, feel and write. Therefore, the social, historical or cultural situations of the author can influence the text (Syverson, 1999). With the previous in mind, authors cannot disconnect themselves from the structures and processes that shape the worlds in which they live. Likewise, they cannot wholly separate those structures and processes from the worlds they create. Consequently, since literary works are shaped by their author’s values and ideologies, an author’s background and social influences can impact a narrative in ways that “support and reinforce the status quo by perpetuating widely held views, thus inhibiting progressive thinking” (Sutherland, 1985, p. 7). Along similar lines, Strange (2002) posits that stories both mirror and invent, and to the extent that their inventions are construed as reflections of the world, the license that fiction is granted can lead to misconceptions about the way things work, what and how things happened and who individuals and communities are (p. 267). Fantasy that lacks social

progressiveness can perpetuate harmful societal narratives, myths and ideologies. In contrast, fantasy stories written by progressive authors such as N. K. Jemisin, China Miéville and Zen Cho reinvent the genre by subverting formulaic plots, actively avoiding the reinforcement of dominant ideologies.

While the aforementioned fantasy literary scholars posit that the genre has a potentiality to display and decipher the symptoms of our current socio-political state of affairs by expressing ideas, challenging our perceptions and inviting us to reconsider our assumptions through our imaginations, there has been little attention paid to the specific internal psychological processes by which reading fantasy might have transformative effects on our beliefs and attitudes around social justice-oriented change and activism. More to this effect, in the fields of literature, communication studies and psychology, researchers have been studying the effects of reading fiction literature on the mind (see Green & Brock, 2002; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). In fact, communications scholar Melanie Green's research on how fiction narratives can change the way individuals think and behave has led to the establishing of a theory of transportation into a narrative world that focuses on a fantasy reader's immersion into a story as a mechanism of narrative influence. Building off this premise, Green and Brock (2002) introduced research examining the phenomenological experience of being transported to a narrative world by exploring the causes and the consequences of narrative-based mental processing and its impact on individuals' real-world beliefs. These real-world beliefs include a reader's values, attitudes, worldviews, ideologies, opinions and convictions. While transportation theory can offer possible explanations as to how narrative-based belief change might occur through engagement with the story world, characters, plot and themes, the actual psychological mechanisms that enable this process to possibly take place are relatively undertheorized. To

address this gap, psychologists Stenner (2021) and Meyer and Land (2003) have explored the relation between literature and personal transformation through liminal³ spaces. Crawford et al. (2015) contend that the liminal is a space of transition, not knowing and uncertainty which involves transformative learning and reflection. The liminal space puts distance between the fantasy reader and their actual world where a temporary separation results in a regaining of a different perspective (Crawford et al., 2015; Engel, 2017). Consequently, what can be inferred from this is that reading literary works of fiction possibly involves an individual being altered from one psychological state into another through the acquisition of new knowledge and awareness. Moreover, that there exists a transformative potential that occurs within a reflective liminal space in fantasy readers' minds as they read.

While Green's, Stenner's and Meyer and Land's research is promising for works of fiction, there is little to no evidence with regards to narrative-based belief change, transportation theory or engagement in a liminal space and fantasy literature. Therefore, in response to this gap, my research aimed to explore not only how fantasy might have potential value for helping readers to imagine social change, but how it might induce narrative-based belief change within the individual fantasy reader. The research questions guiding this exploration include:

³ Liminality is a concept from anthropology, applicable in sociology and psychology, which describes the disorienting, fluid condition occurring in the middle stage of rituals and transformative processes (Szakolczai, 2017; Van Gennep (1909/1960). It is a transitional phase where participants are no longer in their pre-ritual status but have not yet achieved the new status that will emerge at the completion of the process (Szakolczai, 2017; Van Gennep (1909/1960). Turner (1977) defines liminality as the "threshold phase" in these processes, characterized by ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy (p. 95). As a precursor to liminal spaces, liminality sets the stage for these transitional areas to manifest, offering a potent environment for questioning traditional institutions, norms and values (Beech, 2011). This, in turn, can lead to the potential for significant transformations in identity and society. The concept highlights the importance of transitional periods as fertile ground for developing new cultural symbols and practices, emphasising the state of potentiality and transformation inherent in liminal spaces (Thomassen, 2009). Liminality, therefore, not only characterizes these threshold moments but also facilitates the creation of spaces where transformative learning and reflection can occur, ultimately leading to changes within individuals and communities.

1. How do fantasy narratives critique current socio-political and cultural norms, and to what extent does this commentary prompt the genre's readers to re-examine and potentially shift their own beliefs about social justice?
2. In what ways does the narrative-based belief change fostered by fantasy literature potentially lead to heightened awareness and critical reflection on social justice issues in the individual fantasy reader?
3. How might engaging with fantasy literature create or enhance a 'liminal' or transformative mental space, enabling fantasy readers to reflect on alternate possibilities for individual and societal change?
4. In what ways does the interplay between fantasy literature and self-reflection within transformative mental spaces foster fan activism and engagement with social justice causes?
5. How can authors and the publishing industry leverage narrative elements like themes, motifs, and character development within the fantasy genre to foster narrative-based belief changes in fantasy readers and promote progressive social change?

To further investigate the applicability of fantasy to narrative-based belief change and transportation theory I carried out a sequential QUAL-qual mixed method design (Morse, 2010, p. 483) consisting of two distinct phases as described in Chapter 4. Phase One consisted of data gathering and thematic analysis emergent coding from semi-structured interviews with readers of fantasy novels. While Phase Two involved follow-up semi-structured interviews with participants from Phase One and semi-structured interviews with fantasy authors.

Through both phases of the research process, I uncovered numerous themes that shed light on the complex relationship between fantasy, narrative-based belief transformation and fan-

based activism. One of the most significant themes revolves around the concept of fantasy readers immersing themselves deeply into the fantastical worlds created within these novels. This insight indicates that the more a reader is drawn into a fantasy novel's story world the more absorbed they become and the more susceptible they might be to entering a liminal space that can potentially foster belief change around progressive social change. However, it is important to note that not all fantasy readers experience this kind of narrative absorption. Bertolt Brecht's (1964) theory of the "alienation effect (or *verfremdungseffekt*)" (p. 125) offers a critical counterpoint. Developed within the context of epic theatre, Brecht's (1964) 'alienation effect' seeks to disrupt the audience's emotional immersion, encouraging them instead to engage critically and reflect on the performance as a constructed artifact. Brecht (1964) argued that such distancing, achieved through techniques like 'breaking the fourth wall, exposing theatrical mechanisms, or presenting contradictory elements', fosters a heightened awareness of social realities and power structures. Applied to literature, the alienation effect challenges the idea that immersive absorption is the dominant or most effective mode of engagement, proposing instead that critical detachment can provoke intellectual and social awakening (Freedman, 2000).

In the context of fantasy literature, Brecht's theory raises questions about how readers engage with fantastical narratives (Misra, 2015). While some fantasy readers may experience transportation into an imaginative liminal space, others might approach these narratives with a more analytical perspective, maintaining a critical distance that allows them to evaluate the themes, ideologies and societal implications presented in the text (Turner, 1977; Thomassen, 2009). This divergence suggests that readers may not exclusively experience absorption or critical reflection but could oscillate between these modes or engage in both simultaneously (Green & Brock, 2000).

My research acknowledges the possibility that fantasy literature may foster varying modes of engagement, including absorption and critical reflection, and considers how these different approaches could influence readers' experiences and interpretations of narratives and their capacity for transformative belief changes. Recognizing the diverse ways readers might engage with fantasy; this study seeks to explore how such modes of engagement contribute to the broader psychological and social processes associated with narrative-based belief change.

The resultant discovery has led to the development of the Reader's Journey in Chapter 6, which, in its preliminary stages, serves as an illustrative model to explore the processes occurring within the minds of fantasy readers as they engage with narrative-based belief transformation. The Reader's Journey is a theoretical construct that seeks to elucidate how the interplay of narrative absorption, liminality and narrative-based belief transformation can potentially motivate readers of fantasy literature to participate in social activism.

Another significant theme that emerged from the research is the role played by fantasy literature that asserts themes of social justice. While the Reader's Journey might serve to explain the internal psychological mechanisms that potentially establish narrative-based belief change, the research also indicated that there must be specific social justice oriented content to facilitate these changes in a fantasy reader's thinking. Fundamentally, for a reader to undergo narrative-based belief transformation through fantasy novels, it is essential that the textual content challenges their existing worldviews, beliefs and assumptions. In response to these insights, Chapter 7 introduces a new subgenre of fantasy I have called 'social justice fantasy'. This subgenre involves fantasy literature that potentially offers a critique of our current society. Furthermore, I posit that social justice fantasy can generate a critically reflective liminal process that prompts readers to re-examine their beliefs, values and assumptions by offering insight into

the inequality and authoritativeness often at the core of mainstream worldviews and dominant ideologies. The research concludes by discussing the study's limitations and its implications for education, curriculum development and critical teaching methods in Chapter 8.

Significance of this Research

Literary academics such as Eagleton (1996), Hanne (1994) and Howe (1961) point to fiction literature's role as a social product and social force affecting society while being continually involved in the process of social development. While existing discourse has predominantly focused on fiction, this study contributes to an expanding body of knowledge by investigating the transformative potential of fantasy literature. Specifically, this thesis explores how fantasy narratives can critique and challenge entrenched hegemonic ideologies within its readers and can encourage fantasy readers to rethink societal norms and injustices. Furthermore, this research extends the progressive dimensions of fantasy literature by examining its capacity to inspire social justice action, encompassing fan activism and broader social movements.

Green and Brock (2002) have noted literature's ability to induce narrative-based belief change, a process employed for questioning and reshaping the fantasy readers' values and ideologies. Despite little to no academic attention directed towards fantasy literature in this regard, this thesis aims to fill this gap. Through qualitative interviews with fantasy readers and authors, this research demonstrates that narrative-based belief change indeed occurs within the context of fantasy literature. This research also further expands upon existing theories of narrative-based belief change and narrative transportation, which have been traditionally limited to fiction literature.

Finally, this thesis contributes novel insights by proposing the Reader's Journey model, which elucidates how fantasy literature might foster narrative-based belief change among

readers. Introducing the subgenre of social justice fantasy, this research also complements scholarly discourse by highlighting fantasy's evolving role in potentially challenging prevailing oppressive ideologies and fostering critical consciousness among its readership.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

According to Randolph (2009), the purpose of a literature review within scholarship can have numerous intentions. However, the more relevant application to this thesis employs the following: “identifying relationships between ideas and practices, establishing the context of the topic or problem, understanding the structure of the subject and relating ideas and theory to applications” (Randolph, 2009, p. 3). Therefore, demonstrating an understanding of relevant subject areas pertinent to this thesis is crucial for participating in dialogic conversations and offering valuable insights across different fields of study. Considering that this research involves theories and insights from the fields of literature, psychology and communications studies, it is important that the following chapter “reviews, critiques and synthesizes representative literature in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated” (Torraco, 2016, p. 404). Consequently, in what follows, this chapter will offer an interdisciplinary literature review to thoroughly explore the current scholarship on fantasy literature and its progressive potential, transportation theory, narrative-based belief change, liminal spaces and threshold concepts. Furthermore, given that this qualitative research is primarily exploratory and introduces novel concepts like the Reader’s Journey and a new subgenre of fantasy, it is essential for the literature review in this chapter to offer useful overviews and current knowledge on this topic.

Defining Fantasy⁴

To better contextualize fantasy literature within this thesis and initiate a discussion on how the genre can promote narrative-based belief change towards social justice, it is important to first attempt to define the genre. However, as Hancock (2008) points out, definitions of fantasy are not simple and tend to err in the extremes; either the definition is too wide and envelops virtually the entire body of literature, or it is too narrow and excludes works that clearly seem to embody something of fantasy, even if they do not fit the terms at hand. As such, this section will highlight the challenge of establishing a unified definition for fantasy.

In looking at the literature on fantasy, some academics argue that defining the fantasy genre poses challenges, while others propose multiple distinct definitions. For instance, Sandner (2004) posits that while fantasy is a recognised literary genre, its constant evolution of subgenres over the years makes it an unstable form even today. In effect, one of the reasons for this inheres in the fact that fantasy has expanded throughout modern times and is still evolving, where subgenres are continually created and cross over with each other (Dalton, 2019; Roslan et al., 2016). More to this point, Attebery (1992) asserts that contemporary fantasy writers are broadening the range of modern fantasy, which can make it inherently difficult for academics, authors, fans and publishers to reach a consensus on its definition and value within the realm of literature. Additionally, Eşberk (2014) claims that amongst scholarship inquiry, fantasy maintains an “argumentative position in literature, whereby its origins, functions and aims have long been discussed and no definite categorization on its being a genre can be provided” (p. 139). Lastly, in

⁴ I acknowledge that the definitions and fantasy literature I refer to situate themselves within western traditions, mainly the literature that arises out of Britain and North America. While I do recognise that fantasy literature exists in numerous non-western countries and cultures, exploring them would extend unmanageably beyond the scope of this work.

his essay “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien (1964/2001) raises the possibility that fantasy is not inclined to definition because the genre “cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible” (p. 10).

Bearing the previous in mind, these apparent challenges to defining the genre have not prevented academics, scholars and writers from creating various definitions of fantasy.

Therefore, in order to arrive at some semblance of a definition for the genre and to specify the terms and scope of my research, it is important to examine some of the numerous interpretations and descriptions of fantasy literature. For example, Attebery (1992) offers the following elucidations:

1. Fantasy is a form of popular escapist literature that combines stock characters and devices—wizards, dragons, magic swords and the like—into a predictable plot in which the perennially understaffed forces of good triumph over a monolithic evil.
2. Fantasy is a sophisticated mode of storytelling characterized by stylistic playfulness, self-reflexiveness, and a subversive treatment of established orders of society and thought. Arguably the major fictional mode of the late twentieth century, it draws upon contemporary ideas about sign systems and the indeterminacy of meaning and at the same time recaptures the vitality and freedom of nonmimetic traditional forms such as epic, folktale, romance and myth. (p.1)

According to Armitt (2020), fantasy works are defined by how the “laws of physics, logic, time, physiognomy, life and death and geography are usually subverted in preference for a narrative vision which is improbable, impossible, or beyond belief” (p. 3). Meanwhile others contend that the genre generally involves worlds established around their own set of rules, where magic predominates and mythical beings and races reside (see Canavan, 2011; Jackson, 2003; Manlove, 1999; Mathews, 1997). Long (2011) posits that there are three major elements that define the fantasy novel, those being the presence of magic, alternate worlds and low technology similar to that possessed by medieval-era civilizations. Correspondingly, Nikolajeva (2003) maintains that the fantasy genre typically contains a range of phenomena that deals with alternative/secondary

story worlds, non-linear time, extrasensory perception and various supernatural and magical events that so far cannot be explained in terms of science. The issue here is that among the many subgenres of fantasy (high, low, dark, epic, sword and sorcery, contemporary, urban etc.) the aforementioned qualities are not exclusive to fantasy literature and can be represented in other fiction genres such as horror, romance and science fiction. James Walters (2011) makes a similar point when he argues that elements of fantasy are just as “likely to emerge in a crime thriller about an escaped convict as [they are] in a story about a mythical kingdom in which the destinies of all creatures are decided by the fate of a magical ring” (p. 2). In light of Walter’s notion, it becomes evident that the defining characteristics of the fantasy genre often transcend its boundaries, appearing in various other literary forms, thereby challenging the notion of clear genre distinctions.

Alternative defining characteristics of fantasy literature involve the exploration of the impossible as a fundamental element in delineating the genre’s boundaries. In his book, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (1976), William Robert Irwin stated that fantasy belongs to the “literature of the impossible” (p. 166). In defining the impossible, Irwin (1976) suggests that fantasy writers create fictional worlds by intentionally breaking the norms and facts that define our conventional understanding of reality. The deliberate violation forms an imaginary counter-structure, or what Irwin calls “antireal” (p. 166), which the fantasy writer can then explore in various ways. Both Wolfe (2004) and Miéville (2004) critique the notion of defining fantasy solely by the presence of the impossible, as they find it problematic. They argue that this criterion overlooks the deeper themes of the works, which often delve into subjects that could feasibly exist in reality despite initial appearances of impossibility. Similarly, Irwin (1976) also contends that notions of the impossible can converge creatively on the fantasy readers’

understanding of the real world. Therefore, as Fredericks (1978) contends, “fantasy must be regarded as dealing with human realities and as having a reality-oriented function despite the self-conceived unreality of its hypotheses and conceptions” (p. 36). Consequently, defining the genre solely based on counter-reality or the impossible overlooks its potential to offer commentary or critique of the contemporary world.

Another important dimension of defining the genre is the relationship between fantasy literature and myth. Eşberk (2014) and Nichols (1976) propose that modern fantasy is grounded and developed in a manner originating from mythology, folk wonder-tales, heroic songs and Anglo-Saxon epics. Literary scholars Jackson (2003), Ordway (2001) and Sullivan (2004) further suggest that fantasy has established beginnings in stories about myths, legends, fairy tales and folklore. Similarly, while arguing for the academic merits of science fiction, Suvin (1979) contrasts fantasy by dismissing the genre as mere myth-making. In line with notions of mythic traditions as a defining feature of fantasy, Oziwicz (2008) argues that the vast majority of fantasy literature involves traditionally formulaic plot-shapes including a combination of the quest and the *bildungsroman* structures shared by the hero myth. There is, however, an inherent issue with using mythic traditions as a defining feature of fantasy literature in that academics such as Meletinski (1997) and Gould (1981) contend that most fiction works can be defined by mythological expectations, shape and terms. In fact, Gould (1979) contends that literature is a receptacle of myth, by which written narratives implicitly preserve mythic traditions, because like myth, literature uses motifs from shared human experience. Gould’s assertion is rooted in the research of Joseph Campbell (1949/1968), who proposed that all narratives adhere to a universal pattern known as the Hero’s Journey or ‘monomyth’. The monomyth concept suggests that stories, regardless of their cultural or historical context, share a common structure

characterized by the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and transformation. It is important to note, however, that defining fantasy in relation to myth can present a challenge. According to Grifka-Wander (2019), linking fantasy to mythic traditions may portray the genre as culturally insignificant. As such, associating fantasy with mythic stories can position fantasy literature as lacking socio-political content and potentially a drive towards future change.

With the previous discussion in mind, it may be more appropriate to approach the definition of fantasy not through the lens of universalizing elements, but rather by focusing on its thematic content. According to Filmer (1992), the literary content of fantasy exhibits scepticism towards the various belief systems and ideologies associated with destructive aspects of humanity. For another examination of content, Armitt (2020) states that fantasy literature lies at the "heart of all speculation as well as every time we [society] ask the question 'what if', irrespective of whether the question is followed by the statement 'dragons roamed the air', 'we could land on the moon', 'poverty was eliminated' or 'a cure for cancer was found'" (p. 3). In relation to Filmer's and Armitt's statements, a central argument to this thesis resides on the progressive potential of fantasy literature. In fact, a number of contemporary fantasy theorists, like Baker (2012), Bould (2002) and Landow (1979) posit fantasy as a progressive genre that can create a new version of what could be within the real world, thus positing fantasy as a category open to proposing radical and avant-garde change. In regards to content, Landow (1979) maintains that fantasy writers are engaging in imagining alternate universes by populating their worlds with new sentient creatures and societies. While others have included content that speaks specifically to social inequalities and social injustices. For instance, Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) employs an African inspired setting in which magic users are oppressed and abused by the non-magical ruling class. In this manner, fantasy literature can also be defined

as a genre that can interrupt our ways of seeing and doing things by offering its readers alternative plots, characters and worlds that explore potentially hegemonic belief systems and ideologies.

As this section has shown, the genre's continual evolution complicates efforts by academics, authors and publishers to establish a consensus on its definition. These descriptions stimulate debates not only about the function, but also about the very meaning and interpretation of fantasy, pushing towards a nuanced understanding of what defines the genre. For the purposes of this research, I propose to contribute to the existing definitions of fantasy. Therefore, in this thesis, I define fantasy as a genre that stimulates the imagination through intricate world-building, evolving in tandem with its contemporary context. Furthermore, I contend that fantasy is a genre that is confrontational and reactionary, but more importantly that fantasy literature, with its often expansive and speculative worlds, can encourage its readers to rethink societal norms and injustices.

Current Academic Debates Concerning the Value of Fantasy Literature

Readers and fans of fantasy might be quick to offer praise and support for the genre, in terms of how it might stimulate the imagination more than other genres and how it might offer a more engaging and, therefore, persuasive narrative when it comes to social justice thematic content; however, academically, fantasy still struggles to maintain its foothold as a serious form of literature worthy of study. While there are many critiques of fantasy, most criticism comes from arguments that fantasy is apolitical, escapist, frivolous, formulaic, childish and historically and factually disconnected all the while taking shape from the material reality it rejects (Apter, 1982; Hume, 2014; Jackson, 2003; Lee, 2016; Manlove, 1999; Zanger, 2002). For example, Moorcock's (1978/2008) critique of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954) trilogy, posits works of

this genre as infantile, wistful, distanced and sentimental; frequently enjoyed for its lack of tensions and “clunking archaisms” (p. 14).

Landow (1979) posits that the Sword and Sorcery school of fantasy literature, with its themes of chivalric legend and dragonlore inspired largely by Lord Dunsany’s *The Fortress Unvanquishable, Save for Sacnoth* (1908), paved the way for fantasy to become a mainstay of pulp magazines, thus lowering the reputation of fantasy as a serious form of literature.

Additionally, Grifka-Wander (2019) contends that the devaluing of fantasy is due in part to the insistence upon reviewing the same types of sword and sorcery fantasy texts, thus illustrating an unnecessary favouritism for Tolkienesque fantasy that is based on conservative, past-focused, regressive and masculine-oriented texts that are labelled as central to the genre. More to the previous point, Nichols (1976) claims that modern fantasy should not be considered an “artificial revival of an outmoded art”, but rather the genre’s literature should be seen as an attempt to “recover certain values, values which have not been taken with full seriousness in the West since before the rise of rationalism and of scientific materialism” (p. 21).

Among the myriad negative criticisms directed at the fantasy genre, a particularly salient point of contention within academic discourse pertains to its perceived association with escapism. According to Jackson (1981), French literary critics such as Caillois, Lévy and Vax and English literary critics including Batchelor, Manlove and Prickett, agree on the notion of fantasy as an escapist literature (p. 101-102). Schorr (1985) asserts that readers of fantasy literature frequently encounter accusations of indulging in escapism, a phenomenon characterized by the deliberate evasion of discomforting realities through acts of self-delusion and self-deception. Schorr (1985) further states that the escapist turn of fantasy literature creates beliefs that deem it “mind-threatening drivel... a frivolous pacifier... a kind of insidious

hallucinogen that invites the reader into a plastic land of illusion and deceit, then walls up the exit” (p. 13). Prasannan (2018) claims that the escapist argument also relates to societal beliefs that fantasy, “being detached from the real-world, provides an escape from reality and hence is not an encouraging entity to adult readers” (p. 17). Having said that, Hancock (2008) suggests, escapism does not prevent fantasy from addressing real world issues because “escape itself is a response to the real world” (p. 5). In fact, Begum (2011) proposes that escapism through reading fiction can act as a means to disconnect from everyday life. Begum (2011) further states that this “disconnection can offer the reader an opportunity to engage intellectually” (p. 740), therefore disconnection and escapism, can be considered instrumental for intellectual stimulation.

With Hancock’s and Begum’s notions in mind, critiquing fantasy literature through the lens of escapism proves inadequate upon broader examination of fiction. For instance, Macpherson (2000) posits a fundamental connection between fiction and escapism. Hutcheon (1980) reinforces this perspective by suggesting that all reading—whether of novels, history, or scientific texts—constitutes a form of ‘escape,’ involving a temporary shift in consciousness from empirical realities to imagined realms (p. 76-77). Ravasi (2020) extends Hutcheon’s argument, asserting that any textual form can serve as a conduit for escapism, irrespective of its genre. Consequently, discrediting fantasy’s academic value solely on grounds of escapism, as articulated by the aforementioned literary critics, lacks substantive merit when juxtaposed with the perspectives of Macpherson, Hutcheon, and Ravasi.

While exploring the debates surrounding the academic value of fantasy, the research has revealed that contemporary scholarly discourse surrounding fantasy literature often reveals a dichotomous perspective. This debate divides the genre into two distinct camps. One school of thought posits fantasy as inherently unserious and devoid of substantive academic merit (see

Apter, 1982; Hume, 2014; Jackson, 2003; Lee, 2016; Manlove, 1999; Zanger, 2002). This perspective diminishes its potential for serious scholarly inquiry, relegating it to the realm of infantilism, escapism and entertainment. Conversely, an opposing viewpoint contends that fantasy literature holds significant progressive potential (see Baker, 2012; Bould, 2002; Landow, 1979; Wolf, 2012). Advocates of this stance argue that fantasy can offer a critique and questioning of contemporary societal norms and structures. Baker (2012) and Wolf (2012) contend that by envisioning alternative worlds and scenarios, fantasy narratives can offer a lens through which to examine and challenge prevailing ideologies and power dynamics. Consequently, this dichotomy situates the fantasy genre at a critical juncture within academic discourse, poised between dismissal and recognition, where its capacity to contribute meaningfully to broader scholarly inquiry is contested. For instance, Hunt (2005) states that,

Fantasy literature is either taken seriously (and enthusiastically), or seriously rejected. It is the root of all literature, an area of advanced literary experimentation and essential to our mental health; or it is regressive and associated with self-indulgent catharsis on the part of the writers; or it is linked to a ritualistic, epic, dehumanized world of pre-determination and out of tune with post-romantic sensitivity; or it symbolizes the random world of the postmodern... or, quite possibly, all of these, for fantasy resists and indeed mocks the elaborate classification systems of academia that have grown up around it, just as it defies the view that its huge popularity is a sad reflection on the state of contemporary culture. (p. 2)

For another example, Trębicki (2014) points out that fantasy literature is most closely related with the surreal, the oneiric and the pathological; while at the same time creating the most heterogeneous and convention-breaching works (p. 497). Additionally, Gregori (2018) states that,

Quite often fantasy literary works include parodies of scientific stiffness [... while also offering] a way to potentiate freedom of thought, to promote changes of mentality and behaviour and to pay attention to the violence caused by [...] discourses of hatred. (p. 127)

Furthermore, the dualistic view of fantasy's worth also continues in the non-academic realm within the minds of the general public and publishing world. According to Manuel (2018), there are "those who adhere to the familiar tropes and expectations of the genre where writers, editors and readers believe that the importing of medieval morality into fantasy fiction is somehow an apolitical choice or a fidelity to how things actually were" (para. 6). It can thus be inferred that such views exhibit a popular belief that modern politics and social injustice should be excluded from the fantasy genre. Yet other scholars, such as Farrell (2006), suggest that the fantasy genre should focus on reimagining itself by embedding political themes within imagined settings, thereby challenging traditional narratives and providing a critical lens through which to examine contemporary issues.

Considering Farrell's argument, this thesis contends that fantasy literature holds significant progressive potential deserving of scholarly investigation. It is important to substantiate this perspective by presenting evidence that challenges academic criticisms regarding the genre's scholarly merit. Recent decades have set a new precedent for fantasy literature's progressive expansion. For example, narratives of global multiculturalism and racialism are being challenged by authors of colour within the westernised tradition in fantasy literature (Thomas, 2019). New subgenres like the Black Fantastic, from authors such as Tomi Adeyemi, N. K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor, offer a response to this neglect by presenting an activist artistic production in the face of erasure and marginalization within fantasy literature (Thomas, 2019). Furthering the new trends, the literary work of minorities and women in fantasy has gained prominence and recognition in recent years, helping to diversify the value systems depicted, empowering marginalized voices, fostering equal representation in the publishing industry and challenging entrenched orthodoxies and concepts of the other (Zaidi, 2019).

Moreover, part of the progressive turn is the emergence of contemporary post-colonial speculative fiction and fantasy literature written by primarily female authors that incorporate the cultural heritage of the writer (Healey, 2021). As Healey (2021) asserts, the subversive possibilities of fantasy as a tool of postcolonial critique have become more apparent as contemporary Western literary communities grow more ethnically and generically diverse, drawing inspiration from the histories and mythologies of non-Western or marginalized societies. For example, in R.F. Kuang's ongoing series *The Poppy War* (2018-present), a historical reimagining is presented, which juxtaposes events and ideologies that historically evolved over decades. This narrative strategy compels readers to discern parallels between colonial traumas and recurring cycles of violence (Healey, 2021). Another author, Zen Cho, also continues this trend with her *Sorcerer to The Crown Series* (2015-present) by using her parallel world to explore the colonialist practices of the British who have colonized the Malay Peninsula. In line with today's contemporary issues of gender diversity and awareness, Cho also pushes the boundaries of gender identity by creating unusual gender (and species) pairings and questioning the necessity of marriage as practised in traditional society (Philip, 2020). Cho's intersectional approach of focusing on those who are discriminated against based on race and/or gender adds to the contemporary social justice initiatives aimed at tackling oppression, discrimination and the questioning of power and privilege, reflecting fantasy's reaction to and representation of the changing eras. Kuang and Cho's novels demonstrate that fantasy works with a post-colonial critique can bring a progressive shift to the genre by highlighting political and social injustices.

The progressive expansion of fantasy literature highlights the significant value in studying fantasy from an academic perspective. This section not only emphasises the divergent opinions regarding the academic value of fantasy, but also reinforces its scholarly significance by

drawing attention to the genre's capacity to critique oppressive social structures and envision progressive change. These insights suggest that the academic study of fantasy literature is not only justified, but also inherently valuable for understanding how the genre can influence individual beliefs, attitudes and perceptions within the mind of the individual fantasy reader.

Fiction Literature and the Mind

According to Kidd and Castano (2013), "fiction seems to expand our knowledge of others' lives, helping us recognize our similarity to them" (p. 378). Not only this, but "fiction may change how, not just what, people think about others' lives as well" (Kidd & Castano, 2013, p. 378). Miall and Kuiken (1994) emphasize that through the systematic use of phonological, grammatical and semantic stylistic devices, fiction defamiliarizes its readers and challenges their thinking (p. 15–17). The processing of narratives through reader engagement, then, shares some similarities with the processing of our real social environment (Mar et al., 2006). Thus, reading about complex social interactions such as those commonly described in narrative fiction, theoretically engages neural substrates similar to those used to navigate similar situations in the real-world (Mar et al., 2006, p. 695). The cognitive ability to infer the thoughts and intentions of others, which is common to both fictional and real-world processing, is referred to as theory of mind (Leverage, 2011; Mar et al., 2006). According to Zunshine (2012), theory of mind is a cluster of cognitive adaptations that allows us to navigate our social world and also structures that world. Wulandini and Handayani (2018) assert that reading fiction can stimulate the process of the theory of mind mechanism which involves knowledge, perception and interpretation, such as the use of characters' perspectives, which may be different from the perspectives of the readers themselves. Fiction's contents can provide simulative experiences that lead the readers to feel and think about the social context and various depictions of the mental state, thus prompting

readers to understand the subjective mental state of other people (Wulandini & Handayani, 2018). From a psychology standpoint,

fiction [. . .] uniquely engages the psychological processes needed to gain access to characters' subjective experiences. Just as in real life, the worlds of fiction are replete with complicated individuals whose inner lives are rarely easily discerned but warrant exploration [. . .]. Readers of fiction must draw on more flexible interpretive resources to infer the feelings and thoughts of characters. (Kidd & Castano, 2013, p. 378)

Conceived as such, Tabbi (2004) asserts that fiction can help readers to “pattern in newly nuanced ways our emotions and perceptions (p. 174). More to the point, Iser (1974) also proposes the idea that reading fiction exercises one’s emotional and cognitive abilities. Building off the previous statements by Tabbi and Iser, Phelan (2004) argues that reading fiction can bestow “new knowledge or increased understanding and offers the chance for a sharpened ethical sense (p. 143). Cognitive literary academic Tsur (2008) supports Phelan’s argument by asserting that fiction narratives affect us by “delaying or disrupting in some other manner our cognitive processes” (p. 5). Furthermore, cognitive psychology researchers Djikic and Oatley (2014) state that fiction literature can facilitate “‘self-change’ by allowing shifts to happen in the minds and personalities of readers” (p. 499). Engaging with fiction can wield a significant influence on an individual’s psyche, facilitating comprehension, emotional resonance and potentially transformative shifts in self-perception (Djikic & Oatley, 2014). Therefore, according to Zunshine (2012) reading fiction can foster “new forms of meaning for our everyday existence” (p. 128).

Some researchers argue that certain fiction narratives engage a reader’s theory of mind more deeply than others (see Kidd, et al., 2016; Panero et al., 2016; Zunshine, 2012). For example, Wulandini and Handayani (2018) claim that non-fiction and popular fiction are less able to stimulate imagination and emotional experience. Also, Kidd and Castano (2013) further

suggest that literary fiction, as opposed to popular genre fiction primarily designed to entertain passive readers, tends to engage theory of mind more effectively. Additionally, in their research Fong et al. (2013) found that there was higher theory of mind test scores in readers of romance than readers of science fiction and fantasy (Fong et al., 2013). The issue with Fong et al.'s research with regard to fantasy is that they lumped the genres of fantasy and science fiction into one category during their study. By combining the two genres, the researchers have essentially blurred the boundaries of fantasy and science fiction making their distinction “dynamic [...] fluid [...] and fuzzy” (Frow, 2014, p. 128). For this reason and from my standpoint where I propose fantasy as a distinct genre set apart from science fiction, I take issue with Fong et al.'s argument that romance establishes higher theory of mind in readers as opposed to fantasy.

As a counter to Fong et al.'s study, Vezzali et al.'s (2015) research has demonstrated that selected fantasy texts can in fact promote theory of mind. One fantasy text that has been intensely studied regarding the psychological effects of empathy and the theory of mind is J. K. Rowlings' *Harry Potter* series (see Dunlop, 2023; Hsu, et al., 2015; Layman, 2017). Fields (2007) notes that the novels address important social, cultural, and psychological issues, such as culture, society, social inequalities, love, the transition to maturity and prejudice (see also Barratt, 2012; Heilman, 2009; Knapp, 2003; Whitney et al., 2005). In their study, Vezzali et al. (2015) highlighted that the results from one experimental intervention and two cross-sectional studies demonstrate that reading the *Harry Potter* novels improved attitudes toward stigmatized groups among those who identified more with the main character. There are several examples in the novels where Harry, during contact with characters belonging to stigmatized groups that suffer the consequences of prejudices and discrimination, tries to understand them and to improve their situation, such as Dobby and the plight of the House Elves. Therefore, based on

the Vezzali et al. (2015) study, *Harry Potter* book readers can gain higher theory of mind because individual readers can potentially associate fantastic characters with real-world group members. As such, it can be inferred that reading some fantasy stories can result in a cognitive and emotional simulation of experience that can lead to theory of mind and potentially new ideas. Although the above study shows that cognitive literary and psychological studies, such as those in the *Harry Potter* series, indicate that fantasy literature can enhance theory of mind and empathy among readers, there is still limited specific research on how fantasy literature might alter personal beliefs and perceptions in individual readers.

Narrative-Based Belief Change, Narrative Absorption and Narrative Transportation

As observed in the previous section, reading fiction offers individuals the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of human thought, emotion and behaviour (Calarco et al., 2017).

Engaging with fiction can directly impact a reader's mind, prompting them to understand, feel and even alter their sense of self (Djikic & Oatley, 2014). The previous section also highlighted the potential for fantasy works, such as *Harry Potter*, to influence readers' theory of mind.

Building on this information, this section will now explore various theories on how fiction narratives, particularly fantasy, can potentially bring about changes in the reader's mind through narrative-based belief change.

Many researchers have postulated that books reflect the changing world around us, consequently resulting in possible worldview shifts on the cultural or national scale (see Bakhtin, 1981; Eagleton, 1996; Howe, 1961; Rancière, 2004). Mar and Oatley (2008) go as far to say that stories are one means by which we make sense of our history and our current life and by which we make predictions and decisions regarding our future (p. 174). In fact, Nussbaum (1990) contends that a deep affection for a particular genre, such as fantasy, can transform an individual

by prompting them to reflect on their relationships, community and society, leading to potential shifts in their worldview as they examine the connections formed with the characters and settings in the books they read. With regards to fantasy, Drobot (2019) argues that the genre can provide frames of mind, attitudes and values in a world unlike our own in which readers get the occasion to explore, thus directing our personal reflections in a story world where we might be able to explore life philosophies in an unrestricted way.

Prior research has shown that readers often change their beliefs and attitudes in response to stories (see Green & Brock, 2000; Green & Donahue, 2011; Prentice et al., 1997). These beliefs and attitudes can include our values, worldviews, ideologies, opinions and convictions. These cognitive changes that some readers experience is often called narrative-based belief change, refers to the process through which a person's beliefs or attitudes are influenced or altered by engaging with narratives, stories or accounts (Prentice et al., 1997; Appel & Richter, 2007). Unlike traditional persuasive arguments that rely on logic or evidence, narrative-based approaches appeal to emotions, empathy and identification with characters or situations depicted in stories (Prentice et al., 1997; Appel & Richter, 2007). This method recognizes the potential of storytelling to reshape perspectives, often by immersing individuals in narratives that challenge their existing beliefs or offer alternative viewpoints, thereby potentially leading to a shift in their attitudes or understanding (Prentice et al., 1997; Appel & Richter, 2007).

To support these assertions about how reading fiction might alter a reader's beliefs and attitudes, psychology researchers Djikic and Oatley (2014) state that fiction literature can facilitate change by potentially impacting the minds and personalities of readers. Empirical evidence using the Mind in the Eyes Test to measure empathy and the theory of mind has been demonstrated in a number of studies thus supporting that beliefs and attitudes can change from

reading fiction. For instance, Kidd and Castano (2013) found that reading a fiction short story improved scores on the Mind in the Eyes Test and other measures of empathy more than did reading a non-fiction work. Additional research studies have found similar links. For example, Johnson (2013) found that participants who read a literary story about the plights and oppressive experiences of Arab Muslims increased empathy for Muslims. Black and Barnes (2015) also discovered similar results in their study on how participants who read a piece of fiction about issues in the social world increased their empathy and theory of mind scores on the Mind in the Eyes Test.

Calarco et al. (2017) suggest that reading fiction improves theory of mind and empathy scores because “readers who are immersed in a story are more likely to shift their attitudes and beliefs to be consistent with those beliefs embedded in the story” (p. 299). Gill (2013) also suggests that the immersive nature of fiction literature can have a lasting impact on the reader’s mind. In the context of fantasy, O’Keefe (2003) describes reading fantasy as “a liberation into something, into openness, possibility and coherence” (p. 11). Therefore, in reading a fantasy novel the reader has the potential to become part of the story in an immersive and imaginative sense, thus potentially affecting their beliefs and attitudes through narrative.

After the reader encounters a sense of immersion while reading fiction as Gill suggests, the reader then experiences narrative absorption (Kuijpers et al., 2017; Thiem, 2005). Narrative absorption or feeling absorbed in reading stories is defined as a “psychological and experiential state that can emerge during the reading of a narrative text characterized by a reader’s focused attention on the story world presented in the text, as a consequence of which readers become less aware of their surroundings and themselves” (Kuijpers et al., 2017, p. 32-34). Thiem (2005) supports this assertion by suggesting that through narrative absorption the reader ceases to be the

reader and safely detaches from the physical world, instead becoming an agent in a fictional world. Story narrative absorption encompasses four dimensions: attention, mental imagery, emotional engagement and transportation (Kuijpers et al., 2017). During this kind of experience, a reader can feel transported to the world of the story and this feeling can be supported by strong emotional reactions to what happens in the story world and by the mental imagery it generates (Kuijpers et al., 2017, p. 34).

In keeping in line with the idea of narrative absorption, Gerrig (1993) proposes that fiction stories enable readers to be transported into an imagined world. Gerrig (1993) employed a metaphor of travel, describing how a good work of fiction can “transport” a reader to different times and places (p. 10). According to Gerrig (1993) there are several elements to the experience of being transported by the traveller (or reader): 1) the traveller experiences transportation by some means of transportation as a result of performing certain actions; 2) the traveller goes some distance from their world of origin which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible and 3) the traveller returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey (p. 10-11). Therefore, based on Gerrig’s (1993) notions, once transported, the reader experiences thoughts and emotions predicated on the fictional context which can have lasting real-world consequences on the reader’s beliefs.

In further advancing Gerrig’s idea of a reader feeling transported into a book while reading, Green and Brock (2002) introduce the concept of narrative transportation, which is defined as “immersion into a text” (p. 702). Narrative transportation allows a reader to become deeply immersed in a story which can “lead to persuasion through reduced negative cognitive responding, realism of experience and strong affective responses” (Green & Brock, 2002, p. 702). Their study, using “Murder at the Mall,” an adapted version of a true story from Sherwin

Nuland's book *How We Die* (1994), evidenced that readers who were more highly transported into a narrative experienced greater belief change, more positive evaluations of sympathetic major characters and less rejection of story content.

With regards to narrative-based belief change, becoming absorbed in a story and subsequently transported into a narrative world can have emotional and persuasive consequences (see Green & Brock, 2000, 2002; Gerrig, 1993). After being transported in a text, readers often change their story-relevant beliefs and attitudes in response to the story (see Escalas, 2004; Green, 2004; Vaughn et al., 2009). As evidence, Green and Brock (2002) introduced research examining the phenomenological experience of being transported to a narrative world by exploring the causes and the consequences of this type of narrative-based mental processing and its impact on individuals' real-world beliefs. These real-world beliefs include our values, attitudes, worldviews, ideologies, opinions and convictions. Green and Brock (2002) further revealed that individuals who were more highly transported into a narrative showed greater belief change, more positive evaluations of sympathetic major characters and less rejection of story content. Green and Brock, like Gerrig, proposed returning from the transportation leaves readers somewhat changed by the experience as they access their opinions, previous knowledge, or other thoughts and experiences in order to evaluate the messages within the story. Therefore, the more readers are transported into a narrative world, the more likely they are to change their real-world beliefs and attitudes to be more consistent with those beliefs embedded within the story (Fitzgerald & Green, 2002; Calarco et al., 2002).

Despite the persuasive potential of narrative absorption, I want to return to Brecht's counter argument of the alienation effect. Brecht (1964) deliberately disrupted audience immersion by encouraging them to maintain critical distance and actively question the

performance. For instance, abrupt breaks in the fourth wall, harsh lighting, or interjected songs all served to remind viewers that they were witnessing a constructed reality, thus compelling them to see (and critique) the social and political contexts behind the drama (Brecht, 1964). Brecht believed that if audiences were too immersed or emotionally wrapped up in the story, they would lose their capacity for critical thinking (Brecht, 1964).

By extension, the same principle can be applied to reading fantasy: not all readers become absorbed (Kuijpers et al., 2014). Some deliberately hold the text at arm's length, examining it intellectually, reacting analytically and sustaining a continuous discourse about the issues at play (Kuijpers et al., 2014). This Brechtian approach fosters the idea of the possibility that critical distance, rather than immersion, might also produce meaningful reflections on social or political themes, thereby highlighting that anti-absorption is a valid lens through which to explore reading experiences (Bay-Cheng & Cole, 2010).

Nevertheless, while some readers of fantasy may similarly opt for an anti-absorption approach, my research ultimately suggests that deeper narrative absorption, far from diminishing critical reflection, can intensify engagement with social justice ideas and progressive themes. In other words, the more fully fantasy readers immerse themselves in a text, the more likely they are to reflect on its deeper socio-political implications once they step back from the reading experience.

The Transportation-Imagery Model

To further study and articulate the process of narrative-based belief change and the feeling of being transported into a novel, Green and Brock (2002) proposed the Transportation-Imagery Model which consists of five postulates: 1) belief change is limited to story texts which are stories that evoke images whereby readers' beliefs are implicated; 2) belief changes occurs to the

extent that the evoked images are activated by psychological transportation; 3) propensity for transportation by exposure to a given narrative account is affected by attributes of the recipient (i.e. imagery skill); 4) propensity for transportation by exposure to a given narrative account is affected by attributes of the text (i.e. level of artistic craftsmanship and adherence to narrative format) and 5) propensity for transportation by exposure to a narrative is affected by attributes of the context that might limit or foster opportunity for imaginative investment and participatory responses (p. 316-317). Under this model Green and Brock (2002) emphasize the role of imagery in belief change, whereby it is limited to texts where narrative images can be recalled, recognized and responded to. These mental images generated by highly descriptive scenes within the story essentially take on new meaning as a result of their establishing connections with the experience of entering the narrative world through transportation. Therefore, Green and Brock (2002) contend that as long as there has been a strong transportation experience, a previously held belief can be altered by an imagery-driven juxtaposition with new information in the story world. It is interesting to note that while this model has been used with fiction and non-fiction, there is a lack of research on whether imagery-rich narratives within literature like fantasy can reproduce transportation-induced belief change in the reader.

Narrative-Based Belief Change and the Liminal Space

Lawton and Cain (2022) maintain that reading stories fosters a mental *space* (my italics) for self-discovery and questioning, as well as a pathway of learning to cultivate empathy and work towards social justice. I am proposing in this thesis that this ‘space’ can possibly foster the ability to engage a reader in a process of discovering new truths, ways of thinking and even different ways to move and act in their worlds. Green and Brock’s and Gerrig’s notions with regards to narrative-based belief change, narrative absorption and new perspective generation in

the reader, can support Smith's (2016) idea that belief changes can occur in the realm of the conscious, unconscious, as well as somewhere in between. The mental processes involved in the Transportation-Imagery Model as well as the psychology behind narrative-based belief change allow for the establishment of this in-between location that Smith refers to. With regards to fantasy literature, Baker (2012) states that the genre can offer the same reflective benefits within a *space* (my italics) that potentially enters into dialogue with one's conscious everyday thinking.

As the previous section highlighted, there exists a transformative potential that occurs in our minds as we read (see Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Glover, 2018). Furthermore, Oatley and Djikic (2017) suggest that reading literary works of fiction possibly "involves an individual being altered from one psychological state into another through the acquisition of new knowledge and awareness" (p. 5). To further Oatley and Djikic's notions, in his previous and ongoing theoretical research, psychologist Paul Stenner (2021) has explored the relation between literature and personal transformation through liminal spaces. Crawford et al. (2015) contend that the liminal is a space of transition, not knowing and uncertainty which involves transformative learning and reflection. The liminal space puts distance between the reader and their actual world where a temporary separation results in acquiring a different perspective. Stenner and Zittoun (2020) further build on this idea that the "real worlds we inhabit are complex material and semiotic spheres of experience and practice, in which art [like literature] and associated imaginings become particularly relevant during liminal times of transition when those worlds collide, unravel, blur, or are ruptured" (p. 241). Stenner and Zittoun (2020) suggest that this blurring or rupturing can be caused by various events such as "changes in a person's environment, loss or changes in their relationships, or even sudden realizations – like when we read something eye-opening – which may open spaces of possibility for transformation or transition to a new world,

or may oblige such transformation” (p. 245). Stenner and Zittoun (2020) essentially contend that this transition in a liminal space implies an experience of traversing a threshold. Residing in this liminal space can be likened to anthropologist Victor Turner’s (1977) notions of the liminal as a ritualistic passage of transition, a “betwixt and between” (p. 95) space where the “underlying comes uppermost” (p. 102). Therefore, for Stenner (2021), building from Turner’s notions, a liminal space can allow for a psychological experience that is potentially transformative.

Within the fantasy genre the concept of the liminal is commonly used as a textual element that has been used within subgenres such as liminal fantasy (Mendlesohn, 2008) and portal-quest fantasy (Baker, 2016) as well as among the many descriptions of a dreamlike state a character might encounter. The liminal in literature can also refer to characters in a state of transition, moments of crisis leading to change, or periods of uncertainty and potential. Across fantasy literature subgenres, the concept of liminality is often explored through characters, plot developments and themes.

Characters in a liminal state can sometimes be described as in the midst of some type of change or development potentially brought on by a sense of being between realities or feeling trapped outside reality (Bieger, 2016; Klapcsik, 2012; Mendlesohn, 2008). This can manifest in various forms, such as a young protagonist navigating the complexities of adulthood in a coming-of-age story, undertaking a transformative journey, or experiencing a profound personal transformation triggered by a life-altering event. (Bieger, 2016; Lacy, 2019). These transitions often foster character development, where protagonists can confront their fears, desires and uncertainties. Furthermore, these liminal states can also challenge characters to make significant decisions or face profound truths, leading to transformative outcomes.

Within plot developments, the liminal in fantasy literature can be seen as the actual or metaphorical areas that represent in-between or transitional states. They are plot settings where the normal rules of the world appear to be suspended or do not apply, and they often represent change, transformation, or the boundary between different realms or states of being, thereby creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and possibility (Bieger, 2016; Klapcsik, 2012). Such settings can be literal, like bridges, doorways, crossroads, borders or even temporal spaces such as twilight symbolizing the crossing from one state to another. Within plot development, the liminal can also be more abstract, creating a sense of mystery, suspense, or otherworldliness, for instance a deserted city, a mist-laden path or the silence of a wooded grove, serving as backdrops that enhance the mood of the narrative.

Thematically, the liminal in fantasy literature can be a tool for exploring broader concepts like identity, growth, the human condition and the very nature of reality, be it subjective or otherwise (Maksimović, 2023). According to Maksimović (2023), the liminal can symbolize the transient nature of life and the perpetual state of flux that might offer reflections on the human experience. The liminal can be observed in fantasy stories that contain themes of transitions to adulthood, migration and changing realities, magical or spiritual awakening, or existential crises, where protagonists find themselves in transitional phases grappling with who they are and who they might become.

While the previous paragraphs highlight how fantasy stories contain liminal elements through character, setting and plot development, for the context of this research I am not referring to the liminal qualities that might be present in the text themselves, but rather the specific concepts that might induce critical thinking in a liminal state in the reader's mind called threshold concepts. As will be demonstrated in the following section, threshold concepts are

ideas that can potentially transform a reader's perception. They act as gateways, opening up new ways of thinking and understanding that were previously inaccessible to the reader (Meyer & Land, 2003). Coinciding with the notion of threshold concepts, I contend that the liminal space previously outlined by Stenner (2021) establishes a liminal state, which is an in-between phase where readers are transitioning from their previous understanding to a new one. I also argue that fantasy literature can operate as a vehicle to establish imaginable engagements with current social issues which provides a fertile ground for exploring threshold concepts. Therefore, while fantasy stories themselves might contain liminal elements, this research emphasizes the potential of these narratives to facilitate the exploration of threshold concepts, thereby inducing critical thinking in a liminal state within the fantasy reader's mind.

The Liminal Space, Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning

According to Stenner (2021), artistic creations such as music, poetry and literature are labelled as "liminal affective technologies" (p. 9) because they have the potential to link mental experiences to processes of psychosocial transformation. Conceived in this way, fantasy novels can act as an example of a "liminal affective technology that can facilitate, accompany, or engender relevant social transitions and associated personal transformations" (Stenner & Greco, 2018, p. 4).

Considering that a main premise to this research concerns the idea that fantasy literature has the potential to initiate narrative-based belief change through a reader's engagement with a liminal space, it is therefore important at this juncture to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of how a fantasy reader's engagement with the liminal space might foster narrative-based change in beliefs, worldviews and possibly even self-perceptions.

According to Schwartzman (2016), fantasy can "open up new ways of viewing and interacting with the ordinary world [...] through which adults can develop new ways of thinking"

(p. 19). Jakober (2008) contends that fantasy literature can help us understand aspects of human life by elevating things out of their familiar contexts. Baker (2016) states that fantasy is a literature intrinsically situated at intersections: the intersection of history and culture; the intersection of ideas; the intersection of literary traditions; and the intersection between worlds. This thesis contends that through the intersections of an individual's previously engrained notions and beliefs and the formulations of new ones, fantasy can shift reader perspectives by deepening their understanding of the world through presenting imagined alternatives to our current society. Along similar lines, Jakober (2008) argues that fantasy stories "make us think, make us question, make us wonder what is and what is not changeable" (p. 30). Comparably, Hoggan (2009) proposes that in narrative stories (like fantasy) ideas are given meaning and relevance as they bring abstract concepts into concrete and personal terms, which can lead to transformational experiences and new learning for the fantasy reader. Kosrara (2022) suggests that between the literary work and the reader, an environment is created where readers are free to hear and comprehend alternative ideas. Within the context of this research, the 'environment' Kostara refers to I liken to Stenner's notion of the liminal space that allows for the absorption and expansion of new ideas, thus enabling transformational learning in the fantasy reader.

However, I believe that it is not simply engagement with the liminal space that can lead to transformative insights. Rather, I contend that there needs to be a mechanism that prompts the fantasy reader to begin thinking with new perspectives and adopting a 'what if' stance within their own worldviews. This mechanism I borrow from Meyer and Land's (2003) research involving threshold concepts. Meyer and Land (2003) define threshold concepts as new and previously inaccessible ways of thinking about something operating within a liminal space (p. 1). A threshold concept thus represents a new way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing

something leading to a transformed internal view of a subject, ideology, worldview, etc (Meyer & Land, 2003). Morgan (2012) also contends that threshold concepts in a liminal space can be subversive and undermine deeply held beliefs, attitudes and assumptions, which is essential to thinking about progressive social change. According to Meyer and Land (2005), the liminality of this threshold learning offers “a more liquid space simultaneously transforming and being transformed as the individual moves through it” (p. 380). Thus, Meyer and Land (2005) suggest that the engagement with “threshold concepts in a liminal space leads not only to transformed thought, but also to a transfiguration of personal identity and adoption of an extended discourse” (p. 375). Therefore, the successful interaction with threshold concepts can allow the reader to gain a more successful passage through the liminal space, thereby supporting Stenner and Zittoun’s (2020) notions that literature, like fantasy, can foster “the discovery of new insights and the creation of new meaning” (p. 257), not through escape or avoidance, but rather in a transitive way in which literature can lead to a more sophisticated and enhancing transformative experience.

Threshold concepts within fantasy literature might involve progressive views around gender, race and class and questioning hegemonic ideologies like neo-liberalism. For example, in Octavia Butler’s afro-futurist work *Fledgling* (2005) the Ina are vampires that are (re)configured as powerful beings not outside of the history of racism, but as powerful, enchanting beings that are both vulnerable to the constraints of racism, sexism, homophobia and ableism and committed to creating futures for them and those they love that reject these ways of knowing (Morris, 2012). The main character Shori is endowed with a larger dose of melanin, making her skin colour darker than the stereotypical whiteness of the other Ina in her race, thus giving her a specific racial identity. The threshold concept a fantasy reader might encounter through Butler’s

depiction of Shori challenges the reader's traditional views of vampires in novels such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga (2005-2008) which serve as a way to affirm whiteness, white masculinity and Western values. Through the reader's interaction with Shori as she struggles to contend with her racial identity, they may gain a new understanding of racism, prejudice and white privilege. In this manner, the threshold concepts brought about in Butler's work further supports Stenner and Zittoun's (2020) notions that literature, such as fantasy, could use symbolic and abstract resources like threshold concepts that triggers, guides and supports the transformative potential in the liminal space.

Another important aspect of the threshold concept is that it prompts the fantasy reader to potentially have a breakthrough moment of realisation that requires a consciousness-raising experience. This experience I liken to Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientization* in which the reader is prompted to reflect upon and examine how their biases, assumptions and cultural worldviews affect the ways they perceive difference and power dynamics (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). In effect, the threshold concept in the liminal space might allow a fantasy reader to critically self-interrogate how they have been influenced by dominant ideologies.

It is important to note that this consciousness-raising experience also requires learning and reflection. The theory underpinning these notions is transformational learning theory which is premised on,

how [individuals] learn to negotiate and act on [their] own purposes, values, feelings and meanings rather than those [they] have uncritically assimilated from others. [The theory also] involves changes in psychosocial thinking in ways of judging and dealing with others and their ideas as a consequence of the new insights gained. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 8)

Furthering these notions, Lange (2013) proposes that "transformative learning involves examining the very premises of one's thought system and confronting realities that no longer fit

within one's existing world view" (p. 109). In other words, in order for an individual to be "considered to have undergone an instance of transformational learning, their existing ideas must undergo a drastic shift in meaning and perspective, leaving them with new ideas, new perspectives and a changed way of viewing their world" (Schwartzman, 2016, p. 14).

Engagement with threshold concepts in the liminal space can thus lead to transformational learning by encouraging fantasy readers to seek out multiple viewpoints that challenge the prevailing dominant cultural norms of class, race, gender etc. Consequently, transformational learning occurs when the reader reflects upon these newer viewpoints, "internalizes that reflection and hopefully comes to have a lasting and meaningful change in perspective" (Schwartzman, 2016, p. 14). For the fantasy reader then, interacting with threshold concepts in the liminal space can potentially establish a mental process of transformative learning that prompts the reader to question certain cultural assumptions, beliefs and ways of thinking that become entrenched in our thoughts, behaviours and actions. This premise then aligns with the idea that once a fantasy reader engages with the threshold concept and has a consciousness-raising experience, they will be transformed to such an extent that they may take action to address social injustices based on this new realization.

Narrative-Based Belief Change, the Liminal Space and Fan Activism

With the previous section in mind, the anticipation is that once a fantasy reader engages with threshold concepts in the liminal space and undergoes transformational learning, the resultant learning will potentially lead to some form of social action. In fact, Meyer and Land (2003) contend that the engagement with a threshold concept in the liminal space may involve a "performative element" (p. 5) that can have a practical outcome. Along similar lines Buck and Rowe (2015) state that:

a threshold concept can involve performative and proactive dispositions. Within a performative disposition, the [reader] can imagine and enact the idea within particular contexts. Within a proactive disposition, the [reader] instinctively experiences the idea as a relativist way of thinking, which allows them greater freedom to creatively respond to [the threshold concept] beyond the [liminal space]. (p. 178)

Based on Buck and Rowe's ideas, the performative aspect of engaging with threshold concepts in the liminal space can, therefore, help the fantasy reader to identify the transferability of their new-found knowledge and its applicability beyond the liminal space into the world around them. These notions elucidated by Meyer and Land and Buck and Rowe thus coincide with the premise behind this thesis that once narrative-based belief change occurs through engagement with threshold concepts in the liminal space, then the fantasy reader might be prompted to engage in some form of social justice action. In the following chapters, I will present how these promptings towards social justice can manifest through involvement in fantasy fan activism.

While the role of science fiction literature and its contributions to the evolution of progressive and transformative change through social movements has been increasingly researched especially in the fields of education and advocacy (Menadue & Jacups, 2018), research on similar contributions from fantasy literature have been limited. In response to this gap, Komatsubara (2022) contends that there exists the possibility for fantasy novels to contain content that becomes the driving force of social movements by providing people with a basis for an ideological struggle against dominant hegemonic oppressions and social injustices while encouraging solidarity. Therefore, when examining the role of collective group engagement and social movement formation in societal change from the liminal perspective, it can be inferred that fantasy readers successfully engaging with threshold concepts might engage in a group-based thinking, feeling and acting aimed at reforming the oppressive status quo resulting in fan activism. According to Carriere (2018), fan activism forms the basis for civic engagement and

political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself. One such example that will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, is the fan activist organisation inspired by fantasy literature Fandom Forward (formerly The Harry Potter Alliance). As fantasy readers emerge from the liminal space with their newfound perspectives, the performative aspect of engaging with threshold concepts might prompt them to actively participate with one another across fan activist collectives and networked spaces thus forming a collective agenda motivated towards progressive social change. Given the limited research on how the liminal space might foster fan activism and collective social action in the reader of fantasy fiction, the following chapters explore how the narrative-based belief change potential within the liminal space has the capacity to bring a collective readership together in a single voice to express their protest, demand change and then work towards achieving it. However, before proceeding, it is valuable to investigate fantasy literature's progressive potential through historical case studies.

Chapter 3

Investigating the Progressive Potential of Fantasy Literature via Case Studies

According to Nestingen (2011), fiction not only entertains, but also educates and provokes thought. By fulfilling these roles, Nestingen (2011) further argues that fiction novels can become catalysts for socio-political transformation, enabling readers to evolve their understandings and contribute to broader discussions about the world in which they live. When looking at fantasy literature, Dalton (2020) posits that analysing post-Tolkien fantasy works allows us “to appreciate something of the moral condition, philosophy and social values of different periods of our socio-history” (p. 81). With these arguments in mind, I contend that there is inherent value to studying the genre’s evolution over the past decades, reflecting notions that the incremental metamorphosis taking place within fantasy literature establishes an ever-changing milieu where inclusionary practices, pro-diversity ethics and awareness of oppression are gaining recognition and acknowledgment.

In further substantiating fantasy’s progressive potential, several scholars and literary critics have posited how the genre has the potential to contribute to critiques of socio-political constructs by forming the basis of discovering ways to question the status quo (see Suvin, 2000; Termini, 2015). According to Chuddley-Diatta (2018), critically studying the fantasy genre’s socio-political impacts can potentially prompt serious thought about global issues of the past, the present and possibly the future. For instance, many fantasy novels feature protagonists who challenge oppressive regimes or systems of power within their fictional realms. Considering J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), the titular character and his friends oppose the authoritarian rule of Lord Voldemort. Rowling’s narrative not only entertains, but might also encourage fantasy readers to reflect on the importance of resistance against tyranny and the values of justice and equality.

Within the previous chapters I have asserted that fantasy literature, with its often expansive and speculative worlds, can encourage readers to rethink societal norms and injustices. With this in mind, I also postulate that fantasy literature can serve as a tool for individuals to engage in an ideological struggle against prevailing hegemonic oppressions and social injustices, simultaneously fostering a sense of solidarity among fantasy readers. The genre achieves this through a variety of mechanisms, often by constructing immersive and imaginative worlds that parallel real-world issues. In this context, fantasy may encourage readers to re-evaluate their beliefs through the creation of a liminal space. While the aforementioned remains a basic premise for my thesis and my research, I also contend that once fantasy readers have engaged with threshold concepts in the liminal space, there is potentially a motivation to act upon these new-found learnings and perspectives in a social activist manner. Although this activism will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 5, it is important to discuss how certain works of fantasy fiction have already inspired social action and change.

Komatsubara (2022) posits that there exists the possibility for fantasy stories to become a driving force for social movements. Similarly, Nestingen (2011) also posits that by “finding similarity in disparate and unanswered claims for justice, people form public alliances used to critique, resist, intervene in and make demands about state and social transformation” (p. 255). Therefore, Nestingen and Komatsubara suggest that these public alliances inspired by fantasy works can lead to various fan activist movements. As stated in the previous chapter, fan activism forms the basis for civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself (Carriere, 2018). For some individuals, engagement in fan activism results in the emergence of group-based thinking, feeling and action aimed at reforming the oppressive status quo while, for others, fan activism has the capability to counter the potential for social change by

(re)asserting the value of the status quo and reinforcing hegemonic ideologies and beliefs (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2018). As fans participate with one another across these collective and networked spaces, they employ their capacity to communicate and circulate their ideas, thus forming a collective and shared agenda (Thomas, 2019). Conceived this way, fan activism can then provide individuals and groups with a capacity to bridge the border of the imagined and the actual, identifying an association between the imagined worlds in a fantasy novel and the real world (Carriere, 2018).

Given the contemporary context of activism and social justice across western society, this chapter aims to evidence that fantasy literature has the potential to initiate a progressive shift within a fantasy reader's mind. By examining a number of fan activist case studies inspired by fantasy texts, this chapter will attempt to illustrate how the fantasy genre can be an ideological, political and social motivator and disruptor, thereby adding to its progressive potential as a confrontational and reactionary genre. Through an examination of social justice issues – including anti-capitalist ideology, ableism, racism, patriarchy, gender identity, heterosexism and climate change present in selected fantasy texts, the following research will elucidate how engagement with fantasy novels can inform readers' life experiences by enriching their understanding of various situations and consequently shaping their dispositions towards social action.

The “Frodo Lives!” Campaign and Fantasy Fan-Activism in its Formative Years

As argued by Thomas (2013), literary genres emerge in response to profound societal demands, serving as reflections of distinct mindsets and cultural sensibilities. Fantasy, as a genre, not only aligns with this assertion, but also exemplifies it vividly. In fact, the perspective put forth by Routh and Wolff (1977) that fantasy's evolution as a genre underscores its dual role as both a

product of society and a critical voice amplifies the robust case for the genre's effectiveness.

This genre not only reflects contemporary thought structures, but also actively engages with them making it a persuasive and insightful commentary on societal dynamics and values (Routh & Wolff, 1977).

The sustained popularity and success of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) attests to fantasy's influence over the last seventy years (Chance, 2010). Coinciding with the publication and success of *The Lord of the Rings*, fantasy fandom took on a "quasi-socio-political function as an expression of youth dissatisfaction and rebellion during the mid-twentieth century culture wars, for being a fantasy fan meant rejecting mainstream dogma and embracing an alternative cultural vision" (Sergeant, 2020, p. 103). Fantasy, therefore, operated between "official political discourse and emotional catharsis, providing its readers and audiences with a set of both personal and social pleasures and counter-cultural community that played out during the 1960s as an underground social movement expressing itself through a single slogan 'Frodo Lives!'" (Sergeant, 2020, p. 103).

The 'Frodo Lives!' campaign was a social phenomenon in cities and university campuses across North America involving counter-cultural revolution, reaching its climax during the mid-to-late 1960s before dissipating throughout the 1970s (Brayton, 2006). Inspired by Tolkien's protagonist Frodo Baggins, the slogan was originally created as a quasi-humorous statement spoken in fantasy fandom circles debating whether Frodo's sailing into the Undying Lands is a metaphor for death or a more literal interpretation for the ending's meaning that Frodo would live forever. As the slogan gained counter-cultural significance, people began using it outside its original context. The movement encouraged participants to graffiti "Frodo Lives!" on public places like subway stations and bus shelters and display the message on badges, clothing and

protest banners (Barker, 2006; Brayton, 2006; Sergeant, 2020). This movement became a popular way for youth to express dissatisfaction and dissent, infusing fantasy fandom with a political edge (Barker, 2006; Brayton, 2006; Sergeant, 2020). Although “Frodo Lives!” no longer specifically addressed fantasy fans, it evolved into a symbol of broader youth disenfranchisement (Barker, 2006; Brayton, 2006; Sergeant, 2020). Consequently, this campaign further illustrates how the initial wave of fantasy fandom sparking cultural and societal change was inspired by a fantasy work.

During the 1960s in particular, when the “Frodo Lives!” campaign was at its peak, political activists throughout the Western world added critiques of political and gender power to their anarchical list of societal concerns (Call, 2007). The “Frodo Lives!” campaign inspired various political movements, including the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (Veldman, 1994). This reflected a synergy between the popularity of Tolkien’s environmentalist and anti-materialist fantasy writing and the values of 1960s activism (Veldman, 1994). For activists, the movement and slogan expressed an act of rebellion and an anti-materialist message to others fighting various causes, offering solidarity and collectivism, expressing it in terms of antagonism towards the individualised ideologies they encountered (Barker, 2006; Brayton, 2006; Sergeant, 2020). The youth-led “Frodo Lives!” campaign thus serves as a potentially illustrative analogy for articulating the social and political function of fantasy fiction within western society during this decade.

It is important to acknowledge that while the “Frodo Lives!” campaign waned in the 1970s, *The Lord of the Rings* continued to serve as a source of inspiration for social activists and protests, even decades later. For instance, the conflict in Iraq from 2003 to 2011 spurred anti-war demonstrations across the United States and globally, during which an edited image of President

George Bush donning the “One Ring of Power” circulated online (Gelder, 2006; Schalkwijk, 2013). Shortly thereafter, this widely disseminated image prompted discussions about President Bush, the Iraq War and the concept of evil, giving rise to the protest slogan “Frodo Has Failed: Bush Has the Ring.” This slogan began to appear on bumper stickers, clothing, graffiti and anti-Iraq War protest banners (Gelder, 2006; Schalkwijk, 2013), thus demonstrating how *The Lord of the Rings* has maintained its appeal as a symbol of political and social dissent.

As this case study has evidenced, the enduring legacy of the “Frodo Lives!” campaign illustrates the profound impact that fantasy literature, particularly Tolkien’s work, can have on real-world social and political movements. Although the campaign itself faded in the 1970s, the themes and symbols from *The Lord of the Rings* continued to resonate with activists, providing a framework for expressing dissent and challenging societal norms. The resurgence of Tolkien-inspired imagery and slogans during events like the anti-Iraq War protests in the early 2000s highlights the timeless relevance of his narratives in critiquing power and advocating for justice. As such, the evolution of “Frodo Lives!” from a niche fan statement to a symbol of resistance emphasises the transformative power of literature in uniting and inspiring generations to pursue meaningful change.

Remix Culture and Martin’s *A Song of Fire and Ice*

When delving into political expression like that of the “Frodo Lives!” campaign, it becomes evident that fantasy fan activism thrives within participatory communities that employ a diverse range of creative strategies for discourse and political mobilization. According to Jenkins et al. (2018), fans who take a political stance often engage in remix culture, utilizing elements drawn from their favoured media franchises. Remix culture, characterized by its use of text, music and film to create novel ideas, employs referential content through methods like collage, music

sampling, pastiche, mashups and culture jamming (Chidgey, 2018). Navas (2018) further underscores the cultural relevance of remixing, emphasizing its role as a repository for the perpetual recycling and repurposing of both tangible and intangible elements, thereby fostering awareness of the ongoing exchange of ideas across diverse fields and cultural domains for varied purposes.

When remixing is employed as a form of political participation, it becomes a critique that involves reframing political issues. This reframing occurs in a manner that aligns with the existing elements within the shared culture of the participants (Jenkins et al., 2018). Remixing relies heavily on the utilization of knowledge and cultural references that are specific to a particular community. For example, during the 2016 US Democratic primaries, there was an effort to draw a contrast between the candidates. In this context, Bernie Sanders was portrayed as someone deeply versed in popular culture, while Donald Trump was depicted as disconnected and lacking in cultural awareness (Maher, 2022). Fans of the fantasy genre took Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* as the foundational framework for a remixed meme designed to highlight these distinctions. The meme juxtaposed Sanders' imagined response from a fan's perspective, with statements like, "I love the rich imagery and fascinating characters. This thought put into the history of the world and details of the mythos is nothing short of brilliant!" (Jenkins et al., 2018, p. 237). On the other hand, Trump's response was portrayed as less cerebral, with comments such as, "Too long. Too boring. Not enough guns!" (Navas, 2018). Essentially, this creative use of the meme format sought to highlight the contrasting cultural perspectives associated with the two candidates during the primaries.

For another politically-oriented example inspired by fantasy literature, take for instance Jolevska-Popov and Strezova's (2020) proposal that George R.R. Martin's saga *A Song of Fire*

and Ice (1996 – present) is postmodernist in nature, favouring a political intertextuality or a game of power and overpowering, pointing to the current situations in world politics. Martin himself justified his work by stating that “Westeros draws a parallel to our [society’s] reality, meaning that the residents of the kingdoms pertaining to Westeros are too busy fighting their individual battles, again for egotistical reasons of power and wealth, and they are distracting them from the unravelling and imminent danger that has the potential to shatter their entire world to pieces” (Jolevska-Popov & Strezova, 2020, p. 103). For fantasy fans, Martin’s series offers progressive possibilities for social justice-oriented creativity. This is evident in projects like the YouTube video “Winter is Trumping,” where social activists mash up the HBO series “Game of Thrones” with Trump’s campaign speeches. In the video, Donald Trump, armed with a Valyrian steel sword named Deal-Maker, embarks on a quest through Westeros to enforce border policies (Parkinson, 2016), summarizing Trump’s medieval-like positions during his run for the Republican nomination (Jenkins et al., 2018). This remix allowed left-leaning activists and fantasy fans to create images and messages that emphasised Trump’s oppressive and discriminatory policies towards minorities.

As this section has demonstrated, the intersection of fantasy literature and political activism, exemplified by the remix culture surrounding Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, highlights the role of creative expression in societal discourse. Participatory communities can leverage fantasy narratives to critique and reframe political issues, drawing on shared cultural references to mobilize and inspire change. By remixing elements from media franchises such as HBO’s “Game of Thrones”, activists can communicate complex political messages in accessible and engaging ways. This dynamic process not only spotlights the relevance of fantasy in contemporary political arenas but also demonstrates the enduring influence of imaginative

storytelling in shaping public consciousness and fostering collective action. Whether through memes or video mashups, the creative strategies employed by fans and activists continue to contribute to meaningful dialogues and movements for social justice, showcasing the transformative potential of fantasy fiction in real-world contexts.

Fan Activism and Anti-Fandom Inspired by Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series

Moving to another significant example of fantasy literature's impact on contemporary discourse, I will now consider J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), which has had global-wide impact. Within the series, Rowling's portrayal of the Ministry of Magic emerges as a critique of prevailing governmental systems (Dawson, 2015). The Ministry, often depicted as bureaucratic, corrupt and ineffectual, serves as an allegory for the flaws and shortcomings inherent in many real-world institutions (Dawson, 2015). Rowling's depiction of the Ministry of Magic is not just a simple critique, but also a nuanced exploration of how power can become centralized and detached from the needs of society (Bryfonski, 2009). Throughout the series, the Ministry is shown as prioritizing self-preservation and political expediency over truth and justice, mirroring critiques of contemporary neoliberal governments (Bryfonski, 2009). For instance, the Ministry's denial and cover-up of Voldemort's return in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003) highlights how governments can manipulate information and resist change to maintain their status quo.

This depiction serves as a literary lens through which contemporary neoliberal ideology is scrutinized, depicting it as a hindrance to the collective will and strength of society (Bryfonski, 2009; Marciniak, 2016). The Ministry's obsession with control and regulation, often at the expense of individual freedoms and societal well-being, mirrors the critiques of neoliberal policies that prioritize market values and deregulation over social welfare (Bryfonski, 2009;

Marciniak, 2016). This perspective is notably characterized by the “conceptualization of the state as a parasitic entity sapping the vigour of the national body” (Dawson, 2015, p. 77). In the *Harry Potter* series, the Ministry’s actions often stifle innovation, suppress dissent and marginalize those who challenge its authority, reflecting concerns about how neoliberal governance can lead to societal stagnation and inequality (Bryfonski, 2009). By portraying the Ministry of Magic as a bureaucratic and parasitic entity, Rowling invites fantasy readers to reflect on the nature of power, governance and resistance in their own societies, further demonstrating the transformative potential of fantasy literature in engaging with real-world concerns.

According to Sullivan (2019), the *Harry Potter* series has a global reach, with over 500 million copies sold in 85 languages and the film adaptations reaching even wider audiences. The extensive fan base coalesced into an online community, which in turn provided a platform for various, often unanswered calls for social justice. This can be seen in the fan activist entity known as Fandom Forward (formerly The Harry Potter Alliance), which has since established its presence with operational chapters spanning over thirty countries (Fandom Forward, 2021). This activist platform plays a pivotal role in mobilizing fans to champion causes related to equity and societal betterment. Fandom Forward accomplishes this by offering accessible training, immersing fans in campaign experiences and fostering a sense of community among its members (Fandom Forward, 2021).

Fandom Forward harnesses the communal practices inherent to fan culture to orchestrate advocacy and activism campaigns. These efforts are organised through a decentralized network, comprising both paid and volunteer personnel as well as local chapters (Fandom Forward, 2021). The roots of this fan activist organization are in the fictional construct of Dumbledore’s Army, introduced in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003). In this book, Rowling’s

narrative explores themes of resistance and the power of grassroots movements, as seen in the formation of Dumbledore's Army. This student-led group symbolizes the potential for collective action and grassroots mobilization to counteract institutional failings and advocate for justice and reform (Bryfonski, 2009). In this way, the *Harry Potter* series not only critiques existing power structures, but also inspires fantasy readers to envision and work towards alternative modes of governance that prioritize community, equity and transparency (Bryfonski, 2009; Marciniak, 2016). Consequently, Fandom Forward adeptly joins this imaginative realm with real-world social justice endeavours, encompassing causes such as fair trade and marriage equality through initial creative and active engagement with the *Harry Potter* narrative world (Brough & Shresthova, 2012).

Initially founded by Andrew Slack in 2005, Fandom Forward's first initiative involved joining forces with prominent fans, directly courting Wizard Rock stars, podcast producers, fan fiction editors and writers, high-profile bloggers and convention organizers (Jenkins, 2012). For example, Paul DeGeorge, who together with his brother Joe, fronts Harry and the Potters, helped spearhead the Wizard Rock EP of the Month Club, which raised money for literacy-related non-profits by offering members exclusive CDs by groups such as the Whomping Willows, the Moaning Myrtles, Tonks and the Aurors, Danny Dementor, MC Kreacher and the Shrieking Shack Disco Gang (Jenkins, 2012). Fandom Forward also encouraged civic participation that included online discussion forums, creative production and collaborative efforts around sites like MuggleNet (<http://www.mugglenet.com/>) and The Leaky Cauldron (<http://theleakycauldron.org/>), the Quiddich tournaments and annual fan conventions (Jenkins, 2012). Through these fan activist communities, Fandom Forward collaborated with a number of US activist and charity organizations, such as Doctors for Health, Mass Equity, Free Press, The

GayStraight Alliance and Walmart Watch (Jenkins, 2012). The resultant fan activist collaboration with these organisations consequently raised 123,000 USD to fund five cargo planes transporting medical supplies to Haiti after the devastating 2010 earthquake (Jenkins, 2012). Additionally, the non-profit's Accio Books! Campaign has collected over 55,000 books for communities around the world, not to mention that Fandom Forward members called 3,597 residents of the state of Maine in one day, encouraging them to vote against Proposition 9, which would deny equal marriage rights to gay and lesbian couples (Hamilton & Sefel, 2015; Hinck, 2012; Jenkins, 2012). More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, fan groups from Fandom Forward held teach-ins that explained how to make cloth masks (Fandom Forward, 2021).

Leading up to the release of “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 2” (2011), Fandom Forward initiated a campaign targeting seven real-world Horcruxes, symbolic of objects embodying evil in the books (Hinck, 2012). For instance, the Starvation Wages Horcrux aimed to address global human rights issues by urging Warner Brothers to source Harry Potter candies from fair trade companies (Hamilton & Sefel, 2015; Hinck, 2012). Other Horcruxes, such as the Dementor Horcrux, collaborated with Reachout.com to support teens at risk of suicide, while the Body Bind Horcrux challenged distorted body images, and the Bullying Horcrux fought homophobia in schools by partnering with the Gay-Straight Alliance (Hamilton & Sefel, 2015; Hinck, 2012; Jenkins, 2012). These initiatives ranged from national activism to personal reflection, aiming to bridge social justice campaigns with individual fears and barriers to action. By using Horcruxes as pedagogical tools, Fandom Forward aimed to transform perceptions and inspire long-term social change.

With the previous discussion in mind, there is no doubt the *Harry Potter* series has garnered a tremendous fan base leading to fan activism. However, in spite of that, Rowling's

novels have also met with strong religious reactions, including extreme acts of rejection by church leaders and parents in conservative Christian communities, leading to book burnings, library bans and public denouncement of the series as evil for promoting witchcraft and Satanism (Feldt, 2016; Nexon & Gemmill, 2006). While Fandom Forward motivates fantasy readers and fans towards positive social change, the religious reactions from conservative groups demonstrates the more negative side to fan activism.

The controversy surrounding Rowling's novels originated within the American Christian Conservative Movement and the Christian Right Group, which perceive mass media as promoting values contradictory to Christian beliefs (Nexon & Gemmill, 2006). This conservative dispute led to protests, book burnings and attempts to ban the *Harry Potter* series from libraries and classrooms, making it one of the most challenged books in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Höttges, 2014). Critics argue that the portrayal of magic in the series contradicts Biblical scripture, promoting occultism and secular ethics (Nexon & Gemmill, 2006). Despite the Vatican's endorsement, conservative critics maintain that the series undermines parental and institutional authority (Nexon & Gemmill, 2006).

In a similar vein, Feldt (2016) argues that fantasy literature, like the *Harry Potter* series, shares narrative motifs with religious texts, leading to strong reactions from religious groups. The series' world-building, featuring magical realms alongside the mundane, reflects medievalist paradigms found in religious texts (Feldt, 2016). Fantasy protagonists, like Harry Potter, often bear cosmic responsibilities, embodying moral standards in a battle of good versus evil (Senior, 2012). While fantasy narratives do not inherently espouse religious themes, interpretations within specific communities can imbue them with religious significance (Feldt, 2016). Thus, the conservative Christian community's vocal opposition to Rowling's books reflects their

interpretation of the series as promoting values antithetical to Christianity, aligning with their broader agenda against perceived cultural influences.

In conclusion, this section highlights how Fandom Forward, inspired by Rowling's novels, stands as a testament to the power of fan activism, mobilizing a global community of fans to enact positive social change. From partnering with prominent fan figures to organizing civic participation initiatives, Fandom Forward has demonstrated the potential of fandom to drive meaningful action. The organization's Horcrux campaign, targeting real-world issues through symbolic means, exemplifies its innovative approach to advocacy and education. However, amidst the triumph of fan activism, the religious backlash against Rowling's novels emphasises the challenges faced by those advocating for progressive values within conservative communities. The controversy surrounding the *Harry Potter* series reveals the complex interplay between fiction, religion and social change, highlighting both the transformative potential and the opposition faced by fan activism in current society.

Two Sides of Fan Activism Inspired by Meyer's *Twilight* Saga

While Fandom Forward illustrates the potential for fandom to effect positive change, feminist analyses reveal persistent issues within the genre, particularly concerning gender dynamics. In examining works like the *Twilight* saga (2005-2008), feminist scholars and activists have raised concerns about the perpetuation of traditional gender norms and the portrayal of female characters (Dassler, 2021; Paris, 2016). From a feminist perspective, Dassler (2021) posits that fantasy literature sometimes fails to undergo critical examination due to the historical predominance of white male authors, thereby reinforcing a narrative framework that favours male protagonists while marginalizing female characters into stereotypical and underdeveloped

roles. This imbalance not only reflects systemic biases within the publishing industry, but also perpetuates narrow and limiting representations of gender roles and identities.

Beyond the demographics of authors and character portrayals, feminist critiques of fantasy literature also interrogate the underlying messages and themes present in these works. For instance, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga (2005-2008) has garnered significant attention from feminist scholars and activists due to its complex portrayal of gender dynamics (Paris, 2016). On one hand, the series has been interpreted as promoting conservative ideals such as traditional gender norms and premarital abstinence, framing protagonist Bella Swan as an emblem of virtuous femininity (Buchanan-Oliver & Schau, 2020; Dassler, 2021; Paris, 2016). While on the other hand, the saga has also been analysed as a narrative that inadvertently glorifies abusive relationships, positioning Bella as a passive victim of Edward Cullen's controlling behaviour (Buchanan-Oliver & Schau, 2020; Dassler, 2021; Paris, 2016).

Arguably, one of the most contentious elements of the series revolves around its modern interpretation of vampire mythology, which delves deeply into psychological and emotional realms while intertwining themes of sexual desire and physical aggression through the portrayal of a dominant, formidable and monstrous male lead character (Buchanan-Oliver & Schau, 2020; Salmi, 2014). In the novel *Breaking Dawn* (2008), advocates for social awareness emphasized instances of physical mistreatment endured by the female protagonist, Bella, subsequent to her marital union with the male vampire protagonist, Edward Cullen. In the scene depicting the morning after, Bella examines her naked body in a mirror and describes her lips as a little swollen, her body "decorated with patches of blue and purple" and her concern in covering up "the bruises that would be the hardest to hide" (Meyers, 2008, p. 73).

In response to the tumultuous relationship between Edward and Bella, fan activists on social media and dialogue websites like reddit.com, feminist blogs like the Huffpost and university student groups like the Sewanee Purple use online platforms to educate and bring attention to systematic male hegemony, ideological legitimization of toxic masculinity and reproductions of patriarchal normativity (Malka, 2022). Many of these groups and activists have organised their message with the purpose of encouraging teen girls and young women to be more aware of romantic relationships that are potentially abusive like the one portrayed between the protagonists in the *Twilight* series (Salmi, 2014). In fact, many online feminist activist communities and intimate partner violence education groups have linked the accounts of violence in Edward's and Bella's relationship to information provided by the National Domestic Violence Hotline, the Mayo Clinic and other online sources (Michel, 2011). In many of these groups, activists and critics hope to raise awareness of the problem of intimate partner violence, while offering opportunities for dialogue in an attempt to provide access to valuable interventions and supports (Michel, 2011).

According to Paris (2016), the *Twilight* series is known to have a predominantly female fan base, which has sparked efforts to address and educate about some of the problematic and unhealthy relationship themes within the narrative. Additionally, the books have also inspired various collective and communal groups dedicated to promoting positive social action through fan activism (Paris, 2016). One such organisation is Esme's Heart (originally Twilight Moms of Georgia), an activist group in the US founded in 2009 by Cindy Adrien and Bethany Rensberger (*About us*, n.d.). The organisation's first event partnered with a local movie theatre at the New Moon movie premiere in Macon, Georgia, to collect canned items for a November food drive where 250 attendees donated 1,000 pounds of provisions (*About us*, n.d.). Esme's Heart

describes itself as a non-profit organization whose mission is to accomplish acts of love inspired by a caring heart like Esme Cullen (*About us*, n.d.). In the *Twilight* saga, Esme is the matriarch of the Olympic coven and wife to Carlisle Cullen, with strong maternal instincts, considered an extremely warm individual gifted with the ability to love those around her passionately (*Esme Cullen*, n.d.). Inspired by Esme and the Cullen family's emphasis on compassion, altruism and ethical behaviour, even in challenging circumstances, members of Esme's Heart have undertaken various social initiatives aimed at giving back to their community. This has included collaborative efforts with local charities, demonstrating a commitment to social responsibility and community support. Through additional social actions they partnered with Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation and raised over 80,000 USD in seven days through donations and auctioning items for childhood cancer (*Alex's lemonade*, n.d.) and organised a blood donation campaign using the catchphrase "donating blood instead of drinking it" to attract fans of the series (*About us*, n.d.). What Esme's Heart shows us is that a collective fan base rooted in the desire to share the fondness they experienced for a fantasy series can potentially inspire fans and non-fans alike to engage in social activism.

In conclusion, the examination of fan activism through organizations like Esme's Heart and feminist critiques of fantasy literature highlights the impact of fan communities in contemporary society. While groups like Fandom Forward, discussed in the previous section, highlight the potential of fandom to mobilize for positive social change through creative and symbolic campaigns, the feminist analysis of works like the *Twilight* saga reveals persistent challenges within the genre, particularly concerning gender dynamics and the portrayal of relationships. Despite these criticisms via a feminist lens, the response from fan activists demonstrates the power of fandom to foster critical dialogue and social action. Organizations like

Esme's Heart show how fans can channel their passion for a series into meaningful community engagement, addressing issues such as domestic violence and supporting charitable causes. Together, these examples illustrate the dual capacity of fantasy literature to inspire both positive social activism and critical reflection on cultural norms and values.

Political Fan Activism and the Three-Fingered Salute in Collins' *Hunger Games* Series

With the previous section in mind, the efforts of Esme's Heart, rooted in their dedication to the values embodied by Esme and the Cullen family, highlights the potential for collective fan communities to inspire both fans and non-fans to engage in social activism. Turning to another facet of the fantasy literary world, the expansion of young adult dystopian fiction, exemplified by works like Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010), has burgeoned into a cultural phenomenon. According to Trotta and Sadri (2020), this genre resonates with readers across various speculative fiction domains, particularly in response to numerous significant global political developments. Lee (2021) argues that these futuristic narratives often serve as reflections of and commentaries on real-world issues, ranging from rapid technological advancements to prevailing social injustices. Trotta and Sadri (2020) further suggest that dystopian fiction can inspire readers to "see [themselves] reflected in the broken future(s) these narratives foretell" (p. 2). As such, Kligler-Vilenchik (2013) contends that dystopian narratives may encourage humanity, and its readers, to make changes in the present in order to create a better future. Consequently, this ability to imagine different possibilities may inspire political action, as suggested by Imagine Better's *Hunger Games*-related campaigns and the adoption of the three-fingered salute by global political activists (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2013).

The fan activist group Imagine Better originally started off as a branch of the Harry Potter Alliance, but in 2012, to coincide with the release of the first "Hunger Games" film,

Imagine Better partnered with Oxfam's GROW campaign to launch their "Hunger Is Not a Game" movement to tackle global hunger (Fandom Forward, 2021). During this operation *Hunger Games* fans were encouraged to sign Oxfam's GROW pledge, which called for governments to create policies to encourage the growth of crops for food rather than fuel, food aid reform and support for small farmers (Grossman-Cohen, 2012). According to Levitt (2020), with the release of the first film, canned food drives were held at local movie theatres, where activists attended midnight release parties, asking people to sign the pledge and tweet with the hashtag #notagame to create a sense of global community. Shortly thereafter, Imagine Better initiated the "We Are the Districts" campaign, inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement's slogan "We are the 99 percent," which came up with real-world causes of systemic inequality (Fandom Forward, 2021). According to Levitt (2020), Imagine Better urged fans to share their personal stories of inequality with the hashtag #myhungergames, and was even retweeted by Anonymous, a global, collaborative hacktivist group that has taken action against religious groups, governments and corporations. Mueller (2022) suggested that Imagine Better further encouraged *Hunger Games* fans to rise up in solidarity, posting real-world facts about economic inequality and pictures of themselves doing the three-finger salute, a symbol of the districts' rebellion against the Capitol within the book series. Furthermore, during this time the We Are the Districts Tumblr became a digital community space for the discussion of economic inequality, posting three-finger salute selfies and #myhungergames posts (Levitt, 2020).

It is important to note that out of all the initiatives Imagine Better launched, the three-fingered salute has maintained the longest and strongest support globally. In the *Hunger Games* series, the three-fingered salute acts as a symbol of the districts' resistance against economic inequalities and oppression. The salute was first seen in District 12 of Panem, when the narrator

Katniss Everdeen volunteered as tribute and was taken away to compete in the 74th Hunger Games, and subsequently evolved into a general symbol against the tyrannical dictatorship (Hui, 2020). Levitt (2020) linking the socially, economically and politically inferior position of the districts to the peripheral position of the Global South with the use of postcolonial theory. The districts extract resources and produce goods for the use of elites in the Capitol, with those districts located closest to the Capitol involved in the production of luxury items such as gemstones and occupying a stratified, privileged position as compared to the other districts (Levitt, 2020).

The series likewise reflects prevailing societal sentiments regarding the portrayal of the state as an oppressive entity within hegemonic neoliberal frameworks, such as how President Snow is represented as Panem's totalitarian leader, prompting social activists in south-east Asian countries like Myanmar and Thailand to adopt the three-finger salute used in the novels as a sign of solidarity, pro-democracy and resistance to authoritarian governments ("Three-Finger Salute", 2021). For instance, in May of 2014, Thai protestors raised the three-finger salute during demonstrations against the military takeover of Thailand's civilian government, appropriating the salute as a symbol of resistance, unity and overall opposition to the ruling military junta (Hui, 2020; Turner, 2017). On November 19th of the same year, one day before the premiere of "The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1" film, five students were arrested for raising the salute during a public speech by Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha, who led the coup and later became head of the military government; these students were subsequently detained by the police and handed over to military authorities for attitude and behavioural adjustment (Hui, 2020; Turner, 2017). Simultaneously, in Hong Kong, following a decision by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on reforms to Hong Kong's electoral process, which required

candidates for Hong Kong's chief executive to be selected by a nominating committee, tens of thousands of protesters led by the Umbrella Movement took to the streets to demand free and fair elections, adopting the three-finger salute as a pro-democracy symbol (Levitt, 2020). Similar pro-democracy demonstrations emerged in China as protestors adopted the three-finger salute as a sign of defiance against the Central People's Government in Beijing (Levitt, 2020). Even in the year 2020, six years after these demonstrations in Thailand and Hong Kong, the salute remains a lasting protest symbol during resistance movements and in current protests that call for a return to democratic elections (Hui, 2020). In 2020 students across Thailand raised three-fingered salutes, tied white ribbons in their hair, on their clothes, or on their belongings to stand in solidarity with anti-government protestors challenging conservative norms and institutions such as in daily morning assemblies where the national anthem is sung (Lertchoosakul, 2021).

According to Hui (2020), instances of the reappropriation of such symbols, like that of pro-democracy protesters with the three-finger salute, reveal that fantasy narratives can act as an impetus for social change, that they "expose the faults and fissures of lived reality, serving as more than a space of escape for readers, but instead as a catalyst for resistance movements and social justice" (p. 80-81). Therefore, a sense of solidarity and shared resistance to oppressive forces supporting and encouraging progressive action on a micro and macro social level can be seen when fans mutually understand a fantasy novel's narrative and experience similar oppressions in their lives (Hui, 2020). Consequently, as Hui (2020) points out, the solidarity fostered through narratives of economic inequality and resistance in fantasy literature, such as *The Hunger Games*, can serve to catalyse and motivate social action.

As this section demonstrates, the exploration of fan activism within the fantasy genre reveals a compelling interaction between narrative fiction and real-world social movements. The

case of the Imagine Better campaign demonstrates how fandom can be mobilized to effect positive change, leveraging the symbolic and creative potential of fantasy to address contemporary issues. Notably, young adult dystopian fiction, exemplified by *The Hunger Games*, serves as a cultural phenomenon that resonates with global audiences by reflecting and critiquing real-world injustices. The three-finger salute, adopted by pro-democracy activists in various countries, highlights the impact of these narratives in inspiring political action and solidarity. As such, fantasy literature can also act as an impetus for resistance and social justice, demonstrating the transformative power of this genre's stories to inspire and enact meaningful change in society.

Anti-Fandom, Book Cancellations and the Hugo Awards' "Puppygate"

According to Hui (2020), the sense of solidarity and shared resistance that emerges when fans collectively engage with the narrative and identify with its themes of oppression in their own lives can serve as a motivator for both micro and macro-level social action. Expanding on the theme of fan mobilization from the previous case study, it is important to recognize that inspiration drawn from a particular fantasy work can galvanize fans toward activism, be it aimed at raising awareness or advocating for a social cause, whether positive or negative. In a positive sense, fan activism can provide a supportive environment for individuals to connect, collaborate and mobilize around shared causes, strengthening social bonds and collective action. Conversely, fans can use their collective voices and actions to exert a potentially negative influence. Within the detrimental context of fan activism, Gray (2003) and Duffett (2013) discuss the concept of anti-fandom, whereby anti-fandom groups often adhere to rigid moral or ideological positions and strongly oppose published materials that deviate from their preferred viewpoints.

Accordingly, this section will discuss how the adverse impact of anti-fandom can directly affect the publishing industry and the literary awards sector.

One example of text-related anti-fandom can be seen in my previous discussion of the conservative Christian backlash to the *Harry Potter* series. Other examples include the criticism of some books to the extent that they are not published or at least require major revisions prior to publication. One such case involves Amélie Wen Zhao's novel *Blood Heir* (2019), which faced significant backlash on Twitter. Critics accused Zhao of writing a book that lacked sensitivity towards African-Americans, primarily due to passages depicting slaves being sold at an auction (Hoggatt, 2019). This criticism led to a debate about the representation of racial issues in literature and the responsibility of authors to handle sensitive topics with care (Schaub, 2019). Essentially, the controversy highlighted the complex dynamics between artistic expression and social responsibility, especially in a diverse and interconnected world. Even though Zhao defended her novel by claiming that she had intended the book to be a critique of indentured servitude in Asia and not having anything to do with slavery in the United States, Zhao ended up publicly stating that she had asked her publisher to cancel the publication of the book (Singal, 2019). Due to the heavy criticism from the online anti-fandom community towards her book, Zhao worked with her publisher, academic scholars and disgruntled fans to make subsequent revisions resulting in the re-scheduling of the book's publication (Singal, 2019).

Arguably, one of the most prominent examples of text-related anti-fandom involved N. K. Jemisin, the Hugo Awards and a movement labelled Puppygate. Starting in 1953 the Hugo Awards have been considered the top prize in literature for science fiction and fantasy works, where each year writers petition for nominations and votes from their fans (Wilson, 2018). Dating back to 2013, "Puppygate" (comprising of the Sad Puppies and Rabid Puppies

movements) became an attempt to disrupt the electoral proceedings of Worldcon led by authors who organized fan networks previously outside the established voting community of the Hugo Awards (Stevens & van der Merwe, 2018).

The controversy began when author Larry Correia took to his blog to ask for fan support at the upcoming Hugo Awards because he believed that his novel, *Monster Hunter Legion*, was better qualified for the award than previous winners had been (Wilson, 2018). His issue with previous winners was that they tended to be works that provided a strong social or political message (Mueller, 2022; Wilson, 2018). While he did not win a nomination that year, in 2014 he mobilised his followers and fan-base around his novel *Warbound*, again using his anti-message stance as a qualifier (Wilson, 2018). He created a list of his choices for nominees in each of the Hugo's twelve categories with selections that explicitly excluded works by or that feature women, members of the LGBTQ2IA+ community and liberal, left-wing-leaning authors (Mueller, 2022; Proctor & Kies, 2018; Wilson, 2018). As a result of his growing number of followers and supporters Correia dubbed his followers Sad Puppies, aiming for the commiseration similar to the emotional responses evoked from the Sarah McLachlan SPCA commercials which ask for financial support for mistreated animals (Wilson, 2018). The following year a new group known as the Rabid Puppies aimed to disrupt the 2015 Hugo Awards led by Theodore Beale (who went by the pseudonym Vox Day) centred on the same premise that many submissions were being overlooked in favour of more liberal and message-heavy works, but with a more aggressive and overtly political version of the Sad Puppies (Mueller, 2022; Proctor & Kies, 2018; Wilson, 2018). The movement gathered much support; in fact, the Puppygate movement organized a bloc vote to skew the final ballots away from works by perceived social justice-oriented works, whereby voting participation in the 2015 Hugo Awards

increased by 65 percent over previous years (Kreiter, 2021). Between the Sad and the Rabid Puppies, the “final shortlists were heavily dominated by Puppygate approved authors where 51 out of 60 Sad Puppy recommendations and 58 out of 67 Rabid Puppy slate titles made it onto the nominee shortlists” (Mueller, 2022, p. 97).

According to Kreiter (2021), much of the toxic rhetoric from the Puppygate movement focuses on African-American author N. K. Jemisin, who made history by becoming the first writer to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel three years in a row. Jemisin’s novels typically focus upon complex female characters traditionally placed on the margins due to their biological sex and race and consider the ways individuals may influence the future of a society (Pitts, 2021). *The Broken Earth Trilogy* (2015-2017) depicts how patriarchal male characters and their feminist-oriented counterparts impact women of colour and society more broadly (Pitts, 2021). The series also expands the focus of feminist utopias to consider the negative effects of traditional masculinities upon subjects possessing nonnormative racial, sexual and gender identities (Pitts, 2021). For example, in N. K. Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season* (2015) while instructing subjects to endure a fifth season they are told to follow strategies such as “building a wall, taking in the useful and excluding the useless, arming and storing and hoping for luck” (p. 409), a statement that reinforces oppressive patriarchal and discriminatory meta-narratives similar to those in the modern world.

Theodore Beale, known for his outspoken hatred of social justice activists and his conservative political leanings (Wilson, 2018), was among the strongest critics of Jemisin, her novels and their pro-diversity messaging. What Correia and Beale and their movements suggest is a rising toxicity that can be attributed to certain subsets of fans, most often understood as white, heterosexual men who feel the decline of their social, political, cultural and economic

capital most significantly through these changes to entertainment media (Kreiter, 2021; Proctor & Kies, 2018). Fearing the loss of their white male privilege, these fans expressed anger at the idea that traditional narratives (or story elements) in science fiction, fantasy, comic books and gaming was being overshadowed by a focus on diversity and inclusivity (Mueller, 2022). As such, Jemisin's success as a Black author was met with direct hostility from fans and supporters of the Puppygate movement. This backlash stemmed from white male advocates of toxic masculinity, who perceived the inclusion of women writers in science fiction and fantasy as detrimental to the genres' foundational elements and enjoyment (Kreiter, 2021). These white male critics argued that female writers of colour were undermining traditional genre boundaries by employing innovative narrative techniques and promoting greater racial, gender and sexual diversity (Kreiter, 2021; Mueller, 2022). The discussion in this section, as well as previous discourse, emphasizes that not only fantasy, but also science fiction can stimulate various reactionary movements through their texts.

Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*, Gender Identity and Keyboard Warriors

Sexual minority representation has been and continues to be a contentious issue (Tatum & Niedermeyer, 2021). Gender and sexuality remain a complex and contested cultural terrain, not just in society, but also in literature, media and film, where these topics serve as a juncture through which the personal and political intersect (Bishin, 2009). Over the past two decades, LGBTQ2IA+ identity has moved from media and popular culture invisibility into the public spotlight (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich, 2021). More recently the Netflix production of *The Sandman* (1988-1996) comic books introduced a new generation to Neil Gaiman's progressive work, instigating a backlash around gender representation. Netflix's production challenges the existing heteronormativity, racism and sexism in the film industry resulting in a backlash from online

anti-fandom networks maintaining various exclusionary practices and privileges of white heterosexual males.

During its eight-year run, *The Sandman* became one of the most popular, significant and award-winning comic book series in history (Brisbin & Booth, 2013). According to Brisbin and Booth (2013), Gaiman's saga tells a tale of familial responsibility, self-identification and aging, illuminating these issues' interconnectedness, along with a postmodernist critical edge relevant to contemporary notions of gender and identity. The overarching story of *The Sandman* centres on the character Dream, who embarks on a series of quests informed by his strong sense of responsibility until he dies. However, based on Brisbin and Booth's (2013) suggestions, the structure of the narrative strays from the typical style of the Hero's Journey by "challenging patriarchal discourse by interrogating notions of story and narrative, whereby the books vacillate from male-centric to female-centric and back again" (p. 27). A critical aspect of Gaiman's work is his use of transgender, homosexual and amorphous-gender characters, each of whom contradicts a culturally-presumed heteronormativity (Brisbin & Booth, 2013). For example, in *A Game of You* (1993), Wanda is a pre-op male-to-female transgender character who identifies and lives as a woman, which according to Brisbin and Booth (2013) viscerally reflects the schism between gender individuality and the conservatism of gender-roles in society. Additionally, Brisbin and Booth (2013) further contend that another character, Desire, displays Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity, an endless process of becoming, where Desire's perceived gender is not static; they appear as an androgynous being, often with soft, feminine features but no clear sex markers.

According to Nayek (2016), some gender critics have argued that *The Sandman* comics associate gender with physical appearance, thus misrepresenting the concept of gender, and

further misconstruing the fact that every transgender person desires to transform their body through surgery. It is a typical practice in the realm of printed comics that gender non-conforming characters are rarely visible or are limited to minor and secondary roles, where they never become the nucleus of any plotline (Nayek, 2016). This othering of the LGBTQ2IA+ community is also reflected in society where they are often accused of deceiving and lying about their gender, they are looked down upon and are considered to be unnatural and mentally unstable as well as easy targets of sexual assault (Nayek, 2016). These notions have repeatedly been encouraged by comics through their recurring illustration of the transgender characters as shape-shifters, aliens and prostitutes (Nayek, 2016). However, as Tembo (2020) contends, in *The Sandman* books and Netflix version readers and viewers are enlightened about the concepts of gender fluidity, transgender and gender queer in that associated characters are projected as normal human beings or superheroes. In this manner, Gaiman uses his work to “consciously and conscientiously draw attention to these very same issues and debates, thereby using the privilege of his cis white heterosexual male voice to create dialogue, as well as open both he and his work up to criticism along these lines” (Tembo, 2020, p. 98). By addressing these issues in his storytelling, Gaiman leverages his position of privilege to highlight and critique societal norms regarding gender and sexuality. This intentional approach not only fosters conversation, but also invites scrutiny and feedback from a diverse audience.

The reception of fantasy works like *The Sandman*, whether positive or negative, has created a valuable platform for dialogue between transgender and non-transgender readerships. Gaiman’s work has inspired and emboldened more gender non-conforming individuals to express their views and experiences (Scott et al., 2015). By seeing themselves represented in literature and media, these individuals may feel more validated and empowered to share their

stories, challenge societal expectations and advocate for greater inclusivity and acceptance.

Through this process, Gaiman's work contributes to the broader movement towards recognizing and celebrating diverse gender identities.

As an author, Gaiman is celebrated for his prolific nature, willingness to cross genres and adopt new media, engagement with fantasy readers and social activism (Karkulehto et al., 2019; Prescott, 2018). He is renowned for his ability to reimagine marginalized people and genres that have long been overlooked or undervalued (Karkulehto et al., 2019). Gaiman has not only brought these narratives to the forefront, but also championed various social causes. In the 1990s, Gaiman emerged as an author who crafted engaging female characters who were historically under-represented in the traditionally male genres of comics, science fiction and fantasy, while offering rich narratives that stretched the boundaries of form and offered representations of character diversity (Karkulehto, et al., 2019). Through his work, he has shed light on underrepresented voices and themes, making them accessible and engaging to a broad audience.

Gaiman's advocacy also extends beyond his writing. He utilizes multiple forms of communication to interact with fans and effect change. Whether through social media, public speaking, or participating in charitable initiatives, Gaiman actively engages with his audience to promote social awareness and responsibility. More to this point, Prescott (2018), contends that perhaps more than any other author, "Gaiman reaches out through various online outlets to interact with his fans, engage with other artists and promote causes related to literacy, equality, freedom of speech and social justice" (p. 67). His wider cultural impact is evident in Gaiman's large and diverse fanbase, "a mixture of cosplayers and comic geeks, parents and children, musicians and scientists, artists and bloggers" (Prescott, 2018, p. 70). He has used his reach with

fans to advocate for “non-profit and social causes, including raising funds for the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, the Reading Agency and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the last of which appointed him as a global Goodwill Ambassador in 2017” (Prescott, 2018, p. 70). With the previous in mind, Gaiman’s efforts have helped foster a more inclusive literary community and encouraged fantasy readers to think critically about the world around them. By blending his creative outputs with his commitment to social justice, Gaiman has made a significant impact both within and beyond the literary world.

Given Gaiman’s substantial social media presence, his dedication to social justice causes, his profound cultural influence, and his propensity to challenge conventional literary norms, motifs and character representations, it comes as little surprise that the Netflix adaptation of *The Sandman* garnered a mixed reception. According to (Hayles-Gledhill, 2021), Gaiman’s active engagement in discussions surrounding diversity, representation and societal issues has undoubtedly shaped expectations for adaptations of his work. Additionally, his willingness to push boundaries and subvert traditional storytelling conventions may have raised anticipation among fans, leading to heightened scrutiny of any adaptation (Hayles-Gledhill, 2021). Such criticism was primarily aimed at gender reversals such as Lucifer portrayed by Gwendoline Christie and Johanna Constantine played by Jenna Coleman (a gender-flipped version of a comic book character named John Constantine), Desire being played by nonbinary actor Mason Alexander Park and characters Death, Lucienne, Rose Walker, Jedd Walker and Unity Kincaid were changed from Caucasian to Black.

The adverse reaction to the Netflix series could stem from a variety of factors. According to Shah and Bock (2022), fans of the original comics may have had specific expectations regarding fidelity to the source material, which could have clashed with the creative liberties

taken by the adaptation. Furthermore, given the complexity and depth of *The Sandman*'s narrative and characters, translating them to a different medium presents inherent challenges that may not satisfy all viewers. As an example, a maelstrom of negative commentary on Twitter had critics displeased with the changes, accusing Gaiman of pandering to woke viewers, woke diversity and social justice messaging by calling out the gender swapping and race swapping of the show (Ichimura, 2022; Kupemba, 2022; Stewart, 2022). According to Johnson (2018), the ubiquity of social media has created a toxic environment in which fans use easy access to one another and producers to demand satisfaction of their consumer desires and spew hate-filled speech at those who dare propose other possibilities. The heated exchange of negative and positive comments regarding the Netflix series gave rise to cyber activism in the form of keyboard warriors consisting of individuals or groups associated with negative perception (Mahamed et al., 2020). *The Sandman* Twitter wars established an us versus them mentality by using the internet as a space to reinforce extreme forms of identity and allowing supporters the freedom to construct controversial and potential damaging narratives online (Geddes, 2016). Furthering Geddes point, Shah and Bock (2022) highlight that in an era where representation and inclusivity are increasingly valued, any perceived missteps in the portrayal of diverse characters or themes are likely to spark controversy and criticism. In other words, Gaiman's reputation as a champion of marginalized voices may have heightened sensitivity to issues of representation in the adaptation. Ultimately, the adverse reaction to the Netflix adaptation of *The Sandman* highlights the challenges inherent in translating beloved literary works to the screen and the complexities of meeting changing audience expectations while also pushing creative boundaries.

***Game of Thrones* and the Disability Narrative**

When it comes to fantasy literature and its cultural impact, one cannot ignore the prolific and expansive influence of Martin's *Song of Fire and Ice* saga across literary publishing and media

landscapes (see Hartnett, 2016; Neubauer, 2022). Some academics contend that Martin's most significant contribution to fantasy may be in convincing mainstream audiences of the acceptability of the genre and publishers and film studios of its profitability (see Hughes, 2015; Hynes, 2018). Others attest that *A Song of Fire and Ice* and its HBO adaptation "Game of Thrones" can potentially present the real world in disguise, thus encouraging audiences to engage imaginatively with narratives in order to understand the social structures and rules textually presented, using their own lived experiences as a guide (see Chau & Vanderwees, 2019; Hardy, 2019). In this manner, Martin's inclusive characterisation and representations of disability are examples of how some works of the fantasy genre can live up to their progressive potential. More to this point, Martin is renowned for "presenting more characters with disabilities than other fantasy series of such popularity" (Harrison, 2020, p. 113). Characters such as Tyrion Lannister and Penny depicted as little people, Brandon Stark becoming a paraplegic, Hodor's cognitive impairment, Maester Aemon and Beric Dondarrion's blindness, Gregor "The Hound" Clegane's disfigurement by skin burns and Jamie Lannister's loss of his hand represent the wide spectrum of disability, while also emphasising the continued lack of intersectional disability representation in fantasy literature.

According to Cheyne (2019), while some fantasy novels depict temporarily disabled heroes, permanently disabled protagonists are few, possibly explained by the fact that the fantasy quest typically involves literal as well as metaphorical journeys which are facilitated by a nondisabled body. In the realm of fantasy literature, it is relatively uncommon to encounter disabled protagonists like Tyrion and Jaime Lannister; typically, disabled characters are relegated to secondary or minor roles, or they serve as elements of the world-building process within a novel (Donnelly, 2016; Hatcher, 2021). Traditionally, deformed, monstrous or disabled

individuals are chosen to embody evildoers and villains, reinforcing negative stereotypes associated with disability (Biehl, 2021; Donnelly, 2016; Hatcher, 2021).

The representation of disability in fantasy disrupts the genre's typical emotional trajectory (Biehl, 2021; Donnelly, 2016; Hatcher, 2021). This disruption occurs because the prevailing feelings of loss and grief associated with disability in Western cultural imagination contradict the affirmative sense of hope and optimism that fantasy aims to evoke (Cheyne, 2019). Within the fantasy genre, disability often serves as a stark reminder of the fragility and vulnerability of human body-minds, suggesting that things might not necessarily turn out well in the end (Biehl, 2021; Cheyne, 2019; Donnelly, 2016; Hatcher, 2021). Therefore, by introducing successful disabled protagonists such as Tyrion and Jaime Lannister, George R.R. Martin challenges these established norms and stereotypes within the fantasy genre. These characters defy conventional expectations by occupying central roles within the narrative and displaying complex personalities and motivations. Their presence enriches the storytelling by offering nuanced portrayals of disability that transcend simplistic tropes and stereotypes. Through characters like Tyrion and Jaime, Martin invites fantasy readers to reconsider their assumptions about disability and prompts a deeper exploration of themes related to identity, resilience and the human experience.

From a critical standpoint and social justice perspective, disability is a value judgement, a socially constructed identity resulting from the interaction between people with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Macdonald & Deacon, 2019; Shuttleworth, 2016). According to Harrison (2020), both the book and television series highlight the emotional cost of living in a world designed for those with normal bodies, along with highlighting the felt impact of

inaccessibility and prejudice. For example, in Martin's book *A Game of Thrones* (2011) Tyrion Lannister faltered during the last leg of their day-long climb up to the Eyrie, "his stunted legs unable to take him any higher, spurring Bronn to carry him the rest of the way while adding to his humiliation" (p. 440). From this example, Ellis (2014) claims that Tyrion (Peter Dinklage) in the HBO production also opens up a new dialogue around disability representation in film and television and brings attention to the critiques of underrepresentation, negative stereotypes and inaccurate portrayals of normalisation in media. This new dialogue thus sparked impassioned Twitter responses through the hashtag #FreeTyrion, where fans were able to identify with disabled characters (Crugnale, 2014). In this way, disability critiques and awareness are brought to the forefront through Tyrion, who openly embraces the stigma imposed upon him by society. Through his character, the narrative highlights the pervasive discrimination faced by individuals who deviate from societal norms, regardless of their contributions to their communities and society as a whole.

The result of this critical dialogue and consciousness-raising around ableism prompted Tyrion's character to inspire discussions and fan activists to spread their conversations over onto disability blogs and crip fan fiction (definition to follow) sites because of their potential identification with his character. According to Sandino (2018), fan fiction communities largely take place online and increasingly function as a space for disability activism, allowing more individuals experiencing disablement to have their voices heard. Furthermore, Sandino (2018), posits that fan fiction as a whole represents far more diverse characters and authors than traditional publishing, while also offering a model of community-based reading that brings together marginalized persons who may be unable to meet in a physical space. Newman-Stille (2019) suggests that these fiction narratives can be politically transformative activities both for

those who are participating in the making itself, as well as for the recipients of the finished, created items. Leetal (2019) proposes that fan fiction writing can offer an avenue for critical engagement and activism. According to Carriere (2018), fan fiction can enable the creation of alternative narratives diverging from those presented in mainstream cultural adaptations. This allows for the inclusion of diverse voices, fresh perspectives, and counter-cultural messages that challenge dominant power structures typically perpetuated in mainstream popular culture. This critical re-making, therefore, has the same progressive potential in the fantasy genre as a space to envision an alternative world and imagine new possibilities for those experiencing disablement (Newman-Stille, 2019), especially in the world of crip fan fiction.

The crippling canon on fan fiction sites often retells well-known or not so known narratives of disability from people's own positions, on their own terms, thus opening fandom up to disability issues (Dreisinger, 2019). Using sites such as Fanfiction.net and Archive of Our Own (A03), microblogging sites such as Tumblr, or personal blogs or websites, fan fiction has allowed crip communities to write their stories onto existing narratives by not only restructuring and rewriting published works and pop culture to include explicitly crip stories, but also highlight existing crip elements in these tales (Sandino, 2018). The expansion, demand and growth of this online creative activism has prompted Dreamwidth, a social blogging platform to aim for robust technological accessibility and inclusive development practices (Ellcessor, 2018). The creation of Access_Fandom, a Dreamwidth community that hosts conversations about disability in media, fandom and fan fiction, serves as a key location for claiming a disabled identity, whereby people experiencing disablement share experiences, develop a shared cultural space and come to recognize a social model of disability or to participate in a disability community (Ellcessor, 2018). In this manner, the fan activism on such sites offers spaces in

which people with disabilities can challenge representational norms, engage in discussion and produce their own media texts, thus allowing them to reject the dominant paradigms that would mark them as less valuable, giving them the power to create their own autonomy and voice.

As this section has highlighted, the critical dialogue surrounding ableism, sparked by Tyrion's character in fantasy literature, has transcended the pages of novels to inspire discussions and activism within disability communities. Fan fiction platforms and online spaces have emerged as vital arenas for these conversations, providing marginalized individuals with a platform to voice their experiences and challenge mainstream narratives. Fan fiction not only amplifies diverse voices, but also reimagines traditional stories through a disability-inclusive lens. This transformative process empowers individuals to envision alternative worlds and narratives where disability is celebrated rather than stigmatized. The growth of online creative activism, exemplified by communities like Access_Fandom, signifies a significant shift towards inclusivity and representation in fandom culture. By reclaiming their narratives and asserting their autonomy, individuals with disabilities are challenging societal norms and shaping their own cultural spaces. Ultimately, the emergence of crip fan fiction serves as an example of empowerment, offering a platform for marginalized voices to be heard, recognized and celebrated within the realm of fantasy literature and beyond.

Climate Change & Radical Environmentalism Inspired by Eco-fantasy

In addition to the advancements in fan activism and cultural accessibility within online spaces as discussed in the previous section, it is further useful to contextualize these developments within the broader socio-political landscape of the new millennium and subsequent decades. This period witnessed significant ideological transformations stimulated by a multitude of crises and societal upheavals (see Cox, 1999; Teeple, 2000; West, 2016). In addition to geopolitical conflicts and

economic downturns, pivotal events such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the release of Al Gore's documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth" in 2006, underscored the urgent need to address climate change and the unsustainable practices inherent in industrial capitalism's exploitation of natural resources (Dawson, 2015). In fact, these events were pivotal in bringing environmentalism to the forefront of national political agendas. Figures such as Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg spearheaded advocacy efforts for immediate global action, providing the contextual backdrop for my final case study.

According to Willmott (2014), environmental activists, climate scientists and individuals committed to ecological preservation have increasingly embraced an eco-centric perspective, acknowledging humanity's pivotal role in precipitating the current Anthropocene era characterized by unprecedented environmental damage. Consequently, the narrative of ecological justice has come to centre on humanity's relationship with the natural world and the intrinsic interdependence between human behaviour and environmental sustainability. In literature, Huggan and Tiffin (2010), contend that an interest for writers in applying environmental themes in their writing stems from an ecocritical stance which explores the relationship between humans and non-humans, largely from the perspective of anxieties around humanity's destructive impact on the biosphere. Ecocriticism in literature seeks to view nature as a part of a community, not a commodity, which involves a change in how the natural world is viewed (Brawley, 2007). This shift in perspective is significant because, according to Zhang et al. (2017), literary works that contain eco-environmental criticisms and explorations can represent current environmental issues in the real world which demonstrates how fantasy writers and readers of different eras are potentially reflecting on environment-related problems.

In fantasy literature, this eco-centric justice trend has produced works that recognise the value of all elements of the biosphere, both animate and inanimate within their story worlds, thematic content and characters (Brawley, 2007). For instance, in Tolkien's *The Two Towers* (1954) Treebeard and the Ents fight against Saruman's destruction of Fanghorn Forest. For another example, Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017) contains a geologically and environmentally unstable story world called the Stillness ruined by seismic turmoil and seasons of harsh weather, thus affecting its characters who must adjust to living under these erratic ecological conditions. By contrast, Waller (2022) posits that Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice* saga displays a more allegorical vision of eco-centric fantasy, wherein multiple power factions clash as the threat of climate catastrophe looms, reflecting the real-world politics of climate change. Moreover, DiPaolo (2018) and Milkoreit (2019) further contend that the series has been used for political commentary on climate change by fostering discussions around environmental politics.

Since 2013, a number of political commentators and activists have drawn parallels between Martin's narrative and climate change through magazine articles, tweets, short videos and even political actions on the side-lines of international climate negotiations (Milkoreit, 2019). Examples include the Youth Climate Leaders Group in Brazil, who made a YouTube video using the White Walkers as an allegory for the real-world threat of climate change (Milkoreit, 2019). What makes Martin's and Jemisin's literary contribution to environmentalism discourses so significant is that they are written at a time when climate change research was expanding rapidly and becoming a real concern outside of the scientific community (Miller, 2017). In fact, Martin once told the New York Times that, the people in Westeros are fighting their individual battles over power and status and wealth, and those are so distracting to them

that they're ignoring the threat of 'winter is coming,' which has the potential to destroy all of them and to destroy their world, where the statement "winter is coming" serves as an allegorical statement concerning the peril or global warming and the threat of climate change (Miller, 2017).

While the warnings of climate change are obvious within the previous books I discussed, no other fantasy series has inspired such lasting ecological messaging and environmental activism as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR). According to Weaver (2018), Tolkien's secondary world of Middle-Earth speaks directly to notions of sustainability, industrialism and capitalism, where his work lends itself to an ecocritical analysis through its anti-industrial descriptions of domination and overconsumption contributing to the decline of the environment and the crisis that results from that deterioration. Tolkien's environmental vision and ecocritical position "provides a deep and complex ecological vision incorporating many elements and spanning a broad spectrum of approaches, including positions compatible with both conservation and preservation in modern environmentalism" (Dickerson & Evans, 2006, p. xvi). Examining characters such as Treebeard, Tom Bombadil, the Hobbits and the Elves it is evident they see themselves as part of the environment rather than its ruler. In LOTR Saruman's destruction of the nearby trees in Fangorn forest is a direct ecocritical-allegorical reading where the wizard is the face of industry, modernity and the destruction of nature (Ulstein, 2015).

As a result of Tolkien's strong eco-centric stance in his books, a number of radical environmentalist groups like Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) were inspired by his pro-environment messaging. By the early twenty-first century Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) had become the best known of the radical environmental groups in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, and they had established footholds in a multitude of countries on every continent but Antarctica (Taylor, 2005). According to Taylor

(2005), radical environmentalism comprises of a “cluster of environmental movements and ideologies that share an overall worldview that includes a perception of the sacredness of nature and traces environmental degradation to anthropocentric and hierarchical Western philosophies and religions” (p. 518).

Established in 1980, Earth First! gained notoriety for its radical environmental activism, characterized by civil disobedience campaigns and occasional sabotage to protect biologically sensitive lands (Taylor, 2005). Influenced by deep ecology, social ecology and anti-civilization anarchism, Earth First! activists combined ecological concerns with social justice and labour politics (Parson, 2008). Under the Earth First! umbrella, pagan groups like the Donga Tribe and the Dragon Environmental Network emerged, alongside the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), a splinter group known for economic sabotage to halt environmental exploitation (Taylor, 2005; Pickering, 2007). Inspired by Tolkien’s elves, ELF activists sought to educate the public about environmental atrocities and protect all life forms (Pickering, 2007). By 2004, ELF’s actions had expanded to include targeting luxury homes, ski resorts, and SUVs, resulting in damages exceeding 100 million USD and the group being labelled as the top domestic terrorism threat by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Taylor, 2005). While radical tactics like arson have waned, eco-conscious groups persist, with ELF remaining primarily underground. Contemporary platforms like Vice News’s Climate Uprise Movement continue to cover environmental activism, connecting modern-day eco-warriors through online channels and social media (Climate uprise, 2023). Furthermore, the ELF’s principles of lifestyle simplification, political resistance and reconnection with nature continue to shape the environmental agenda for future activists (Taylor, 2005).

In summary, eco-centric fantasy, as exemplified by works like N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, serves as a medium for raising ecological awareness and engaging fantasy readers in discussions about the looming threats of environmental degradation and climate change. These narratives offer allegorical reflections of real-world ecological crises, urging readers to contemplate the consequences of unchecked exploitation and the urgent need for collective action. Moreover, Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series and Jemisin's works have been instrumental in sparking political commentary and activism around climate change, drawing parallels between fictional narratives and real-world environmental challenges. Martin's notion of "Winter is coming" serves as a poignant allegory for the perils of global warming, highlighting the dangers of ignoring environmental threats in pursuit of power and wealth. Additionally, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* stands as a foundational text in eco-critical fantasy, inspiring lasting ecological messaging and environmental activism through its portrayal of the interconnectedness of characters and their environment. Overall, these literary contributions emphasise the transformative potential of fantasy literature in fostering environmental consciousness and inspiring meaningful action towards a sustainable future.

Conclusion

Through its imaginative storytelling and reflection of real-world issues, fantasy literature can serve as a catalyst for social activism, encouraging fantasy readers to empathize, reflect, envision and take action towards a more equitable and just society. The above case studies have demonstrated how novels of the genre can allow readers to draw parallels between the fiction narrative and real-world issues, prompting reflection and potentially motivating action. By using allegory, symbolism and by portraying conflicts between different races, species, or factions, fantasy stories such as LOTR reflect societal injustices, discrimination and power struggles.

These case studies also show how the introduction of diverse characters, each with their own backgrounds, struggles and perspectives allows fantasy readers to develop empathy and understanding for individuals from different backgrounds. As seen with the communities of crip fan fiction inspired by Tyrion, this understanding can foster a sense of solidarity with marginalized groups and drive activism for their rights and equality. The aforementioned case studies also demonstrate how fantasy literature, like the *Twilight* series, often delves into complex moral dilemmas and ethical questions. By exploring themes of good versus evil, power, corruption and sacrifice, these stories challenge readers to contemplate the implications of their actions and the greater good. This reflection can lead to increased awareness of societal issues and inspire activism aimed at fostering positive change. Similarly, fantasy often features protagonists overcoming adversity, standing up against oppression and fighting for what they believe in. Katniss in the *Hunger Games* offers fantasy readers an opportunity to see how fantasy can foster a sense of empowerment and resilience in readers, inspiring them to take a stand against injustices and work towards societal change. Stories like the *Hunger Games* provide visions of alternative worlds, societies and systems. By presenting utopian or dystopian worlds, fantasy encourages readers to envision a better future or cautions against potential societal pitfalls. This imaginative exploration can motivate activism by inspiring people to work toward creating a more just and equitable world.

Based on my initial inquiries and the progression of this research, I hypothesized that fantasy literature possesses the potential not only to aid readers in envisioning social change but also to be more effective than other genres in eliciting narrative-based belief shifts and motivating individual social action. The above case studies, accordingly, highlight the potential for fantasy literature to inspire readers toward social change and active engagement. However,

considering that these case studies have demonstrated that fantasy can and does inspire social activism in its readers, the actual cognitive mechanism behind this inspiration remains unknown and undertheorized. Therefore, since my specific research seeks to examine how fantasy might actually inspire its readers and fans to engage in social activism, the next stages of this research aim to discover how this might actually foster narrative-base belief change within the mind of the individual reader.

Chapter 4

Research Design, Methodology & Data Collection

Research Aims & Questions

Contemporary scholars such as Baker (2012), Bould (2002), Dalton (2019), Grifka-Wander (2019) and Trębicki (2011) have discussed how fantasy literature responds to the time in which it is created and how it can introduce new ideas. Drobot (2019) also suggests that fantasy novels help us think about the past and how people's beliefs and values have changed and can still change. They argue that these stories can lead to shifts in what society believes.

In spite of these arguments, there is a gap in researching how fantasy literature can profoundly change readers and groups of readers. This study aims to bridge this gap by focusing on the five research questions detailed below, which guide the study into the ways fantasy novels create mental spaces for reflection and imagination, thereby challenging and potentially altering fantasy readers' beliefs and perceptions about social justice.

In order to explore how fantasy books might help readers imagine “what if” scenarios, challenging their existing ideas and offering new perspectives on themselves and the world, I created two main objectives for this research. The first is to discover if a fantasy reader's engagement with narrative absorption and threshold concepts in a liminal space enables “what if” self-reflection that challenges preconceived ideologies and worldviews through imagination while providing illustrations for new possibilities for their own self-understanding and the world in which they live. The second is to determine whether this liminal interaction can allow fantasy stories, narratives and literature to foster beliefs and actions about improving the society in which they live. The research questions guiding this study include:

1. How do fantasy narratives critique current socio-political and cultural norms, and to what extent does this commentary prompt the genre's readers to re-examine and potentially shift their own beliefs about social justice? (RQ1)
2. In what ways does the narrative-based belief change fostered by fantasy literature potentially lead to heightened awareness and critical reflection on social justice issues in the individual fantasy reader? (RQ2)
3. How might engaging with fantasy literature create or enhance a 'liminal' or transformative mental space, enabling fantasy readers to reflect on alternate possibilities for individual and societal change? (RQ3)
4. In what ways does the interplay between fantasy literature and self-reflection within transformative mental spaces foster fan activism and engagement with social justice causes? (RQ4)
5. How can authors and the publishing industry leverage narrative elements like themes, motifs, and character development within the fantasy genre to foster narrative-based belief changes in fantasy readers and promote progressive social change? (RQ5)

These questions collectively aim to uncover the mechanisms through which fantasy literature influences fantasy readers beliefs and actions regarding social justice.

Research Design & Methodology

According to Jones (2007), qualitative research has the capacity to make discoveries with wide applicability while examining the attitudes, beliefs, expectations and behaviours of participants, which is most pertinent for my research purposes. The goal of most qualitative studies is to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of human experience through intensive study of particular cases or issues (Polit & Beck, 2010). This approach is particularly suited to addressing

research questions 1 and 2, which explore how fantasy literature critiques socio-political norms and creates transformative mental spaces for readers. As in the case of my research topic, which has the potential to span the fields of literature, sociology and cultural and media studies, I believe qualitative research is especially well suited for revealing higher-level concepts and theories that are not unique to a particular participant or setting (Polit & Beck, 2010). For the purpose of my research, the rich and highly detailed and potentially insightful nature of qualitative findings makes them especially suitable for extrapolation (Polit & Beck, 2010).

For this research I have chosen to employ a sequential QUAL-*qual* mixed method design (Morse, 2010, p. 483) consisting of two distinct phases. According to Morse (2010), the primary characteristic of this type of methodology is that both the core component and the supplementary component have an inductive theoretical drive. The QUAL-*qual* mixed method design coincides with the exploratory nature of my research, which has the potential to range from rich description to theory development (Morse, 2010; Polit & Beck, 2010). This design specifically facilitates the exploration of research questions 3 and 4 by allowing an in-depth examination of how transformative mental spaces foster activism and how authors can leverage narrative elements for social change. The core component (Phase One) consists of data gathering and thematic analysis emergent coding from semi-structured interviews (see Appendices A and B for interview questions and interview protocol) with readers of fantasy novels. The objective of the core component at the phase one interviews is broad scope information gathering and theme identification to lay the foundations for more in-depth, detailed and focused exploration at the second phase.

Incorporating Reader-Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1969) into the methodology underscores the dynamic interaction between the readers and the texts under examination. This

theory situates the reader as an active participant in meaning-making, emphasizing that the interpretations and experiences elicited by fantasy novels are as much a product of the reader's lived context as of the text itself (Rosenblatt, 1969). This theoretical framework is essential for addressing research questions 1 and 2, as it helps in understanding how readers engage with and are influenced by fantasy narratives. The interviews in Phase One were designed to capture this transactional process, examining how participants engaged with fantasy texts aesthetically and emotionally (Rosenblatt, 1969), thus shaping their broader understanding of the narratives and their socio-political implications.

The supplementary component (Phase Two) consists of follow-up semi-structured interviews with participants from phase one (see Appendix C for interview questions) and semi-structured interviews with fantasy authors (see Appendix D for interview questions). The qualitative data collected in the follow-up interviews as part of the second phase in the sequence help to explain, or elaborate on, the qualitative results obtained in the first phase. This component is directly aligned with research questions 3 and 4, as it seeks to understand the transition from personal belief changes to collective activism and the role of authors in promoting social justice through narrative elements. This component served to obtain a more detailed perspective of the initial themes using a different level of thematic analysis through a priori coding. During the data analysis stage of phase two each data set (readers of fantasy and authors) was kept separate and analysed separately until the findings from each component were incorporated into the results narrative (Morse, 2010).

In Phase Two, particular attention was paid to the concept of the “constructed audience” (Radway, 1988, p. 359-360) in relation to young adult (YA) fantasy readers. This term highlights the ways in which authors and publishers anticipate and frame their works for a perceived

readership, shaping the thematic elements and stylistic features to resonate with the imagined needs and preferences of young adult readers (McQuail, 1997). Understanding the constructed audience is important for addressing research question 5, which explores how authors and publishers can strategically use narrative elements to influence readers' beliefs and promote social change. This constructed audience emerged as a factor during the author interviews, particularly concerning how YA fantasy incorporates social justice narratives to align with the progressive values often attributed to its readership. For instance, author participants discussed tailoring character development and world-building to create accessible allegories for power dynamics, resistance and empathy that would resonate with younger, socially conscious audiences.

The supplementary interview data provided otherwise inaccessible insights, filling gaps left by the core method and helping to answer sub-questions that the core method alone could not address. (Morse, 2010). Through this dual focus on reader-response and the constructed audience, the methodology integrates the perspectives of both the recipients and creators of YA fantasy, offering a comprehensive understanding of its role in fostering social justice awareness. Therefore, the sequential QUAL-*qual* mixed method design helped to answer minor questions that have emerged from Phase One.

Phase One Data Collection

Participant Selection and Demographical Information

Participants for this study were drawn from two forms of non-probabilistic sampling. I used a purposive sample to include only people who meet the specific criteria outlined below.

Recruitment posters were posted in various bookstores in the Halifax area and on social media. I also found the use of snowball sampling very beneficial to help identify and refer additional study participants.

The criteria for inclusion in the study was:

- adults ≥ 18 years of age
- have a strong preference for reading fantasy literature
- preferably from diverse gender, cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds

A total of 16 participants entered the study.

This diverse and engaged sample is essential for addressing research questions 1 and 2, as it ensures a wide range of perspectives on how fantasy literature critiques socio-political norms and creates transformative mental spaces.

Age breakdown:

7 participants were between the ages of 20 and 29.

4 participants were between the ages of 30 and 39

2 participants were between the ages of 40 and 49.

1 participant was between the ages of 50 and 59.

2 participants chose not to disclose their age.

Gender breakdown:

8 participants self-identified as women.

4 participants self-identified as men.

3 participants self-identified as non-binary/trans/queer.

1 participant chose not to disclose their gender.

Ethnic breakdown:

8 participants self-identified as Caucasian/white.

2 participants self-identified as Black/African.

2 participants self-identified as Asian.

1 participant self-identified as First Nations/Métis.

1 participant self-identified as Middle Eastern.

1 participant self-identified as Latin American.

1 participant chose not to disclose their ethnicity.

By focusing on interviews with sixteen readers, this initial participant group represents a diverse cross-section of fantasy enthusiasts whose in-depth insights best address the research questions concerning engagement, immersion and potential shifts in worldview. These insights are directly relevant to research questions 1 and 2, which explore how fantasy narratives critique socio-political norms and foster belief changes in readers. The sample size was deemed adequate to encompass diverse perspectives while preserving the depth required for qualitative analysis.

Data Collection

Initially, I had scheduled interview sessions with each participant. Twelve of the interviews took place in-person at cafes, public libraries, and on the Dalhousie University Campus, while the remaining four had to be rescheduled several times for accommodation purposes. These four interviews eventually took place via Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

On average, each interview lasted approximately one hour, enabling thorough exploration of personal attitudes, reading experiences and internal thought processes. Although some participants were interviewed face-to-face and others online, the core interview protocol remained identical. This consistency ensured that the data collected retained comparability, as the potential differences in physical versus virtual environment did not appear to influence the depth or sincerity of participant responses.

Thirteen interviews were recorded and transcribed promptly in order to guide future research. The remaining three participants chose not to be recorded. During and after each interview and conversation, I wrote field notes to provide additional input to the analytic process to follow. As part of the summary process, after every interview I collected observation notes regarding the focused themes, unanswered questions and other concerns. My notes assisted in focusing my thinking about any themes that emerged from the interviews, recording unexpected

data limitations, or tracking issues with the structure of the interview. I then incorporated these notes as part of the constant comparative portion of the data analysis process.

All recorded interviews were captured in audio format, reflecting both participant preferences and the need for unobtrusive data collection. This approach aligned with the project's emphasis on open-ended dialogue. For the three participants who were not recorded, detailed field notes captured substantial direct quotations and contextual cues. While these notes may not replicate the verbatim completeness of a fully transcribed interview, the attention to detail made them sufficiently comparable for thematic analysis.

Self-reporting on cognitive processes such as immersion and narrative transportation remains the most suitable method for investigating readers' internal experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005). Alternative measures (e.g., physiological sensors) may offer objective indicators, but they do not capture the nuanced mental, emotional and imaginative states that arise during reading (Polkinghorne, 2005). Thus, collecting personal narratives was the most direct and ethically viable way to investigate these complex phenomena.

To transcribe the audio data, LiGRE software (ligresoftware.com) was employed. Having used this programme in the past, this platform was chosen for its efficient interface, its ability to integrate seamlessly with thematic analysis workflows and its reliable accuracy. In particular, LiGRE enabled rapid conversion of audio recordings into text, while providing options for note-taking and code labelling, thereby expediting the process of moving from raw data to initial thematic identification.

The rationale behind selecting semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions stems from the need to balance consistency of inquiry with the flexibility to delve into unexpected themes (Kallio et al., 2016). Such an approach is important when examining personal

beliefs and subjective reading experiences, as it provides a guiding framework without constraining respondents from describing the fullest possible range of thoughts and emotions (Kallio et al., 2016).

Data Coding Stages

I transcribed the interview sessions using qualitative thematic analysis. This initial coding involved the breaking down of qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them and comparing them for similarities and differences (Saldaña, 2015). The goal of initial coding is to remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by the readings of the data (Saldaña, 2015). The researcher acts as a mediator, influencing data/findings, by constantly making choices and selections on how and what to code, and how and why data/findings are presented and re-presented (Swain, 2018). It is an opportunity for me as the researcher to reflect deeply on the contents and nuances of my data as I begin to take ownership of them (Saldaña, 2015). After transcribing the interview sessions, I listed the coding of initial thematic impressions and performed subsequent re-readings to hone the thematic categories and to identify examples of each theme as well as moments of discrepancy. These initial codes were independently created based upon themes that emerged from the data collected by me as the researcher. In order to have a visual understanding of the codes listed, I created a chart listing the codes and the number of times each code appears in the interviews. I also conducted a second cycle of coding also called pattern coding. By identifying the patterns, I was able to regroup the codes into smaller categories, which led to identification of major themes in the data (see Appendix E).

This coding process is designed to systematically address research questions 1 and 2 by identifying how fantasy narratives critique socio-political norms and create transformative mental spaces for readers.

McCracken's Analytic Method

In addition to and expanding upon Saldaña's (2015) methods, I implemented McCracken's (1988) coding process. It encourages researchers to review all positional and intersectional categories, including their own, prior to analysis in order for researchers to identify and appreciate their own experience with the topic of interest (McCracken, 1988). This process of self-reflection provides an opportunity for researchers to contextualize their own assumptions to better distance themselves from any bias during the analysis phase. The self-reflection process for this inquiry is presented in the following section.

The details of McCracken's (1988) five-step method of qualitative narrative analysis used in this study are:

Step 1: I read the field notes and narrative interview transcripts twice to isolate viable utterances.

The first time the data was read for meaning. The second reading of the data isolated short phrases that occurred in each paragraph.

Step 2: These isolated phrases were developed into descriptive and interpretive categories. McCracken (1988) recommends the expansion of these phrases until the implications and possibilities are more fully played out.

Step 3: The preliminary categories generated from the phrases were utilized. At this point, McCracken (1988) suggests the researcher look for a "field of patterns and themes [...] rising into view" (p. 45).

Step 4: Cross-comparisons were made between each interview and the clusters of comments in my field notes in order to identify themes. Those themes that did not fit an assigned category were deleted or moved as a form of reliability checking.

Step 5: Categories were collapsed and organized into common themes.

Implementing McCracken's method aids in addressing all five research questions by ensuring a comprehensive and reflective analysis of how fantasy literature influences readers and how authors write narratives to promote social justice.

For Phase One, the exploratory thematic analysis offered a broad lens that captured unexpected themes within the data. However, a broad approach may invite criticism for its potential to yield diffuse categories (Guest et al., 2012). To counter this limitation, pattern coding and iterative refinement were implemented (Guest et al., 2012), ensuring that the final thematic structure accurately reflected the complexities and consistencies found across multiple interviews.

Having established the themes and insights from Phase One, the next step in this research design was to deepen the investigation. While Phase One provided preliminary thematic structures and a broad overview of readers' experiences with fantasy literature, further exploration was needed to refine and expand the findings. This transition is important for addressing research questions 3 and 4, which examine how transformative mental spaces foster activism and how authors can leverage narrative elements for social change. In keeping with a sequential explanatory approach, this transition to Phase Two targeted participants whose Phase One data indicated especially strong relevance to the identified themes. The following section outlines the participant selection and data collection methods used to build upon and clarify the initial results from Phase One.

Phase Two Data Collection

Participant Selection and Demographic Information

Fantasy Readership Participants

In order to expand and explore the meaning and impact of the themes identified in Phase One, deeper exploration with a second phase of interviews from the first participant group was

required. In the sequential explanatory design, a researcher typically connects the two phases while selecting the participants for the second phase follow-up analysis based on the results from the first phase. This selection process is directly tied to research questions 3 and 4, as it focuses on participants who have demonstrated strong immersive experiences and an interest in young adult fantasy, which is important for understanding the connection between narrative engagement and social activism. Considering the fact that the second phase research is intended to expand on specific results obtained from Phase One interviews only certain participants from the initial pool were selected for interviews. Those participants who identified strong secondary world immersive experiences, withdrawal/coming down effect once they completed reading a fantasy book and admitted reading and/or having an interest in teen fantasy were selected for the second phase research. Of the initial sixteen participants, eleven met these criteria. Of the eleven participants contacted nine agreed to a second round of follow-up interviews.

Age breakdown:

5 participants were between the ages of 20 and 29.

2 participants were between the ages of 30 and 39

1 participant were between the ages of 40 and 49.

1 participant was between the ages of 50 and 59.

Gender breakdown:

6 participants self-identified as women.

2 participants self-identified as men.

1 participant self-identified as non-binary/trans/queer.

Ethnic breakdown:

5 participants self-identified as Caucasian/white.

2 participants self-identified as Black/African.

1 participant self-identified as Asian.

1 participant self-identified as First Nations/Métis.

By selecting participants who exhibit strong immersive experiences, this phase directly addresses research question 3, which explores how engaging with fantasy literature creates transformative mental spaces, and research question 4, which examines the resultant fan activism and social engagement.

Data Collection

As with the Phase One interviews, I scheduled interview sessions with each of the nine participants. Seven of the interviews took place in-person at cafes, public libraries and on the Dalhousie University Campus, while the remaining two took place via Zoom. All nine interviews were recorded and transcribed promptly. During and after each interview and conversation, I wrote field notes to provide additional input to the analytic process to follow.

As with Phase One, each interview in Phase Two was designed to last approximately one hour, ensuring ample time for in-depth discussion of immersive experiences and shifting perspectives. This duration proved sufficient to explore the depth of participants' transformative mental spaces as outlined in research question 3 and their engagement with social justice causes as per research question 4. The choice to continue using self-reporting in Phase Two reflects the conviction that these introspective accounts remain the most direct route to understanding cognitive processes. Moreover, running both in-person and online interviews did not compromise the integrity of the data, as consistent questioning frameworks and rapport-building techniques maintained comparability.

Fantasy Author Participants

To further expand on the themes and data obtained in phase one interviews with fantasy writers were conducted. For this participant group snowball sampling was used since authors and writers can be a hard-to-reach population when it comes to participating in qualitative interviews and research and also because the researcher does not have the networking capacity to reach this

demographic. Snowball sampling involves researchers starting with a small number of initial contacts who fit the research criteria and are invited to become participants within the research (Parker et al., 2019). During the Phase One interviews several participants identified their knowledge of and connection to several fantasy writers and offered to recommend them for my research. Contact was made and three interviews were arranged. Consequently, through these interviews, recommendations concerning other contacts who fit the criteria of the research were made and two more interviews were conducted. A total of five participants entered the study.

Age breakdown:

- 1 participant was between the ages of 30 and 39
- 1 participant was between the ages of 40 and 49.
- 2 participants were between the ages of 50 and 59.
- 1 participant was between the ages of 60 and 69.

Gender breakdown:

- 2 participants self-identified as women.
- 3 participants self-identified as men.

Ethnic breakdown:

- 3 participants self-identified as Caucasian/white.
- 1 participant self-identified as Black/African.
- 1 participant self-identified as First Nations/Métis.

Interviewing authors directly addresses research question 5, which investigates how fantasy authors and the publishing industry can leverage narrative elements to foster belief changes and promote social change. Understanding authors' intentional strategies provides critical insights into the mechanisms behind the narratives that influence fantasy readers.

Data Collection

After the five interviews were scheduled, two interviews took place in-person at public libraries and the remaining three took place over Zoom. The five interviews were recorded and

transcribed promptly. During and after each interview and conversation, I wrote field notes to provide additional input to the analytic process to follow.

Conducting interviews with five authors is integral to addressing the research questions holistically, as it introduces the writers' perspectives on narrative construction and thematic emphasis. This integration is essential for research question 5, which explores how authors intentionally design narrative elements to challenge dominant ideologies and support progressive change. By juxtaposing these views with those of the fantasy readers, the dataset becomes more comprehensive and effectively validates whether the authors' deliberate literary techniques indeed align with, or challenge, readers' immersive experiences and ideological reflections. Although the overall sample size remains modest, the depth achieved in these qualitative interviews satisfies the methodological aim of capturing the nuances and transformations inherent to fantasy engagement.

Audio recordings were again used throughout Phase Two, with LiGRE software providing a unified platform for transcription and initial text coding. Maintaining the same transcription protocol across both phases enhances reliability and comparability, facilitating cross-analysis of fantasy reader and author perspectives.

Data Coding Stages

For the Phase Two coding I employed a deductive approach using a pre-defined list of codes (a priori) that were derived from the individual questions asked in the interviews while keeping in mind the purpose of the research. According to Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019), deductive approaches ensure structure and theoretical relevance from the start, while still enabling a closer inductive exploration of the deductive codes in later coding stages. This is considered a helpful method when the researcher wants to generalize analytically across cases (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) such as combining the data from both the fantasy readership and author

participant groups. Also, with deductive, a priori coding, the process can still remain flexible and the coding frame can be adjusted if interesting differences emerge within a given code or if some new and interesting things come up that are not captured by the existing codes (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

My stages of data coding were adapted from Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) which involved the following steps:

Stage 1 (Codebook): This stage involves developing the code manual which is a template in the form of codes from a codebook to be applied as a means of organizing text for subsequent interpretation (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). A codebook is a tool for the development and evolution of a coding system and is an important means for documenting the codes and the procedures for applying them (Weston et al., 2001). For this research my codebook (see Appendix F) was developed in *a priori* fashion based on my research and interview questions. For this phase of the research the codes were identified by the following: “the code label or name, the definition of what the theme concerns and a description of how to know when the theme occurs” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 85)

Stage 2 (Reliability Testing): At this stage I undertook testing the reliability of the codes to “determine the applicability of the code to the raw information” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 85). I took approximately ten percent of my transcribed interviews and applied the codes looking for inconsistencies within the coding. I compared the results and found that no modifications to the predetermined codebook was required.

Stage 3 (Applying Codes): At this stage I applied the codes from the codebook to the text of the transcribed interviews with the intent of identifying meaningful and significant participant statements in the text. The analysis at this step was guided by the a priori codes.

Stage 4 (Identifying Themes): During this stage Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) identify the need to connect codes, which helps to foster the process of discovering themes and patterns in the data. Similarities between the readership group and the author group data were emerging at this stage and themes within each data group were also beginning to cluster.

These coding stages are designed to address all five research questions by ensuring that both inductive insights and deductive frameworks are applied to understand how fantasy literature critiques norms, fosters belief changes, creates transformative spaces, encourages activism and leverages narrative elements for social change.

The motivation behind using a priori codes in Phase Two stems from the need to delve deeper into the patterns identified in Phase One. Critics of deductive methods argue that focusing on predefined categories can restrict attention to unanticipated phenomena (Hyde, 2000; Morse & Mitcham, 2002). However, this study mitigates such risks by allowing room for emergent codes and by implementing memo-writing sessions that prompt the researcher to capture novel observations outside of the predefined codebook (Patel et al., 2016). Notably, the second-round reader interviews were analysed alongside author interviews to emphasise how fantasy writers' thematic intentions either coordinate with, or deviate from, the ways fantasy readers interpret and internalize these narratives. This comprehensive approach ensures that research questions 3, 4, and 5 are thoroughly explored, providing a balanced understanding of both reader experiences and authorial strategies. This integrated lens proved beneficial for advancing a holistic understanding of how fantasy literature potentially fosters self-reflection and ideological change.

In summary, interviews with sixteen readers and five authors not only produced a dataset large and diverse enough for in-depth qualitative analysis but also supplied critical, multifaceted perspectives on narrative immersion and belief shifts. By conducting interviews of around one

hour, and consistently employing a semi-structured format, the data retained both richness and comparability across different modes of interaction. Audio recording and LiGRE software ensured reliable, detailed transcripts, while note-taking for unrecorded interviews prioritized accuracy in capturing key insights. Self-reporting remains the most direct and ethically appropriate method for investigating cognitive processes such as immersion and transportation (Polkinghorne, 2005), while the thematic analysis (exploratory in Phase One and a priori in Phase Two) effectively balanced comprehensiveness with focus. Finally, analysing second-round reader data in accordance with fantasy author interviews highlights the interplay between creative intent and fantasy reader experience, thereby strengthening the study's conclusions on the transformative power of fantasy narratives.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how the sequential QUAL-qual mixed method design informed both the breadth and depth of the research process. Phase One established foundational themes related to reader engagement with fantasy literature, while Phase Two enabled further refinement and expansion of these themes through targeted follow-up interviews with select fantasy readers and additional interviews with fantasy authors. Each phase was thoroughly aligned with the five research questions, ensuring that the methodology addresses how fantasy literature critiques socio-political norms, creates transformative mental spaces, fosters fan activism and leverages narrative elements for social change. By combining inductive and deductive approaches, the resulting analysis offers an understanding of how narrative absorption, liminality and critical reflection converge to foster transformative belief change and potential social engagement. In the next chapter, findings from both phases are synthesized, illustrating how these multiple lines of inquiry shed light on the possibilities for fan activism and deeper social critique arising from engagement with fantasy narratives.

Chapter 5

Results & Discussion

This chapter presents the results of the research, structured in two phases to systematically address the study's research questions and objectives. Each phase is aligned with the five research questions, ensuring that the findings directly contribute to understanding how fantasy literature influences socio-political norms, belief changes and social activism among readers. Phase One focuses on an exploratory thematic analysis of data gathered from initial interviews, identifying four main themes that serve as the foundation for understanding how participants engage with and interpret fantasy literature. These themes provide critical insights into the participants' experiences of narrative absorption, liminality and belief transformation.

Phase Two builds upon these initial findings through a sequential explanatory approach. By integrating and expanding the thematic results from Phase One with data from the second phase of interviews, this chapter presents a comprehensive discussion that combines inductive and deductive analytical frameworks. Phase Two results not only deepen the understanding of the original themes but also reveal additional dimensions of the participants' engagement with fantasy literature, further enriching the study's findings.

Each research question is addressed through specific thematic insights, ensuring a thorough exploration of the ways in which fantasy literature can critique socio-political norms, foster belief changes, create transformative mental spaces, encourage fan activism and leverage narrative elements for social change.

The following sections outline the findings of both phases. The first section details the themes identified in Phase One, while the second integrates the results from both phases to provide a cohesive discussion of the overarching research outcomes.

Phase One Results & Discussion

From the recruitment method previously described, sixteen participants were included in the study. Through the information gathering and coding process four main themes emerged from the data. They are outlined below.

Theme #1: Multimodal Experience of Reading

In recent decades, there has been a significant proliferation of the fantasy genre in the realms of both film and television, thereby granting access to this genre for millions beyond the confines of the literary realm (Cohn, 2020). The environment beyond the physical text of a fantasy novel extends into visual, digital and online domains. In all sixteen interviews the participants reported their engagement with some form of mass media (i.e., social media, film, television, role playing games and fantasy fiction websites) as part of their reading experiences. Cohn (2020) argues that in this manner the fantastic has gone from a “subcultural to a mass cultural phenomenon: it has moved from a counter-public sphere to the public sphere, becoming a structuring part of its imaginary” (p. 456). Participant #3 reported having a “richer” reading experience due in part to watching “Hollywood adaptations of fantasy books.” Participant #6 stated having a “deeper understanding” and participant #11 noted having a “stronger appreciation for fantasy novels” if and when they engaged with fantasy texts through various digital and mass media. These observations strongly relate to research question 3, which investigates how multimodal experiences influence the transformative mental spaces created by fantasy literature. By engaging with multiple media formats, readers are not only consuming the narrative through text but are also interpreting and internalizing it through visual and interactive experiences, thereby enhancing their cognitive and emotional engagement with the content.

Walsh (2006) contends that, when reading, the meaning(s) within a book can be communicated through a synchronisation of modes, be it spoken or written text, still or moving

images, or words produced on paper or an electronic screen. This harmonisation can be linked to multimodal textual representation in non-print form such as film, video and the internet (Walsh, 2006). Participant #9 reported that when they read a fantasy book, they often have their “phone nearby so that [they] can look up things from the book on the net.” Participants #1, #5, #10 and #14 stated that playing role playing games (RPGs) such as *The Witcher*, *The Elder Scrolls*, *Final Fantasy* and *World of Warcraft* makes their experiences of reading fantasy even more “realistic”, “fun”, “entertaining”, “enjoyable”, “satisfying” and “captivating.” When playing the RPG *Dark Alliance* and reading the *Dungeons & Dragons* novels, participant #5 summarised this experience as “taking the books to a whole new level [...] I feel like I am more a part of the books and the characters [...] it’s like I become the characters somehow [...] when I am reading [...] because the game makes it so real for me.” This enhancement through RPGs and digital media directly addresses research question 4, which explores how such multimodal engagements can encourage fan activism. By deepening their connection to the narrative, fantasy readers are more likely to feel invested in the story’s outcomes and, consequently, more motivated to engage in related social causes.

Transactional Reader-Response Theory, as developed by Louise Rosenblatt (1969), offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamic interaction between the reader and the text. Contrary to dismissing the importance of either the text or the reader, Rosenblatt (1969) emphasizes the co-dependent relationship between them in the process of meaning creation. When a reader engages with a text, it serves as a stimulus that prompts their individual responses, giving rise to numerous feelings, associations and memories. These responses, in turn, play a vital role in shaping the interpretation of the text as a reader progress through it.

The reading experience is profoundly influenced by various factors, including a person's prior encounters with literature, the collective sum of their accumulated knowledge and even their current physical and emotional state (Darlington, 1994). Each of these elements contributes to the lens through which a reader perceives and engages with the text. In this context, it is essential to approach the text in what Rosenblatt (1969) calls the aesthetic mode. The aesthetic mode invites a reader to establish a personal and emotional connection with the text, focusing their attention on the subtleties of its language and encouraging them to make subjective judgments (Rosenblatt, 1969). Through this process, the reader not only decodes the text's explicit meaning, but also delves into its nuances, exploring the intricate interplay of emotions, ideas and interpretations that enrich their reading experience. Essentially, Transactional Reader-Response Theory highlights the active and ever-evolving nature of reading, emphasizing that a reader's engagement with a text is not a passive reception of information, but a dynamic and subjective dialogue between their own individual perspectives and the text's inherent complexities.

Based on Transactional Reader-Response Theory, Rosenblatt describes participant #5's experience of playing an RPG which makes the aesthetic transaction of reading *Dungeons & Dragons* more engaging. This also speaks to the multimodal mass media component that can impact fantasy textual representations whereby the reader is moved towards a vicarious understanding of the lives and experiences of the characters in the fantasy novel due to the occurrence of a transaction between the reader, the text and digital media which becomes not simply an object, but an event, a lived-through process for the reader (Glover, 2018). Furthermore, applying Rosenblatt's theory to the current research highlights how multimodal experiences facilitate a deeper transactional relationship between the reader and the text, thereby

addressing research question 1, which examines how fantasy literature critiques socio-political norms. The active engagement promoted by multimodal interactions allows readers to interpret and question underlying societal structures portrayed within the narratives.

Throughout the interviews it becomes more evident that the process of reading is not static; it is a constant interaction between the fantasy reader, the text and their mediated environment. Participant #15 stated that they

never used to read fantasy when [they] were younger [...] until recently [...] in the last 15 years or so after watching the LOTR films and reading all the comments on social media [they] became more interested in fantasy and started to read [the genre]. It was as if [their] eyes were opened to a whole new world [they] never knew existed.

Participant #1 also stated that when they

watched Game of Thrones on HBO [they] found it so brutal to women, making [them] re-read the books to see if the same violence was in them [...] because [they are] a supporter of the #MeToo movement and [they] did not think this was appropriate.

What participants #15 and #1 highlight is the interaction between reader and text can occur within a number of contexts simultaneously: the social or cultural context of the individual reader, the socio-cultural context of the text production, the genre and purpose of the text, the interest and purpose of the reader and the immediate situation in which the text is being read at any particular moment (Rosenblatt, 1969; Tyson, 2006; Walsh, 2006). Consequently, participants' #15 and #1 responses emphasise the relationship between the reader, the text and mass media within the reading process as a two-way recursive and dynamic interaction that occurs within both an immediate and wider socio-cultural context (Rosenblatt, 1969; Tyson, 2006; Walsh, 2006). Additionally, these personal narratives exemplify how research question 2, which focuses on narrative-based belief changes leading to emotional awareness and critical reflection on social justice issues, is manifested through multimodal experiences. The enhanced

emotional and cognitive engagement from media interactions prompts readers to reassess and critique real-world societal issues reflected in the fantasy narratives.

Through the lens of reader response theory, multimodal experiences of reading emphasize the transactional nature of engagement between the reader and the text. Rosenblatt's (1969) framework highlights that meaning emerges not solely from the text itself but from the dynamic interaction between the text and the reader's context, emotions and background knowledge. For young adults, the constructed audience for much of the fantasy genre, multimodal engagements like RPGs and digital media deepen these transactions. YA readers often blend their imaginative faculties with external visual and interactive representations, enhancing the aesthetic experience and forging personal connections with the narrative (Rosenblatt, 1969). Furthermore, this comprehensive understanding reinforces research question 5, which investigates how fantasy authors utilize narrative elements to promote progressive social change. By acknowledging the multifaceted interactions between fantasy readers and various media forms, fantasy authors can create narratives that not only entertain but also inspire critical thought and social consciousness among their readership.

Theme #2: Feeling Transported into the Story-World

When investigating how the real-world impacts the fantasy genre and a fantasy reader's experiences, Faber (2018) contends it is necessary to discuss "immersion – the state in which audiences largely forget, for a limited time, their own reality and accept a story-world as a possible alternative" (p. 217). Faber's notions about immersion further calls attention to the idea that there is always something immersive about fiction (Jaspal et al., 2016). Whether it is through personal identification with a character, event, place or time within a book through one's own worldviews and experiences a fantasy reader can become part of the narrative in a pseudo-

physical, imaginary sense (Jaspal et al., 2016). Further accentuating Jaspal et al.'s stance, participant #10 stated the following:

As a reader of fantasy books, I do not believe the rules in the books need to match with our own world when it comes to the natural order of things, such as the laws of physics. If something in the books appears to defy these rules it is in the realm of possibility and miracles and magic and so on. I think this really helps with its engrossing features. I enjoy fantasy because it takes me into different realms and into a world that is Earth-like. I lose myself there all the time because they are so unique and play with my emotions and imagination.

In the context of my research, the insights shared by participant #10 align closely with the principles outlined in Green and Brock's (2002) transportation theory. This theory delves into the intricate phenomenological experience of fantasy readers becoming engrossed and transported into the narrative world of a story. It investigates both the factors that trigger this immersive experience and the subsequent effects on the reader's mental processes and emotional engagement.

To elaborate further, when a fantasy reader is transported, they become deeply cognitively and emotionally involved in the story. This deep engagement mirrors the perspective put forth by Gerrig (1993), who posited that fiction narratives have an ability to transport readers into a vividly imagined world within the text. Essentially, a transported fantasy reader is not merely a passive observer but an active participant in the narrative, experiencing events, emotions and the setting as if they were physically present within the story's world.

Reader response theory further clarifies the phenomenon of transportation as a deeply personal, context-driven interaction between text and reader. For fantasy readers, the constructed audience design capitalizes on developmental experiences of identity formation and emotional intensity (Radway, 1988). The narrative immersion experienced by participant #10 aligns with Rosenblatt's aesthetic stance, where the reader enters the story-world emotionally and

subjectively, engaging not as a detached observer but as an active participant. Fantasy's focus on relatable protagonists and moral dilemmas heightens this immersion, making transportation a significant element in how readers construct meaning and relate to the text.

This theme directly addresses research question 2 by illustrating how the feeling of being transported into a story-world facilitates emotional and cognitive engagement that can lead to critical reflection on social justice issues. The immersive experience acts as a motivation for fantasy readers to internalize and question the socio-political themes presented within the narrative.

The immersive quality of being transported holds significant relevance for this research, as it sheds light on the mechanisms through which fantasy literature, in particular, can have a profound impact on fantasy readers. By enabling readers to enter and engage with fantastical worlds, these stories create a potent space for emotional and cognitive involvement, making it an ideal medium for exploring the potential for narrative-based belief change and social action. Understanding how fantasy readers are transported into these narrative realms provides valuable insights into the transformative power of literature, an essential aspect of this research inquiry. Furthermore, Theme #2 connects to research question 1 by demonstrating how the immersive transportation into story-worlds allows readers to critically engage with and challenge socio-political norms depicted within the fantasy narratives. This engagement fosters an environment conducive to belief transformation and social consciousness.

Through the interview process, I found thirteen of the sixteen participants reported the feeling of being transported while reading a book. Many descriptions such as “feeling the outside world disappear” (participant #1), “losing all sense of time” (participant #2), “forgetting where I was while reading” (participant #4), “losing track of the context I’m actually in and just feeling

consumed by the world that has been built” (participant #5), “I journeyed into the book” (participant #8), “I was in the book” (participant #9), “go to Middle-Earth with Frodo” (participant #12) and “it’s like being a little bit inside the book” (participant #16) indicate notions of transportation into a fantasy story-world. These participant statements also align with Kuijpers et al. (2017) and Thiem’s (2005) notions that readers experience a state of “narrative absorption, whereby they become less aware of their surroundings and themselves and this feeling can be supported by strong emotional reactions to what happens in the story world and by mental imagery it generates” (Kuijpers et al., 2017, p. 34).

What is interesting to note is that among eleven of the same thirteen participants they reported their feelings of immersion enhanced with multimodal engagement with the story. Six participants reported that their engagement with social media and watching a tv/movie adaptation of the book they were reading enhanced this feeling of being transported. Participant #7 even stated:

After I watched the Hunger Games movies... I read the books over again and I found them even better... I was in Panem, like I felt it more vividly, like I was *there*... I now had even more images from the movies to add to the pictures I made in my head when I read the books... it was way more real, like I was in Panem... like I was there with Katniss in the book.

Participant #7’s experience relates to research question 4 by highlighting how multimodal engagements, such as movie adaptations, not only enhance the feeling of transportation but also deepen the reader’s emotional investment in the narrative. This heightened engagement can translate into increased empathy and motivation for social activism inspired by the story’s themes.

What these participants reveal is that there is perhaps an evolution to Green and Brock's transportation theory where the feeling of being transported into the story-world are more enhanced if there is multimodal engagement with the fantasy novel.

Theme #3: Alternate/Second Worlds to Explore Possibilities for the First World

According to Jackson (2003), fantasy literature has the capacity to surpass reality through the construction of alternate, secondary worlds. In all participant responses the main reason they enjoyed reading fantasy was for the "ingenuity" (participant #2), "imaginative" (participant #8) potential, "creativity" (participant #12) and "uniqueness" (participant #13) of the alternate story-worlds in the novels they read. Participant #5 stated that they "really enjoy the world-building, being transported into a different world with its own set of rules and ways of being". Along similar lines, participant #16 reported the story-world as one of the main reasons for her interest in reading fantasy, by stating the following:

I have always been attracted to different worlds... I think [fantasy] allows room to explore who we are if we are untethered [sic] to our current world. When I was a child, it could mean being in a faraway land with different species, rules, plants. Now, it means exploring other realities where the rules of our current society do not apply.

Participant #16 brings into consideration how alternate worlds in fantasy open up a space for exploration that offers us a way to move beyond the familiar safe spaces of realistic fiction in a way that allows us to engage with the political, social and philosophical thought experiments expressed in the genre's novels (Wolf, 2012). Fantasy's literary experimentation with the invention of new cultures, races and species whose very existence can imply certain ideas or outlooks can also challenge oppressive hegemonic ideologies and worldviews in the current world (Wolf, 2012).

In line with Wolf's previously stated assertions, reader response theory highlights how fantasy's secondary worlds serve as mirrors through which readers explore real-world

possibilities and challenges. For the constructed audience, these narratives resonate because they provide a space for grappling with identity, values and societal norms in a safe, distanced manner (Radway, 1988). The responses of participants, such as participant #16's reflections, reveal the ways in which the alternate world becomes a transactional space where readers project their aspirations and anxieties, using the text as a lens to reimagine their own realities. As such, this theme directly engages research question 1 by demonstrating how the creation of alternate worlds within fantasy literature serves as a mechanism for critiquing and reimagining socio-political norms. By providing a safe space for readers to explore and challenge existing societal structures, fantasy literature can facilitate belief transformation and progressive thinking.

From the growing popularity of teen fantasy in recent years to the many evolutions of fantasy into subgenres that tackle issues of race, gender and class, fantasy's secondary worlds reaffirm people's connections to place and each other. According to Larsen and Johnson (2017) humankind is very good at forgetting its interdependencies with others, choosing not to live in life-supportive ways and imposing its sense of mastery on the world. Participant #5 illustrates similar notions by stating that in a fantasy novel's alternate world "the sense of camaraderie and coming together to take on some larger negative force is often inspiring [...] [there is a] sense of possibility to take on hegemonic power." This convergence ultimately invites individuals to recognize their interconnectedness with both human and nonhuman beings, prompting them to explore the realms of political and ethical awareness (Larsen & Johnson, 2017).

A number of interviews revealed that fantasy's alternate worlds are "a great space to examine what's wrong with our world" (participant #3), "a place to go and see what a future full of harmony and equality could look like" (participant #9) and "a safe space to question and

reflect on what we could do better in this world” (participant #10). Additionally, participant #16 reported that:

Fantasy allows us room to explore the possibilities of us, and the world around us. It creates a safe space to try to understand different ways of thinking or being, and it pushes us to consider who we are when we don’t have the structures we see today. It can provide us with enough similarities... so issues are relatable and distant... so there is less emotional investment especially when we consider a story.

According to Faber (2018) some aspects of the real world are so hard-wired into humanity’s ways of thinking that they limit the possibilities within the theoretically boundless imaginative space of secondary worlds. As participants #3, #9, #10 and #16 have evidenced, the fantasy novel can provide a safe space to altering personal worldviews and challenging preconceived notions. This also coincides with the notion of escapism (see Chapter 2 for more detail), whereby the temporary escape provided by reading fantasy offers a (partial) break from reality and is integral to a healthy state of mind.

It is important to note that while there are critiques regarding the escapist nature of fantasy literature, my research has shown that this is not to be considered to the detriment of the genre, but rather might be seen as a strength. According to Drobot (2019), fantasy not only provides escapism, but it also offers familiar elements with which the fantasy reader feels at home by providing familiar first world elements, attitudes and values. In this sense, therefore, the escapism provided by reading fantasy works is thus not an avoidance of reality, but an exploration of it by exploring different worlds (Drobot, 2019). In other words, the escapism provided while reading fantasy can provide “a way of knowing the world” (Short, 2012, p. 11) while providing a safe space to “explore new and remarkable possibilities, to confront difficulty and despair and take risks in imagined experience” (Turner, 1991, p. 238). Furthermore, as the interviews conducted in this research demonstrate, secondary worlds in fantasy literature allows

for a safe reflective space through escapism to critique narratives associated with oppressive cultural and socio-political influences, which can help society re-imagine how it can fight against the hegemonic constraints of the current world. Additionally, these insights align with research questions 1 and 3 by highlighting how alternate worlds in fantasy literature not only critique existing societal norms but also foster transformative mental spaces where readers can envision and contemplate progressive social changes. The exploration of new possibilities within these worlds can therefore foster belief transformation and encourage readers to question and redefine their own worldviews.

Considering the fact that this research has shown the significance and importance of fantasy literature's secondary worlds with regards to transportation and opening up reflective spaces for social equity, six participants noted an interesting phenomenon upon exiting the secondary world once they finish reading the book. Several participants reported feelings of sadness, loss and confusion once the book they were reading was completed. Participant #4 stated that they were "practically devastated" when they left the story world and they "had to return to reality." Participant #9 mentioned that "the escape I experienced while in the secondary world was so intense that when I finished reading [...] it was like I had broken up with my boyfriend". Participant #15 similarly stated that the immersive experience of reading is "like a rollercoaster of thoughts and emotions [...] and then the book ends [...] and like boom [...] you are left hanging wanting more [...] feeling so angry that it's over."

What these participants point to is a coming down effect after reading a novel linked to an experience called the book hangover. According to Barnett (2020), a book hangover is the popular culture vernacular for the feeling a reader receives upon completing a book and they cannot stop thinking about the fictional world where they have a sentimental longing for the

characters or the atmosphere of the novel. While there is little academic research on the book hangover, Barnett (2020) suggests that there is a psychological basis for the lingering emotions for this phenomenon resting with notions of emotional transportation and empathy. What Barnett and the participants in this research highlight is that reading fiction can have a direct impact on one's psyche as it helps readers to understand, feel and even change their selfhood (Djikic & Oatley, 2014). Therefore, the strong emotions experienced by the participants can also suggest that book hangovers are part of the way reading changes the reader (Barnett, 2020). An intense book hangover experience has the potential to extend a reader's sense of empathy for others and prompts them to confront ideas about themselves and their world (Barnett, 2020; Djikic & Oatley, 2014). Moreover, there also appears to be an element of grief and loss associated with this intense emotional experience. My findings also align with the scope of my current research exploring transportation theory and belief change through reading fantasy literature, specifically in how after reading a book and leaving the secondary world the process can leave readers somewhat changed by the experience as they access their feelings, reactions, opinions, previous knowledge, or other thoughts and experiences in order to evaluate the messages within the story (Green & Brock, 2000; Gerrig, 1993). The findings from this research also suggest the need for further exploration in phase two of the coming down effect and grief once reading a fantasy novel is completed to expand on the impact of these experiences upon participants to generate a possible idea of how narrative based belief change in the liminal space might transpire. In completing secondary phased research exploring the emergence of the coming down effect in greater detail, the process directly addresses research question 2 by illustrating how the emotional investment and subsequent loss experienced after finishing a fantasy novel can lead to heightened emotional awareness and critical reflection. This emotional response can serve as a

bridge between narrative transportation and belief transformation, reinforcing the role of fantasy literature in fostering social consciousness and potential activism among readers.

Theme #4: Fantasy with Social Justice Themes

In light of earlier and ongoing movements like Black Lives Matter, Schools Strike for Climate/Fridays for Future, Animal Save/Veganuary and #MeToo, along with the evolving consciousness of the “woke” generation, the prominence of social justice and transformative action is steadily growing in society. These initiatives reinforce individuals’ and communities’ struggle to redress oppression occurring within ethical relations that are ongoing and negotiated across differences both within individuals and in society’s cultural and historical context. In eleven of the sixteen interviews the participants reported a strong interest in reading fantasy with social justice themes and messaging. Books by Octavia Butler, N.K. Jemisin, Nnedi Okorafor, Ursula K. Le Guin, Suzanne Collins, China Miéville and Samuel R. Delany were either collectively or individually mentioned by fourteen of the sixteen participants as possessing strong social justice motifs, characterisation and content. For example, participant #7 claims that:

Books like Hunger Games or the Deadland Saga allowed [them] to discuss social justice in a safe way with others. [These books] create a buffer between the personal that allows people to step into conversation in a way that is not so defensive.

Meanwhile participant #4 stated that fantasy novels

create a break in the structure we see in society today, and it’s interesting [...] to see how [a book’s] characters behave when we don’t have set structures in place [...] We talk about respect, equity, safety now as if we are all on the same page, but when there is a break in the structure, we can see how everyone is reaching out for all of those but in different ways.

Similarly, participant #16 stated that fantasy books such as “*Harry Potter* [have] created a lot of room to discuss social justice, especially among the youth [...]. This was more evident after transphobic comments by author J. K. Rowling, as fans of the series who have been touched by

her work [...] and probably had their social justice understanding expanded by it [...] have come in defence of the Queer community.”

Reader response theory emphasizes that a reader’s engagement with a text involves interpreting its content through their own sociocultural framework (Rosenblatt, 1969). Fantasy with social justice thematic content leverages this transactional process to construct an audience that is particularly attuned to social justice issues, employing allegorical storytelling to highlight societal inequities. As participant #7 notes, these texts act as conversation starters, framing complex themes in accessible, emotionally resonant ways that encourage fantasy readers to engage critically and empathetically. This interaction highlights Rosenblatt’s view that reading is not merely an act of consumption but a dynamic exchange that fosters personal and social growth. As such, this theme strongly relates to research question 5 by demonstrating how authors can integrate social justice themes into fantasy narratives, thereby fostering belief changes and promoting progressive social change among readers. The use of allegory and accessible storytelling methods enables fantasy readers to engage with complex social issues in a manner that is both relatable and thought-provoking (Tambling, 2009).

Glass (2017) states that the “praxis of being ‘woke’ involves inventing ways to live that resist the dominant ideologies that also preserve and forge affirming relations with other people, with other living and non-living beings and with the planet itself” (p. 21). Such a trend is emerging within fantasy literature, whereby the new narratives of global multiculturalism and racialism are challenged by authors of colour within the westernised tradition in fantasy literature (Thomas, 2019). Traditionally, fantasy has and, in the main still, continues to neglect non-white readership and authorship. New subgenres like the Black fantastic from authors such as Octavia Butler, N. K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor offer a response to this neglect (or exclusion) by

presenting an activist artistic production in the face of erasure and marginalization within fantasy literature (Thomas, 2019). Participant #5 speaks to this effect with the following:

I think fantasy novels offer models of resistance against powerful forces, often of evil. The ways that ordinary people collaborate and take this on feels resonant with social justice struggles... The [fantasy novels] that I've read that are more future oriented... like Butler for example... [They] are interesting because they offer ways to understand that organizing in a context where the disruption or destruction of current capitalist ways of being are more pronounced. They show more what... it [looks] like to keep working towards social justice even as conditions have become increasingly difficult.

In line with the previous statement, participant #6 claims that from their own experience,

most fantasy media engage with ideas of social justice in some format [...]. There's something about using real-world issues inside of fantastical, and even allegorical, settings, that can help readers/gamers/viewers to understand a given [social justice] issue better, or to hold more empathy for those impacted by said real-world issue.

This aligns with the observations made by Johnson and Johnson (2002), who assert that modern novels, including recent fantasy literature, are adept at delving into social concepts and advocating for social change, ultimately prompting shifts in both society and the perspectives of fantasy readers.

According to Zaidi (2019) the literary work of minorities and women in fantasy has gained prominence and recognition in recent years, helping to diversify the value systems depicted, empowering marginalized voices, fostering equal representation in the publishing industry and challenging entrenched orthodoxies and concepts of the other. No longer is the quest by a hyper-masculinized male protagonist the only hope for salvation where magic is wielded by the elite few; women, gender fluid individuals and people of different races and class now share the spotlight, where social issues like slavery, racism, classism and sexism are being challenged (Jaspal et al., 2016). Participant #5 mirrors this sentiment where they see

fantasy used as a lens to then imagine building worlds that are different from the one we live in right now [...]. In that sense, I have seen it used with a visioning lens in social justice spaces [...] whether on social media with writer and activist adrienne maree

brown [...] [or] a workshop on fantasy I went to years ago at an anarchist bookfair that used [fantasy] as an interesting lens to disrupt the sense of what was possible.

Consequently, participant #5's insights directly address research question 1 by illustrating how fantasy literature serves as a medium for challenging and reimagining oppressive societal structures. The use of fantasy as a visionary tool enables both authors and readers to envision and advocate for alternative, more equitable social paradigms.

Essentially these findings reveal that readers of fantasy see newer publications in the genre engaging in social justice messaging and dialogue aimed at tackling oppression, discrimination and the questioning of power and privilege. In a similar manner, participant #13 highlights this sentiment of the previous statement by saying that "reading fantasy [can] create a path to critically think about new information [...] I think [reading fantasy critically] is an important skill to learn and carry forward [...] I still practise [it] today when I read a book." Moreover, participant #12's comments further illustrate how modern understandings and critical processes could potentially see a mode of self-reflection emerge that informs and changes current fantasy, overthrowing the trite, pseudo-medieval forms (and implicit values) of early fantasy works.

Despite the fact that this section shows that the majority of the participants aged twenty to 39 are attracted to fantasy literature with social justice-oriented themes, content and motifs, the research also demonstrated that this interest in social justice literature did not necessarily translate into physical, in-person activism. My research found that in only three of the sixteen interviews did the participants report being inspired to partake in social justice activism as a result of their reading fantasy novels. Participant #13 recalled wanting to get involved in local charity organizations in their youth after exposure to themes of social justice in the fantasy content they were engaging with and participant #2 stated that their current career path was

chosen because fantasy has given them inspiration to become an advocate on social media for 2SLGBTQI+ individuals. Similarly, participant #8 reported that they engaged in tweeting and re-tweeting social justice-oriented postings to help spread the word for the Black Lives Matter movement.

Although the exact causes for participant 2, 8 and 13's revelations are not known, possible explanations may lie in several areas. One potential interpretation resides with the observation within my research demonstrating that eleven out of the sixteen participants all reported being under the age of forty. What this interpretation potentially sheds light on within the scope of the current research is that there appears to be a correlation between age and social justice orientated thinking, but not necessarily in-person activism. While the eleven participants have strong leanings towards and awareness of social justice issues these inclinations did not appear to manifest in physical actions being taken.

According to Grasso (2016), advanced "Western democracies have entered a period of political disengagement, where politics have become increasingly irrelevant to the lives of Western citizens" (p. 26). This is also accompanied by suggestions that young people are often considered the least politically engaged age group compared to all other age groups (Grasso, 2016; Quintelier, 2007; Yankah et al., 2017), further supporting the lack of socio-political engagement and activism indicated by the participants in this study. While this phase of the research did not ask participants to identify their political leanings, two participants identified themselves as "politically progressive" (participant #1) and "leftist" (participant #7), although they both admitted to not be engaged in any political activities. Consequently, these results are not significant enough to make any inferences connecting political leanings and socio-political activism as result of reading fantasy literature.

Robert Putnam (2000), an American political scientist, has written extensively about the disintegration of community resulting from neo-liberalism and the loss of social capital from a generational perspective. He laid the foundations for research into the apparent rise in political apathy among Western millennial and post-millennial generations. Following Putnam, Macedo (2005) suggests that political apathy is part of a larger trend in wealthy democracies where political participation appears to be at an all-time low. The lessening of civil participation and political engagement also coincides with Norris (2004), who points out that age-related differences in social justice involvement can be attributed to three distinct processes: “a generational effect (due to long-term secular trends, such as steadily-rising levels of education, that distinguish successive cohorts), a life-cycle effect (such as the experience of entry into the workforce and settling down to start a family within a local community) and a period effect (the product of distinct historical events that leave a lasting impression, such as the radicalizing experience of the 1960s or the end of the Cold War)” (p. 8).

A second explanation may reside in the changing nature of social justice and social movements from being less in-person to more online on social media. According to Hart (2021), newer generations’ mastery of social media and online culture allows them to communicate with each other intensively and employ social media to construct and telegraph their constructions of the self, thereby drawing them to expressive political practices that coincide with online engagement. Along similar lines, Grasso (2016) states that newer research is showing that unconventional political participation (such as engagement on social media through Facebook and Twitter), which is often associated with new social movements, indicates that social justice and political participation is increasing. While social media encourages individuals to share ideas it is possible the participants in this study did not see social justice-oriented activism in the form

of dialogue and online engagement. It could be that this different level of social activism also creates diverse forms of engagement some people might not see as activism since it is more obscure and anonymous. In light of this, Steinberg (2016) posits that the changing face of social activism to an online-platform results in a form of “armchair activism” or “slacktivism” (p. 442) whereby followers are often passionate for the causes they support online, but this loyalty does not appear to translate into people’s personal lives offline. Some critics argue that slacktivism is merely for show and claim it does little to advance meaningful change, leading many to question the lasting benefit in engaging social media for a social justice campaign (Steinberg, 2016). Similarly, from their research Yankah et al. (2017), posit that participants who engaged in more online activism behaviours reported a decreased orientation toward engaging in activism behaviours offline. Yanhak et al. (2017) further state that their findings are consistent with a growing body of literature that asserts that engagement with a movement on social networking sites does not naturally progress to engaging in activism behaviours off-line. Although this research did not look at participants’ social media engagement as a potential source for social justice activism, it may also be said that subtle forms for social media activism, such as tweeting and creating hashtags, may be seen as symbolic of adding voices offering support and encouragement to those who are engaged in more material and in-person forms of social justice work (Steinberg, 2016).

A third explanation as to the lack of socio-political engagement and activism indicated by the participants in this study might revolve around the availability of social justice themed fantasy works. Through the research only three participants mentioned that they found a vast majority of adult fantasy literature to be politically apathetic, with the exception of the young adult genre. Participant #10 stated that they

find it hard to walk into a bookstore to see the fantasy section brimming with social justice themed books. You find Jemisin and Butler obviously since I think there is a push to have more writers of colour, but other than the Black authors, and maybe some Asian, you rarely see anyone else tackling challenging topics like racism, sexism and colonialism. I don't really like reading teen fantasy, but I've started to because the messaging aligns with my worldviews towards inclusivity and diversity.

Similarly, participant #3 reported

more social justice content in young adult than adult fantasy because adult fantasy seems to still be stuck in the past. After a while you get tired of the same types of characters and storylines [...] As a trans person [...] you know the lack of diversity representation gets really boring [...] I'd like to see more characters like me. I think that's why I loved the Nemesis series, Spellhacker, Master of One and lots of others [...] they are so refreshing to read.

In considering these statements and in looking at some of the previous sections' discussions around the critiques of the fantasy genre, these participants support Lee's (2016) assertions that fantasy is "politically lazy" (p. 552). In fact, participant #3 speaks to Marxist criticism claiming that fantasy is "apolitical because of its periodization, anti-materialist subjects and its good-triumphs-over-evil allegories" (Lee, 2016, p. 562). However, as these participants point out, and what Lee is not considering, is the fact that there is a growing trend in teen fantasy to tackle social justice themes. As such, Theme #4 directly addresses research questions 1 and 5 by highlighting how contemporary fantasy literature, especially within the young adult subgenre, integrates social justice themes to critique socio-political norms and promote progressive social change. The active engagement of authors in embedding these themes into their narratives exemplifies how narrative elements can be employed to foster belief transformation and encourage social activism among fantasy readers.

According to Masson and Hale (2016), writers of young adult fantasy employ a deeper engagement with their cultural heritage and their ongoing interest in interweaving local interests with a universal experience. Other scholars suggest the teen fantasy genre expresses a stronger proclivity towards writing stories about diverse voices and perspectives; integrates meaningful,

intersectional representations of characters; presents secondary worlds that relate to social injustices in the world and takes the adolescent outside their reality in order to better question, challenge and ultimately subvert the structures upon which societal culture is built (Donner, 2017; Garcia, 2017; Simmons, 2014). While I do not consider teen fantasy in this research the views expressed within these three interviews bring attention to the need for further research in phase two into the reasons behind the apparent lack of social justice themed fantasy literature for adults.

Conclusion

The primary focus of this research is to delve into the potential of fantasy literature to ignite narrative-based belief change leading to social activism among its readers. In doing so, I uncovered numerous themes that shed light on the complex relationship between fantasy fan-based activism and narrative-based belief transformation. One of the most significant themes revolves around the concept of readers immersing themselves deeply into the fantastical worlds created within these novels. What this indicates is that the more a reader is drawn into a fantasy novel's story world the more absorbed they become and the more susceptible they might be to entering a liminal space that can potentially foster belief change around progressive social change. The resultant insight has led to the development of the Reader's Journey (see Chapter 6), which, in its preliminary stages, serves as an illustrative model to explore the processes occurring within the minds of fantasy readers as they engage with narrative-based belief transformation. The Reader's Journey is a theoretical construct that seeks to elucidate how the interplay of narrative absorption, liminality and narrative-based belief transformation can motivate readers of fantasy literature to participate in social activism.

Another significant theme that emerges from the research is the pivotal role played by fantasy literature that champions themes of social justice. For a fantasy reader to undergo

narrative-based belief transformation through fantasy novels, it is essential that the content challenges their existing worldviews, beliefs and assumptions. At its core, the reflective changes that need to take place should be spurred by ideas and notions within the narrative that disrupt the status quo. Consequently, the greater the exposure of fantasy readers to social justice themes within the genre, the higher the likelihood of them undergoing narrative-based belief transformation and embarking on the Reader's Journey.

The themes outlined in this section indicate how research questions 1 through 5 are interwoven throughout the findings, demonstrating how fantasy literature critiques socio-political norms, fosters belief changes, creates transformative mental spaces, encourages fan activism and utilizes narrative elements to promote progressive social change. The development of the Reader's Journey model encapsulates these interconnected processes, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the transformative potential of fantasy literature.

Essentially, these themes highlight the impact that fantasy literature can have on its readers, not merely as an escapist form of literature, but as an inspiration for thought-provoking engagement with social issues. Furthermore, the insights gained from Phase One also offer a glimpse into the complex relationship between the fantastical and the real world, where the fantasy genre can potentially inspire meaningful change in the minds and actions of its readers. Therefore, in order to expand on the Reader's Journey model and dig deeper into the liminal mechanisms that might enable narrative-based belief change, a second phase of research was deemed necessary and is outlined in the next section.

This conclusion reinforces how each identified theme systematically addresses the research questions, illustrating the multifaceted ways in which fantasy literature can serve as a motivator for belief transformation and social activism among its readers.

Phase Two Results & Discussion

For this section, I integrated the results of both Phases One and Two to form the discussion regarding the outcomes of the entire research process. I combined the thematic results from both phases of the research to more fully answer those questions and develop a more robust and meaningful picture of the research question(s) and thematic results. Through the data gathered in phase one combined with the data from the deductive coding process in Phase Two there was the expansion of previously discussed themes as well as the emergence of new themes. They are outlined below.

Expansion of Themes 1 & 2: Coming Down Effect, Grief & Paratextuality

In examining the coming down effect of fantasy readers in more detail during the second research phase interviewees described some very intense emotional reactions when completing a book or series. Participant #8 communicated that “I felt myself connecting with the world and the characters [...] that when sometimes I finish a book, I feel distanced [...] like I lost hope [...] like I don’t know how to live in the real world anymore.” Participant #4 stated that after reading their current book that they found themselves “in a dark place [...] [where their] body felt like it was in pieces.” Participant #3 stated that, “ending the books was like saying goodbye, it was very hard to do, there was something final about it, like I would never be in that place again.” Participant #11 explained how she felt “ashamed” of her grieving reaction to finishing the books she reads. She felt that “others would judge” her because she was grieving over the “ending of a book like it was the end of the world”, she felt “bad” because she experienced “difficulty getting over it.”

Rosenblatt’s (1969) reader response theory also provides a lens for interpreting these experiences, framing them as a transactional process in which readers construct meaning and emotional connections through their interactions with the text. This sense of loss upon finishing a

narrative emphasises the unique co-creative role of the reader, whose immersive engagement imbues the story with personal significance. The emotional intensity described by participants reflects their active participation in shaping the narrative, with the constructed audience (readers who expect deep engagement and emotional resonance) (Radway, 1988) emerging as a critical consideration for fantasy authors.

Examining these reactions in more detail speaks to the coming down effect as having elements synonymous with experiences of grief. For many of these participants their immersion and transportation into the novels they read ultimately, with the end of the novel, results in a very intense sensation of loss and finality. The emotional experience of feeling as if they were transported inside a book potentially established parallels, sympathies or connections between the fantasy reader's life and that narrative-oriented life they experienced vicariously while reading. Weller (2015) describes the powerful role grief plays in enabling us to face what is taking place in one's life. This dynamic further aligns with Radway's (1988) concept of a constructed audience, particularly when that audience anticipates a profound and transformative reading journey. The grief described can be viewed as an intentional outcome of the narrative design, targeting readers primed for deep immersion. As Weller's perspective highlights, this grief can foster self-reflection and resilience, suggesting that the constructed audience is envisioned as one capable of integrating narrative loss into broader emotional and existential frameworks.

Perhaps in some way the reality of this grief the participants have experienced allows for a reflection on their own lives by stepping into the unknown and undefined dimensions of their lives. Weller (2015) also contends that through one's ability to acknowledge the layers of loss, an individual can truly discover their capacity to respond, to protect and to restore what has been

damaged. Several participants spoke along similar lines by attempting to “channel [their] sadness” (participant #4) into “something more meaningful” (participant #15) such as writing fan fiction, online activism or reading books with similar themes as a way of moving forward.

In the context of Rosenblatt’s (1969) reader response theory, these productive reactions illustrate the transformative potential of active engagement with the text. The constructed audience’s emotional labour, whether channelled into creative output or social action, emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between narrative and reader (Radway, 1988). By aligning the story’s emotional arc with the audience’s expectations and needs, authors foster a collaborative dynamic where meaning extends beyond the text into tangible acts of expression and impact. Furthermore, the intense emotional responses associated with the coming down effect address research question 2, which examines how narrative-based belief changes enhance emotional awareness and critical reflection. These experiences highlight the depth of cognitive and emotional engagement that fantasy literature can evoke, reinforcing its role in potentially fostering social consciousness and social activism.

While not all the participants in the first and second phases referred to grief and loss once they completed a book or series this research does suggest that the more immersive the reading experience the stronger the coming down effect. What this finding might point to in a potential model for the Reader’s Journey is that a coming down effect is closely linked to Brock and Green’s transportation theory. This connection reinforces the theoretical construct of an audience predisposed to emotional and cognitive engagement, one that seeks a narrative experience capable of fostering transportation and transformation (Radway, 1988). The constructed audience, in this sense, reflects the interplay between immersion and response, with fantasy authors and publishers potentially shaping stories that might foster these reader dynamics.

Another consideration is that intense emotions like grief evoked by books and movies are not necessarily just an “aspect of the moment of reception, but also a feature of paratextual accompaniment” (Völcker, 2020, p. 18). As discussed previously in the phase one themes, multimodal experiences of reading were described as intensifying the process of enjoying a book. According to Völcker (2020) movie adaptations of books can generate emotional reactions such as sadness, elation, fear or grief, through a visual stimulus which open insights, generates new information and creates a deeper connection to one’s inner view of the imaginary world and the text of a novel. Völcker’s notions also highlight how the constructed audience’s interaction with paratextual elements, such as adaptations and visual media, extends the transactional reading process beyond the text itself. Reader response theory positions these multimodal interactions as opportunities for readers to deepen their interpretive engagement and recontextualize the narrative within their personal frameworks (Rosenblatt, 1969).

Multimodal experiences can also open the opportunity to “express and experience feelings which are taken up and presented as facets of paratextual accompaniment” (Völcker, 2020, p. 18). By acknowledging the constructed audience’s preference for layered narrative experiences, multimodal storytelling becomes a deliberate strategy to maximize emotional and intellectual engagement (Radway, 1988). These layers reinforce the text’s capacity to elicit diverse responses across different media, emphasizing the adaptability and interpretive agency of the fantasy reader (Radway, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1969).

According to Stanitzek (2005), paratext and paratextuality, concepts originally conceived by French literary critic Gérard Genette, are defined as the “verbal or other productions such as the author’s name, title, preface, dedication, epigraphs, illustrations, interviews and commentaries that frame the text” (p. 30). They involve textual elements found within the book

and occurring in a “position that is both liminal and prominent, and at the same time it detaches itself from the text to refer to it as a whole” (Stanitzek, 2005, p. 31). These components also include the “construction of textual tonalities, moods and emotions, as well as affects, which create an emotional field of experience” (Völcker, 2020, p. 18).

Paratexts are important not only for the “process of textual reception but also for text production” (Stanitzek, 2005, p. 32), which speaks to the multimodal theme discussed by participants. Consequently, this raises an important point that the “paratextual zone is observed to be a sphere of transition, adaptability, mobility, fragility, unstable relationships and a place of contacts and contracts and communication in the form of a transaction” (Desrochers & Tomaszek. 2014, p. 162; Stanitzek, 2005, p. 32) between the textual consumer and their environment. This is similar to Rosenblatt’s concept of transactional reader response as outlined previously; however, in the case of paratextuality the transactions are examined, not only between the reader and the text, but with the text’s surroundings. Therefore, the multimodal aspects of texts and Rosenblatt’s transactional response allows “paratextual elements to illustrate the impossibility of identifying a single, authoritative version of a text, thereby drawing the reader’s attention to the various layers of textual mediation where the text not only resides in the mind of the reader, but also is dependent on the reader’s own acts of interpretation” (Enns, n.d., p. 9) across print, digital and film media.

Considering the results of the phase two research it, therefore, suggests that paratextual elements serve as a distinct liminal space that holds significance for individuals existing on the periphery of society, as they grapple with resisting the dominance of more mainstream groups. The paratext concept aligns with the perspective that the interaction between reading a text and its subsequent multimodal transformations provides a rich terrain for exploration. As Stanitzek

(2005) suggests, this interaction opens up opportunities to delve into a myriad of dimensions, including those of social-historical, economic, media-historical/discourse-analytical, communication-theoretical and gender-related nature. Such engagement enables fantasy readers to “approach texts from various angles, offering a multifaceted reading experience” (Stanitzek, 2005, p. 34).

Furthermore, the paratext and the active engagement of fantasy readers with its elements can potentially trigger transformative changes within the reader’s psyche. These changes stem from the reader’s active creative appropriation and interpretation during their individual readings, as emphasized by Völcker (2020). Readers are encouraged to “formulate their own conclusions by contextualizing information, engaging in critical commentary and pondering provocative questions that transcend the confines of the book itself” (Enns, n.d., p. 12). This process allows for the emergence of multiple interpretations of the text, as highlighted by several participants in their interviews. Notably, textual re-interpretations, exemplified by fan fiction, serve as frameworks that empower recipients to make sense of the text's significance and potential implications (Völcker, 2020).

Intrinsically, the insights provided by scholars like Rosenblatt, Enns and Stanitzek resonate with the perspectives shared by participants in their interviews. The multimodality of texts underscores that the meaning of a literary work is not a fixed entity, but rather a product of individual acts of reading. This meaning emerges from the intricate interplay between the author, the text (including its paratext), the fantasy reader (and their cognitive processes) and the multimedia aspects of the work. This dynamic interaction has the potential to incite broader societal change, translating into tangible actions such as the production of fan fiction. Multimodality, therefore, illustrates how fantasy literature can transcend its traditional role as a

passive medium, becoming a stimulus for active engagement and transformation within society. Furthermore, the exploration of paratextual elements directly contributes to research question 3 by demonstrating how these additional layers enhance the transformative mental spaces created by fantasy literature. By engaging with both the primary text and its paratextual components, fantasy readers experience a more holistic and immersive interaction that can potentially foster narrative-based belief transformation and social activism.

New Theme #1: Young Adult (YA) Fantasy & Social Justice Messaging

In the Phase One research fourteen of the sixteen participants reported reading at least one YA fantasy or speculative fiction book in the last five years. In Phase Two all nine fantasy readership participants reported reading YA fantasy in that last five years and three of the five participants in the author group reported reading YA fantasy in the last five years. Also, in the author participant group one interviewee reported writing YA fantasy fan fiction “at the beginning of launching [their] writing career” (author #2), while another “self-published a YA speculative fiction book” (author #5). Authors #3 and #5 admitted that the YA market is easier to enter into when it comes to social justice themed writing and all five participants of the author group reported that they have published in various fantasy/science fiction magazines in which they specifically choose publications that align with the social justice themed content of their work. Author #1 was a grade seven school teacher for over ten years before she started writing and she stated that when it comes to progressive social change within people’s thoughts you need to “start with children and the youth in the primary education system because younger minds more receptive to social justice thinking and action [...] and YA books can do just that.”

The data brought forth by participant authors #1, #2, #3 and #5 emphasises Rosenblatt’s reader response theory, which suggests that reading is a transactional process where meaning emerges through the interaction between the reader and the text. YA fantasy’s social justice

messaging resonates with a constructed audience of adolescents, whose developmental stage primes them for transformative engagement with these narratives. The authors' intent to write narratives for young readers assumes a constructed audience capable of interpreting allegorical content as both personally relevant and socially instructive. The framing of protagonists as agents of resistance and transformation further connects to the constructed audience's potential to see themselves as empowered change-makers.

According to Boyd and Darragh (2019), YA literature is designed for 12-18-year-olds, generally characterized by their first-person point of view, fast-paced plots and focusing on the resiliency and independence of adolescents. In YA fiction, protagonists often engage in a process of teen self-discovery, grappling with influential sources of power-over that shape societal norms and expectations (Love & Fox, 2020). When looking specifically at YA fantasy and speculative fiction, these genres provide useful stories for examining questions of power, resistance and sociopolitical transformation, whereby characters in these novels work to reconceive oppressive sociopolitical and economic systems (Love & Fox, 2020). These texts encourage fantasy readers to critique structural injustices within their fictional worlds, examine ways that power is misused and reconsider what kind of world is possible (Love & Fox, 2020). This direct examination of YA fantasy's role in promoting social justice directly responds to research question 5, which seeks to understand how narrative elements within fantasy literature are employed to foster belief changes and encourage progressive social action. By focusing on themes of power, resistance, and societal transformation, YA fantasy serves as a conduit for readers to engage critically with and challenge existing social norms. The transactional nature of these texts aligns with the constructed audience's developmental propensity for critical analysis of societal norms. The emphasis on critique and transformation in these narratives reflects a calculated anticipation of

the audience's readiness to question authority and explore alternative societal models. This illustrates how the constructed audience in YA fantasy is not only a demographic but a theoretical construct designed to elicit specific emotional and intellectual responses.

Many fantasy and science fiction YA novels centre around an adolescent figure in crisis, working through issues of personal and national traumas, while in opposition to adult ideological institutions such as the state (García, 2018). While there might be potential disconnections with family, school and other institutions, there is oftentimes a strong kinship bond with other teen characters and in some instances a protective stance over their community and culture highlighting the importance of like-minded peer connections allowing marginalised youth to form communities of their own.

As Elsherief (2020) emphasises, YA novels often feature a *bildungsroman* or coming-of-age storyline which typically involves a conflict between the protagonist and their society, ending with the protagonist's re-emergence and acceptance into society once their mistakes are made and their maturation is complete. However, in YA fantasy where there are often narratives of counter-culture and revolution, the protagonist's growth is not measured through the transition or fulfilment into adulthood or by a return to society as it was, but rather a transformed society through their journey along the storyline (García, 2018). As such, YA fantasy can act as a conglomeration of *bildungsroman* thematic plotlines that incorporates the protagonist's encounters on both personal and sociopolitical levels with a built-in tendency toward problem resolution resulting from a productive exchange and a sense that a lesson was learned (García, 2018; Elsherief, 2020).

Another aspect of YA fantasy worth noting is that the genre often contains allegory. Allegory is the idea that writers employ it to add nuances to their stories, often centring on

themes and moral viewpoints that are deemed to be important by the author (García, 2018). Scenes of suffering, injustice, or racialised conflict help create some degree of empathy for characters in a book on behalf of the reader (García, 2018; van Leeuwen, 2021). While the reader may not be able to empathize completely with the experience of oppression due to their own advantaged social locations, they can understand the allegory of being privileged and doing nothing while others struggle (García, 2018; Elsherief, 2020; van Leeuwen, 2021). In relation to this author #4 stated the following:

I'm not certain if any book can motivate someone to become politically inclined. I think you have to be emotionally or empathically moved in some way as you read a book with social justice themes if you want to enact change inspired by dystopian novels like the Hunger Games for example.

Similarly, Elsherief (2020) contends that YA novels use empathy-creating narrative strategies that draw on the fellow-feeling of moral sentimentalism. Morton and Lounsbury (2015) posit that dystopian YA fiction is a space where young adults can learn patterns of thinking and action to help them actively negotiate the political world by employing narrative empathy. This form of reader identification can thus “recontextualise the thoughts, feelings and the real-world goals in the philosophical, theoretical, cultural and sociopolitical realm beyond the text for it to constitute social action of a reader” (Cosgrove, 2008, p. 237; Morton & Lounsbury, 2015). While YA fantasy and dystopian fiction may not act as a trigger or instigator for political action, it can inspire and energise individuals and groups who are already politically active (Morton & Lounsbury, 2015). Alternatively, individuals who move from political inertia to action at a future date may recontextualise their textual empathic response, using it to guide their newfound political aims (Morton & Lounsbury, 2015). In this manner, strong protagonists like Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games* 2008-2010), June Iparis (*Legend* series 2011-2019), or Beatrice

Prior (*Divergent* series, 2011-2013) have the potential to be role models of social action for their readers.

Love and Fox (2020) highlight an interesting point that YA fiction is written for “ease of reading, which means that oftentimes the world-building and metaphorical aspects tend toward the obvious rather than the subtle” (p. 10). Minimizing “literacy obstacles is an inclusive way to develop theory competency; readers can engage in deeper analysis of power structures when barriers to reading comprehension are minimized” (Love & Fox, 2020, p. 10-11). Through narrative empathy, fantasy readers can then transfer insights gained when analysing fiction to their own lived experiences, applying similar power analyses to critique existing inequality and imagine socially just alternatives (Elsherief, 2020; Love & Fox, 2020). Therefore, reading fantasy and speculative fiction can help illuminate the ways individuals are “complicit in perpetuating injustice through individual actions (micro), organizational dynamics (mezzo) and participation in societal structures (macro)” (Love & Fox, 2020, p. 11).

According to Boyde and Darragh (2019), YA authors have gained widespread popularity, and fantasy readers have become more socially and culturally aware, resulting in a vast array of new books within the field. As a whole, these novels are more inclusive, especially in terms of points of view and reflecting protagonists from different ethnicities, social classes and sexualities (Boyd & Darragh, 2019). During their interview author #2 stated that they believed that “many of today’s YA authors have a different mindset than their contemporaries who write for adults” in that they are “more woke” with regards to social justice issues. Similarly, author #1 reported that when they write YA fantasy/science fiction they often put more of themselves and their experiences growing up into their works. Such a statement coincides with Robichaud et al.’s (2020) notions that the ever-presence of the author can enable or restrict certain knowledge

production, perspectives and realities by determining who is given a voice, when and how and with what authority in a novel. Therefore, authors inclined to social justice-oriented thinking and worldviews will be more likely to write works that offer pathways to cross-cultural understanding and heightened awareness of the goals of social justice (Alsup, 2010; Rutherford, et al., 2022).

Be that as it may, author #3 pointed out that while there seems to be a demand for social justice themed books, authors #1 and #5 acknowledged that there are significant barriers to publishing books with social justice content because publishers are reluctant to publish such works. Boyd and Darragh (2019) and Inefuku and Roh (2016) contend that one reason for this might lie with the content of young adult literature that often reflects controversial topics which mirror cultural themes such as justice, revolution, challenging the status quo, disability, gender identity and mental health, whereby such themes are considered too controversial making publishers reluctant to publish such books. In fact, young adult literature often “appears in the top ten most frequently challenged and banned book lists, such as those issued each year by the American Library Association” (Boyd & Darragh, 2019, p. 19-20).

A second reason also lies at the heart of the publishing industry emphasising a lack of demand for such works and thereby a problem with profit (Boyd & Darragh, 2019; Inefuku & Roh, 2016). While fantasy and science fiction narratives often incorporate social activism in an imaginary world where young adults are revolutionary heroes positioned in terms of their agency, power and resistance, publishers have been slow to respond to this trend. Boyd and Darragh (2019) suggest that young people need access to books that not only reflect themselves, but also teach about cultures aside from their own, representing individuals with lives unlike their own. Interestingly, author #2 mentioned one initiative to help combat this issue has been the

We Need Diverse Books campaign in the US in which she took advantage of their mentorship program to help increase the diversity content within her book. Founded in 2014, We Need Diverse Books.org (2023) is a non-profit, grassroots organization of children's book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honours the lives of all young people. The organization hosts a number of programs, grants and partnerships to recognize and distribute more multicultural and diversity literature (We Need Diverse Books.org, 2023). The organisation's campaign aims to combat the continued book censorship from parents, publishers and educational stakeholders who wish to protect their children by seeking to avoid issues such as racism, violence, or profanity (Boyd & Darragh, 2019; Inefuku & Roh, 2016). As such, the efforts by We Need Diverse Books.org to address these concerns in the field of YA literature has seen the publication of more inclusive books rise in recent years (Boyd & Darragh, 2019; Inefuku & Roh, 2016).

New Theme #2: Social Justice Content, Diversity & the Publishing Industry

In recent decades, “book buying trends have witnessed a decline in overall sales, with the exception of the children's and young adult (YA) sectors, which experienced a substantial 26% growth in book sales in the US during the spring of 2021, resulting in a profit of approximately 91 million USD” (Murray, 2022, p. 220). Despite this growth, the representation of diverse authors within traditionally published literature has remained strikingly low, with only “5% of authors coming from diverse backgrounds, a statistic that has seen little change since the 1950s” (Murray, 2022, p. 220).

Such stark disparities in author demographics are significant when viewed through the lens of the four research questions guiding this thesis. In terms of the first question, which asks how fantasy literature critiques current socio-political and cultural contexts to inspire progressive changes in individual beliefs about social justice, the underrepresentation of diverse authors and

their narratives suggests that a significant body of potentially transformative literature remains marginalized in the mainstream market (see Hviid et al., 2019; Squires, 2017). The existing publishing structures may thus limit the availability of works that challenge dominant socio-political ideologies and that could foster fantasy readers' engagement with social justice themes (Booth et al., 2021).

Reader response theory is particularly significant in understanding the impact of diverse authorship. The constructed audience for social justice-themed books, particularly young fantasy readers, is anticipated to engage actively with the themes of diversity and equity. Fantasy readers from underrepresented backgrounds may experience a heightened emotional and intellectual connection to narratives reflecting their own identities, while those from dominant cultural groups may gain empathy through the transactional reading process.

Although the majority of interviewees within the author participant group identified as white, it was evident from the discussions that racial diversity and representation in the publishing industry were pressing issues. Remarkably, four out of the five interviewed authors acknowledged being personally aware of writers of colour who had encountered substantial barriers while attempting to publish their works with mainstream publishing houses. The exclusion of diverse voices in publishing limits the range of texts available for this constructed audience, effectively narrowing the potential for transactional engagement with diverse worldviews. This highlights a structural imbalance where the publishing industry's gatekeeping undermines the potential for broader reader response and interpretation. This recognition highlighted the persistence of systemic challenges faced by writers from diverse backgrounds, which continued to hinder their access to the traditional publishing arena.

These barriers have direct implications for the second research question regarding the role of fantasy literature in creating transformative mental spaces. If gatekeepers limit the entry of diverse voices, readers may be denied exposure to narratives that could broaden their worldviews, reduce cultural bias, and inspire empathy (Janssen & Verboord, 2015). This restricts the potential of fantasy to serve as a socially transformative site, as texts that emerge from marginalized communities often emphasize alternative cultural frameworks, cosmologies, and ethical values (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2018), which could help dismantle harmful stereotypes and support social justice activism.

Within the context of writers facing barriers to mainstream publishing, author #2 offered valuable insights based on their own experiences. They described the advantages of opting for self-publishing as a means to circumvent some of the bureaucratic hurdles commonly associated with traditional publishing. Self-publishing, as author #2 noted, does entail increased financial risks and demands a more substantial personal commitment to book promotion. However, the autonomy and creative control it affords authors were deemed invaluable. By choosing the self-publishing route, authors can ensure that their literary masterpiece remains entirely their own, safeguarding their ability to maintain an authentic and unfiltered voice (author #2). Additionally, self-publishing allows authors to sidestep the potential influence of privileged and biased editors and agents, enabling them to maintain a stronger connection to their narrative and artistic vision (author #2). These insights thus shed light on the complex landscape of contemporary publishing, emphasizing the importance of alternative avenues like self-publishing for authors who seek to challenge the status quo and preserve their individual voices in the face of longstanding disparities within the industry.

Such self-publishing strategies speak directly to the third research question, which addresses how the interplay between fantasy literature and self-reflection within transformative mental spaces fosters fan activism and social justice engagement. By circumventing traditional gatekeepers, fantasy authors from marginalized backgrounds can produce works that encourage readers to question dominant power structures, ultimately motivating readers to become more actively engaged in social justice causes (Hviid et al., 2019; Young, 2006). The accessibility of self-publishing platforms also enables the rapid dissemination of narratives that critique existing inequalities, thereby contributing to the broader dialogues surrounding justice, equity and inclusion.

Booth et al. (2021) highlight the publishing industry's "privilege problem" (p. 27) made up of a set of structures and attitudes that consistently privilege one set of voices over another, whereby cross-cultural books written for and by ethnic minorities are seen as unprofitable. Acevedo-Aquino et al. (2020), contend that the publishing industry remains dominated by one group (heterosexual, white, able-bodied, cisgender women), and new book titles are acquired for middle-class white fantasy readers by editors who lack cultural competence and diversity and who are more likely to attempt to conform every story to or with a particular, familiar mould. Castillo (2022) further points out that:

The English-language publishing industry centres the perspective and comfort of its overwhelmingly white employee base and audience, leaving writers of colour to be positioned along that firmly established structure: as flavours of the month, as heroic savours, as direly important educators, as necessary interventions [...] [which] continues to be one of the most dominant and palatable gateways for white audiences to become accustomed to seeing Black and Brown bodies on their screens and in their pages, as vessels of sensational trauma. (p. 17)

Along a similar vein, Ishizuka (2016) and Roberts (2021) report that between 80% and 85% of publishing houses consist of a homogeneously white, well-educated workforce, suggesting there

are still issues of ethnic diversity amidst those commissioning content; in other words, those in decision-making and budget-holding positions.

The persistence of these homogenizing structures is particularly troubling in the context of the fourth research question: how can authors and the publishing industry leverage narrative elements to foster belief changes in readers and promote progressive social change? Without sufficiently diverse editorial and managerial staff, many publishing houses risk reinforcing mono-cultural worldviews and limiting the transformative potential of fantasy narratives to challenge dominant ideologies. This not only constrains opportunities for progressive social commentary but also impedes the development of themes, motifs and characters that could encourage readers to re-examine entrenched beliefs (Linke, 2012; Squires, 2017).

During their interview, author #4 stated that they found “a significant amount of gatekeeping” when it comes to who can publish and what type of content gets published. To this effect, Shea et al. (2018) posit that the Big Five publishers (Penguin Random House, Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan and Simon & Schuster), who comprise more than 80% of the book market, act as gatekeepers who regulate what books are seen, read and reviewed. Booth and Narayan (2021) further add that gatekeeping activities foster barriers to publishing, industry participation and the promotion of exclusion, silencing and censorship of content from minority authors. Correspondingly, Acevedo-Aquino et al. (2020) postulate that the mainstream publishing industry maintains the white, privileged status quo through the standardization of what counts as quality in writing material and even how stories are told. As author #2 states: “white authored fantasy has a history of appropriating diverse characters into their stories like sprinkles on a cupcake because white publishing houses still control the messaging.” Castillo (2022) adds to this by claiming that this “appropriation is endemic to white-authored fantasy

through the creation of specific stories of oppression and marginalization that have been hollowed out of their historical context and replaced with white leading characters” (p. 92).

From an activist standpoint, such gatekeeping and appropriation limit the potential of fantasy literature to serve as a site of resistance and encourage readers to engage with transformative ideologies (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2018). If the publishing industry’s dominant decision-makers normalize narratives that dilute or strip away genuine cultural contexts, then readers may not receive the full force of critical social commentary that could spark shifts in their perceptions and values (Hviid et al., 2019).

When it comes to social justice messaging and content in fantasy and fiction in general, author #2 stated that she believes:

There are more themes of social justice coming from work written by authors of colour, because we speak directly from a position of diversity, oppression and inequality [...] it’s just that the mainstream publishing industry doesn’t put any effort into promoting and supporting our voices, and if they do, it ends up becoming a token position on the bookstore shelf or on an awards recipient list [...] it’s like they use us as poster children by saying ‘look at us, we are into diversity and inclusion and all that social justice shit, now shut the fuck up because we did our bit’.

In reference to the above Castillo (2022) makes an interesting statement in that:

Writers of colour often find themselves doing the second, unspoken and unsalaried job of not just being a professional writer but a Professional Person of Colour, where we go to writers of colour for the gooey heart-porn of the ethnographic: to learn about forgotten history, harrowing tragedy, community-destroying political upheaval, genocide, trauma; that we expect those writers to provide those intellectual commodities the way their ancestors once provided spices, minerals, precious stones, and unprecious bodies. (p. 16-17)

While some writers of colour might be seen as “token representations in the publishing industry, serving in some way to offer consolation or education and to provide new definitions and great epiphanies” (Castillo, 2022, p. 52-53), several of the author participants reported that they have noticed a “disturbing trend” (author #5) where even if a book contains social justice themes there is “too much silencing of diversity authors’ voices” (author #2) for authors of colour to make any

headway within mainstream publishing. Booth and Narayan (2021) claim this is symptomatic of a deep-seated prejudice within the publishing industry and related areas against marginalised communities.

This tokenistic approach and associated silencing of minority voices limit the genre's transformative power. Instead of encouraging fantasy readers to engage in meaningful self-reflection and activism (key elements of the second and third research questions) such publishing practices reduce the potential impact of social justice narratives (Squires, 2017; Young, 2006). Rather than reading works that challenge their core beliefs and inspire empathic understanding, fantasy readers may find only superficial diversity. This presents a clear missed opportunity for the industry to foster more impactful social engagement.

In light of this reported systemic discrimination there still appears to be a “reluctance on behalf of publishers to promote works with social justice themes” (author #4). As stated earlier, some of this might be due to the controversial elements related to publishing such content and the ensuing backlash publishers might experience from parents, educational institutions and society in general. Kirkbride (2020) also contends that publishing companies that are beholden to shareholders are also increasingly unable to justify risky or controversial books, resulting in a lack of diverse publishing. In addition, other explanations might reside with perceptions that such stories are potentially less marketable, less profitable and, therefore, less worthy of resourcing (Booth et al., 2021; Booth & Narayan, 2021).

On the note of profitability, all five authors reported that the “money generating success” (author #2) ethos of today's current economy and profit-driven motives are impacting who and what gets published. Kirkbride (2020) claims that “a ‘growth-or-die’ economic attitude, with its roots in capitalism and neoliberalism, means that publishing houses must aim to make more

profit every year” (p. 242). The concept of “growth-or-die (or ‘expand-or-die’ or ‘grow-or-die’) is the theory that economic growth is inherently good, an adequate means by which to measure success of a company or country and that economic growth must be achieved over other priorities” (Kirkbride, 2020, p. 242). Due to the impacts of this belief the publishing industry has become a very competitive sector within the free-market economy. More to the aforementioned point, author #5 stated that they understand “the competitive nature of the industry and its repercussions for not pumping out books that pay the bills”. As such, multi-national publishers themselves are being squeezed on one side by large conglomerates like Amazon’s colossal share of the market and on the other by shareholders (Kirkbride, 2020; Thompson, 2013). This, in turn, leads to a lack of diverse publishers, which leads to even less diverse publishing (Kirkbride, 2020; Thompson, 2013). More to this point, Author #3 stated that “there are so many fantasy novels being pumped out by publishing houses that are copycats of each other, it becomes redundant after a while where you don’t even want to read or write fantasy”. It also means seeing books that are increasingly compromised in terms of quality, with fantasy readers seeing the same kinds of books repeatedly being published (Kirkbride, 2020; Thompson, 2013). As such, “entire ‘undiscovered’ markets are being missed (or ignored) because publishers feel unable to take the financial leap of faith required to try to discover or develop them” (Kirkbride, 2020, p. 247). In this way, economic pressures reinforce conservative editorial decisions, limiting the opportunities for progressive fantasy to flourish. For fantasy authors striving to engage directly with social justice issues, the publishing industry’s focus on safe, profitable narratives can discourage innovation and impede the creation of texts that would otherwise resonate with fantasy readers’ evolving worldviews and prompt activism (Hviid et al., 2019).

During their interview author #2 indicated that they believed one of the main reasons behind a lack of social justice themed books on the market was because of the lack of diversity within the agents and editorial staff at publishing houses. According to Squires (2017), systemic issues affect diversity within publishing, including socioeconomic status, educational background and geographies. As stated previously, the publishing industry is “numerically dominated by a female workforce (4:1), but men in the field are paid 16% more than women” (Squires, 2017, p. 5). Publishing is also considered a historically low-pay industry, particularly given the high educational requirements which are so often mandatory, and the expectation that employees must live in large, costly urban centres like London and New York (Roberts, 2021), which can make it difficult to attract employees from the margins.

Another issue Squires (2017) raises is that while “white authors are published across genres, writers of colour have much less access to a range of genres and find what they do write is all-too frequently met with a clichéd reception and stereotyped packaging” (p. 6). Along similar lines, author #2 stated that in their experience and that of their friends, many writers of colour end up receiving “token publication offers” so that the publisher can “increase the diversity number in their book quota” to make the publisher appear “trendy and current. In the publishing industry, literary novels appear to have more prestige, but the more financially lucrative mass-market genres are less frequently authored by writers of colour (Squires, 2017; Young, 2006). Therefore, the literary marketplace might be seen as having embraced more literary writers of colour (e.g., Toni Morrison, Amy Tan and Gabriel García Márquez), whereas genre writers of colour like those found in fantasy, crime and romance are more infrequent (Squires, 2017; Young, 2006).

This distribution of opportunities directly impacts which kinds of fantasy narratives emerge and gain traction. Without equitable access to the genre's publishing space, works capable of critiquing socio-political contexts and inspiring progressive changes (RQ1), fostering transformative mental spaces for readers (RQ2), sparking fan activism (RQ3), and leveraging narrative elements for belief shifts and progressive change (RQ4) remain stifled. The constraints of prestige hierarchies and tokenistic inclusion signal the need for more diversity initiatives at all levels of the publishing industry (Hviid et al., 2019; Roberts, 2021).

In more recent times, Squires (2017) states that there has been a “shift in that literature and writing now operates within three systems of publishing: one being the traditional, or ‘legacy’, publishing or the Big Five; two being independent/small presses; and three consisting of self-publishing platforms” (p. 7-8). While two of the authors (author #3 and author #4) stated that they have publications by a division within one of the Big Five publishers, three of the author participants reported using “small, independent and locally owned publishers” (author #2) to publish their works. Of these three participants, they stated that they found independent locally owned presses more “receptive to social justice content” (author #1) and more “accepting of works from writers of diverse backgrounds” (author #5).

Independent and small presses have often been lauded for taking creative risks and nurturing emerging authors whose works might not fit the mainstream mould (Hviid et al., 2019). By fostering a more inclusive environment, these presses can promote fantasy narratives that incorporate social justice themes, providing spaces where fantasy authors can challenge hegemonic norms and where fantasy readers can find stories that resonate with diverse identities and lived experiences.

Of the author participant group, three authors stated that they have used self-publishing platforms to publish their works in order to avoid the “red tape of big publishing houses” (author #1). Hviid et al. (2019) posit that self-publishing makes it possible to sidestep the traditional gatekeepers of publishing thus allowing for books that might never have been published, or books to become published in an entirely different way. In the interview with author #2 it was acknowledged that self-publishing was considered “a way to manoeuvre around the constraints and barriers of the current toxic climate of the publishing world.” With a plethora of self-publishing platforms such as Amazon KDP, Apple Books, Barnes & Noble Press, Rakuten Kobo and Draft2Digital, writers and fantasy readers can publish and read books that the mainstream publishing industry would normally disregard. According to the international research data and analytics group WordsRated, 300 million self-published books are sold each year, 67% of top-rated, self-published books are written by women (compared to 39% of traditionally published books) and the number of self-published books has increased by 264% in the last five years (Rizzo, 2023). What this potentially means is that there is a clear business and political need for the publishing industry to interrogate its discriminatory institutional, organisational and sociocultural practices (Hviid et al., 2019; Young, 2006). Such data also highlights the commercial viability and growing cultural influence of self-publishing as a counterforce to mainstream constraints (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2018). This strategy aligns with the proposition that self-published fantasy works can bring forward critical social commentaries, new narrative structures and culturally grounded motifs, thus potentially inspiring shifts in reader worldviews and supporting grassroots fan activism aligned with social justice causes (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2018).

Author #2 called attention to another interesting point when she recounted her experience of using self-publishing as a form of digital activism through re-storying. During her interview she related how she ended up cancelling a publishing contract because her editor was “changing the tone and voice of her work to make it more appealing to the masses.” In the end she “re-storied the changes the editor had made” (author #2) so she could maintain her “authentic proud Black woman voice” (author #2) by self-publishing. According to Stornaiuolo and Thomas (2018) for those who have been “dispossessed or silenced they use the process of re-storying, of reshaping narratives to better reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences, as an act of asserting the importance of one’s existence in a world that tries to silence subaltern voices” (p. 314). In this way, the practice of re-storying holds significant implications, particularly for writers of colour who have long sought to challenge the narratives imposed by the dominant white, Eurocentric culture prevalent in the publishing industry. Within fan fiction communities, the concept of re-storying becomes a powerful tool for individuals to assert their agency and reshape textual representations. By engaging in re-storying practices, people of colour not only reclaim their narratives, but also actively participate in the creation of media content that resonates with their lived experiences and identities (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2018).

In this context, re-storying transcends being a mere literary exercise; it serves as a means for individuals to write themselves into existence. These writers become the architects who cast characters in their own likeness or mirror the attributes of those around them, thereby constructing narratives that authentically reflect the multifaceted reality of their worlds. This process is a “deliberate act of resistance against the dominant narratives that have historically shaped people’s lives, as well as the overarching meta-narratives that perpetuate established power dynamics” (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2018, p. 332).

For writers of colour, the potential offered by self-publishing platforms becomes apparent as a potent work-around strategy. These platforms enable authors to engage in re-storying by presenting their own narratives and perspectives unfiltered, unhindered by the gatekeeping and privileged barriers often associated with mainstream publishing houses. By utilizing self-publishing, writers of colour can amplify their voices, share their stories and contribute to the broader discourse on social justice, equity and representation. Through their narratives, they challenge the existing power structures, advocating for greater inclusivity and a more accurate portrayal of diverse voices in literature.

Such re-storying, informed by authors' lived experiences and empowered by digital tools, directly addresses this thesis's guiding questions. By producing and disseminating transformative fantasy narratives that incorporate themes of oppression, resistance and justice, authors can influence readers' beliefs and foster empathy (RQ1, RQ2). Moreover, fantasy readers who encounter these narratives within supportive fan communities may feel inspired to reflect on their own roles in social justice movements, ultimately translating their understanding into activism and community engagement (RQ3). Simultaneously, both fantasy authors and the publishing industry have the opportunity to learn from these emergent models and adapt editorial policies, marketing strategies and thematic emphases to cultivate progressive social change (RQ4).

New Theme #3: Gatekeeping & the Transformative Potential of Fantasy Literature

According to Coser (1975), publishers act "as 'gatekeepers of ideas' as they are empowered to make decisions as to what information and messaging is let in and what is kept out" (p. 15). In point of fact, several authors reported that they have observed that editors and publishers appear to "select certain types of storylines for publication" (author #3) while other storylines that might be more social justice oriented will be "disregarded and thrown out" (author #5). These

institutions typically give approval to some intellectual creations while denying passage to others, whereby those that occupy the realm of publishing are the “men and women who control access to the medium that Gutenberg invented [and] are still in a position to channel the flow of ideas” (Coser, 1975, p. 15). These gatekeepers thus shape to some extent the marketplace of ideas which in the conservative publishing industry serves as a limiting social mechanism on the transformative potential of fantasy literature. Furthermore, reader response theory offers a critical lens for examining the impact of gatekeeping on the constructed audience. The deliberate curation of content by publishers shapes not only the textual messages but also the scope of interpretive possibilities available to readers. For fantasy literature, the constructed audience is implicitly imagined as favouring escapist rather than transformative narratives, a presumption that limits the genre’s potential for sociopolitical critique.

Cultural gatekeepers and mediators, such as publishers, can be defined as “those involved in the mediation between the production of cultural goods and the production of consumer tastes” (Janssen & Verboord, 2015, p. 440). Cultural gatekeeping has significant implications for the ability of fantasy literature to examine socio-political contexts and encourage progressive change (RQ1). When editorial policies filter out challenging or overtly critical narratives, readers lose access to texts that might have expanded their ideological horizons and promoted a deeper understanding of marginalized experiences (Janssen & Verboord, 2015). Additionally, the role of the constructed audience in this context highlights the transactional tension between fantasy readers’ expectations and publishers’ assumptions. By privileging certain narratives, publishers constrain the fantasy reader’s ability to form diverse interpretations, thereby shaping the audience’s collective response and intellectual engagement. This dynamic, which reinforces the status quo, can be linked to Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and the compromise equilibrium,

which suggests that dominant cultural forces make subtle accommodations to certain challenges in order to maintain control while avoiding overt conflict (Femia, 1981; Forgacs, 1988; Hall et al., 1977; Hoare & Mathews, 1977). Publishers, in their gatekeeping role, may allow some progressive narratives to be published in limited forms, but these are often diluted or framed within accepted paradigms that do not threaten the existing social order. This balance between allowing some challenge while ultimately reinforcing the system is reflective of Gramsci's idea that cultural institutions play a key role in securing long-term political and social stability (Hoare & Mathews, 1977).

In the publishing industry, cultural mediation plays an important role in determining what books are turned into marketable commodities eventually to reach audiences (Janssen & Verboord, 2015). For fantasy as genre literature there is less marketability and in academic circles it is still deemed escapist, frivolous and of less value in the literary world (see Chapter 2 – Academic Debates). To this point, in both the readership and authorship participant groups it was reported that they were often questioned as to why they read or write fantasy despite its “juvenile content” (reader #9), “ridiculous characters and worlds” (reader #5) and “not [being] considered ‘real’ literature like the classics” (author #1). Based on these responses it should be highlighted that cultural mediation of literature directly impacts the fantasy genre through the process of cultural consecration, whereby a few artists and works and literary genres are identified and set apart from others in their field as exceptionally valuable and gain an exemplary and celebrated status (Janssen & Verboord, 2015), such as author #1's distinction between fantasy and classical literature. Cultural consecration “refers to the establishment of a ‘magical division’ between the ‘pure’ and ‘sacred’ cultural offerings, on the one side, and the ‘facile’ or “profane” products on the other” (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 294). What this means according to Janssen and Verboord (2015),

is that cultural consecration not only singles out the greatest works or artists in a field of literature, but also acts as a means of bestowing legitimacy upon an entire genre of cultural production such as fantasy literature. As such, this process of cultural consecration influences not only which works are published but how they are perceived by the reading public. If gatekeepers fail to legitimize progressive or socially conscious fantasy novels, fantasy readers may be less inclined to engage with them, thereby limiting the genre's ability to foster transformative mental spaces (RQ2) or to spur activism among fans (RQ3) (Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009). Moreover, Gramsci's concept of compromise equilibrium (Hoare & Mathews, 1977) can also apply to Bourdieu's (2006) concept of cultural consecration, where publishers may make slight concessions to progressive narratives or subgenres addressing critical social issues, without fully destabilizing the established literary hierarchy. In this manner, publishers achieve a kind of balance where these narratives may exist, but only in ways that do not challenge the dominant social and political order too radically. By preserving the appearance of diversity or progressive thought while safeguarding the established norms, this compromise prevents major disruptions to the hegemony of the status quo (Femia, 1981; Forgacs, 1988; Hall et al., 1977; Hoare & Mathews, 1977).

As cultural mediators, the driving forces behind gatekeepers range from political and moral concerns, commercial interests, to aesthetic motives (Janssen & Verboord, 2015). According to Linke (2012) and Coser (1975), a gatekeeper's class, upbringing, education, values and attitudes to the world as well as the values, norms, professional codes and traditional wisdom of their institutions, including publishing houses, determine the criteria for the selection of material and ultimately what content is published. For example, author #4 reported that a fellow writer once had an "editor tell her that her book contained too much First Nations overtones for

the general public, that it was decolonising overkill for their readers, even though the writer was Indigenous herself.” Author #4’s comments highlight how gatekeepers control the flow of knowledge and narratives of stories, images and experiences as well as the dominant norms and values that structure them, which influences whether existing lines of discourse will be maintained or new ones created (Linke, 2012; Coser, 1975). This is built on the premise that discourse constructs knowledge and that controlling discursive flows means controlling knowledge production of what people will hear and learn through the course of a novel (Linke, 2012; Coser, 1975). Such narrative control has a direct impact on the fantasy reader in that publishing gatekeepers exert their power over the circulation of knowledge and worldviews that are represented in a fantasy or any novel for that matter (Linke, 2012; Coser, 1975). Therefore, fantasy storylines will be adopted more readily if they conform to existing value systems that represent dominant worldviews that rely on well-established canons of knowledge shared by the educated upper classes which stabilizes culture and society (Linke, 2012; Coser, 1975). For the aforementioned reason, gatekeepers who are part of the established systems of knowledge that reinforce the status quo, might help explain why there are relatively few progressive, social justice-themed adult fantasy novels. Subsequently, this editorial filtering process not only restricts which stories are told but also narrows the pathways through which readers might experience transformative insights related to social justice (RQ1 through RQ4). By constraining the diversity of content, publishers effectively limit the genre’s capacity to challenge entrenched assumptions, highlight systemic injustices and mobilize fantasy readers toward advocating for equitable change (Booth & Narayan, 2021; Hviid et al., 2019). This situation again reflects Gramsci’s compromise equilibrium, as gatekeepers negotiate between the demands for progressive content and the imperative to maintain cultural and ideological stability (Hoare &

Mathews, 1977). Rather than opening the floodgates to radically transformative narratives, publishers may allow for some inclusion of social justice themes, but only within frameworks that do not disrupt the overall hegemonic order.

To contextualise the above regarding how ideas and knowledge gatekeeping exist within the publishing industry, take an example from Namibia, a former German colony, where the intersection between colonialism, literature and the formation of ideas on history and identity are observed. According to van der Hoog (2022), the Namibian book market is for a large part shaped by private publishing houses, which exercise considerable power over what gets published and what does not. The market is dominated by private publishing houses and institutions; this industry is characterized by a distinct German–Namibian heritage (van der Hoog, 2022). In Namibia, the power of private presses in the production and dissemination of knowledge perpetuates a dominant narrative in a vast majority of publications that readers must feel proud of their German–Namibian heritage.

In terms of novels and literature there are consistently published works that popularize a romanticized and exotic image of Africa and colonial nostalgia (Walder, 2010). The colonial gaze of the German–Namibian publishing industry does not only affect the content of books that are published (such as genocide-denying literature) but, importantly, also books that were never published (van der Hoog, 2022). This combination results in a skewed book market where gatekeeping and cherry-picking sustains a peculiar genre of whitewashed literature that directly influences what Namibians understand and learn about their own culture, history, people and identity (van der Hoog, 2022; Walder, 2010). Therefore, in the fantasy genre the inherent lack of authors and editors from diverse backgrounds (and differing worldviews, values and attitudes) leads to an impoverishment of progressive social justice themed works due to the continued

dominant white, Eurocentric knowledge production that is currently published within the genre. As such, the German-Namibian publishing example highlights the pervasive global implications of gatekeeping and the industry's cultural biases. It emphasises the urgency of addressing these entrenched power imbalances if fantasy literature is to fully realize its capacity for social critique, world-building that reflects pluralistic experiences and constructive disruption of oppressive norms (Hviid et al., 2019; Squires, 2017).

The advent of online and digital technologies has ushered in a transformative era, liberating individuals from the grip of institutional gatekeepers and self-proclaimed experts. This paradigm shift aligns with broader societal changes that have been unfolding since the 1960s in Western societies. The “democratization of higher education, the empowerment of marginalized groups (including women, young people, ethnic, racial and sexual minorities), increased social mobility and the growing heterogeneity of communities have collectively eroded traditional cultural hierarchies” (Janssen & Verboord, 2015, p. 15).

One conspicuous outcome of these sociocultural changes is the emergence of omnivorous taste patterns, reflecting a willingness to explore a wide range of genres and cultural expressions. This shift has not only disrupted the established cultural order but has also empowered social climbers and marginalized groups to bring their individual tastes and preferences into higher echelons of society. In doing so, they have “bestowed prestige upon genres and narratives that might have been marginalized in the past” (Janssen & Verboord, 2015, p. 15).

In this evolving landscape, individualization has become a defining feature. People are increasingly resistant to conforming to traditional cultural hierarchies and collective taste patterns. Instead, they seek to assert their individuality through their choices and expressions of

taste (Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009). This shift in mindset has particularly favoured fantasy writers who engage in fan fiction and self-publishing.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that individualism, while enabling greater diversity in literary expression, is not without its criticisms. Nevertheless, within the realm of publishing and the literary world, this ethos has provided fertile ground for fantasy authors who champion themes of diversity, inclusion, equity and social justice in their writings. Independent publishers and self-publishing platforms have emerged as key players in this transformation, disrupting the traditional gatekeeping mechanisms that have historically shaped fiction and genre literature.

By embracing more open systems of publishing (ranging from independent presses to self-publishing) fantasy literature can challenge established norms, present new thematic repertoires and engage fantasy readers in reimagining social structures (RQ1 through RQ4). As a result, fantasy readers encounter a wider breadth of narratives, and they may be more inclined to question dominant ideologies, empathize with marginalized perspectives and mobilize around social justice issues (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2018). This democratization of access to fantasy narratives can thus foster an environment where transformative mental spaces thrive, fostering the re-examination of personal beliefs and potentially inspiring social activism.

Furthermore, this disruption is instrumental in opening up new frontiers for fantasy storytelling that align more closely with progressive, social justice-oriented perspectives. Authors now have the opportunity to challenge the status quo, break free from conventional narrative moulds, and amplify voices that have long been marginalized. Through their writings, they contribute to the ongoing discourse on social justice, advocating for greater representation and a deeper understanding of the multifaceted issues that underlie contemporary society. Essentially, the individualism-driven transformation of the independent and self-publishing

industries offers a promising avenue for reshaping fantasy narratives in ways that resonate with the evolving values and aspirations of fantasy readers seeking progressive, socially conscious storytelling.

In summary, the interplay of structural biases, economic pressures and cultural gatekeeping within the publishing industry profoundly influences the capacity of fantasy literature to serve as a vehicle for social commentary and transformative engagement. Yet, the advent of alternative publishing avenues, combined with changing cultural tastes and increasing demands for inclusion, suggests a horizon in which diverse fantasy narratives can flourish. If the publishing industry (and by extension, authors) embrace more inclusive and socially conscious editorial strategies, the fantasy genre can more effectively challenge socio-political norms (RQ1), create transformative mental spaces for readers (RQ2), foster activism and engagement (RQ3), and ultimately leverage narrative elements to promote progressive belief changes (RQ4).

Conclusion

The findings of this research phase further illuminate the multifaceted nature of narrative-based belief change and its relationship with social activism among fantasy readers. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the impact of media extends beyond the confines of the printed page. In today's society, where most fantasy readers are immersed in a media-rich environment, it is essential to consider the significant role played by other forms of media, particularly television and film adaptations of fantasy novels in shaping the immersive experiences of readers.

The immersive experience of reading a fantasy novel is distinct, characterized by the fantasy reader's active engagement with the text, imagination and emotional involvement. However, the immersive experience of watching a television series or a film adaptation of a fantasy book can be equally impactful. In fact, it may even amplify the degree of narrative

transportation that a fantasy reader experiences through these multimodal and paratextual elements.

While this research primarily focuses on the impact of narrative-based belief change within the context of fantasy novels, it is essential to acknowledge that television and film adaptations can also play a significant role in this process. Although this research does not specifically examine the creation of liminal spaces through television and film, the statements and feedback from participants indicate that these adaptations do have a substantial influence on the fantasy reader's engagement with the narrative. Therefore, it is plausible to consider that the synergy between narrative-based belief change, liminality and the Reader's Journey may be further enhanced by the inclusion of media beyond the fantasy novel. The incorporation of visual and auditory storytelling elements, combined with the familiarity of seeing characters and settings come to life on screen, may deepen the fantasy reader's emotional connection to the narrative and amplify the potential for belief transformation and social activism engagement.

While the primary objective of this research is to unearth the potential for transformative experiences within the pages of fantasy literature, ultimately paving the way for a more socially conscious and actively engaged society, the findings have identified a spectrum of narrative absorption and transportation experienced by fantasy readers. These variations in the degree of immersion and engagement may directly influence the extent of narrative-based belief change, particularly in relation to social justice themes. This phase of the research has identified several crucial factors that can either enhance or hinder the ability of fantasy literature to stimulate social action following shifts in readers' attitudes.

One of the paramount revelations from the second phase of this research is the extraordinary influence wielded by the publishing industry in shaping the landscape of fantasy

literature that reaches the public. The industry's implicit biases, preferences, discrimination, norms, 'traditions' and gatekeeping practices serve as significant barriers to fostering narrative-based belief change, embarking on the Reader's Journey and fostering fan-based social activism. The industry's choices regarding which books to promote and distribute have far-reaching consequences on the narratives that reach fantasy readers and, therefore, the potential for those narratives to inspire social change.

The implications of this research extend beyond the mere exploration of fantasy literature and to a call to action. It underscores the urgent need for publishers and writers to reconsider the content of fantasy literature and actively incorporate more works that champion social justice themes. By doing so, the publishing industry can play a pivotal role in empowering readers with fantasy narratives that challenge existing worldviews and encourage critical thinking about pressing social issues. Additionally, it urges fantasy readers to become advocates for change themselves by demanding and supporting more social justice-oriented content within the genre's novels.

Fundamentally, the research not only sheds light on the intricately woven relationship between fantasy literature, belief transformation and social activism, but also highlights the role of key stakeholders, such as publishers, writers and fantasy readers in shaping the narrative environment. It serves as a call to action for these stakeholders to collaborate in promoting stories that inspire positive social change and encourages a revaluation of the publishing industry's practices to ensure a more inclusive and socially impactful future for fantasy literature.

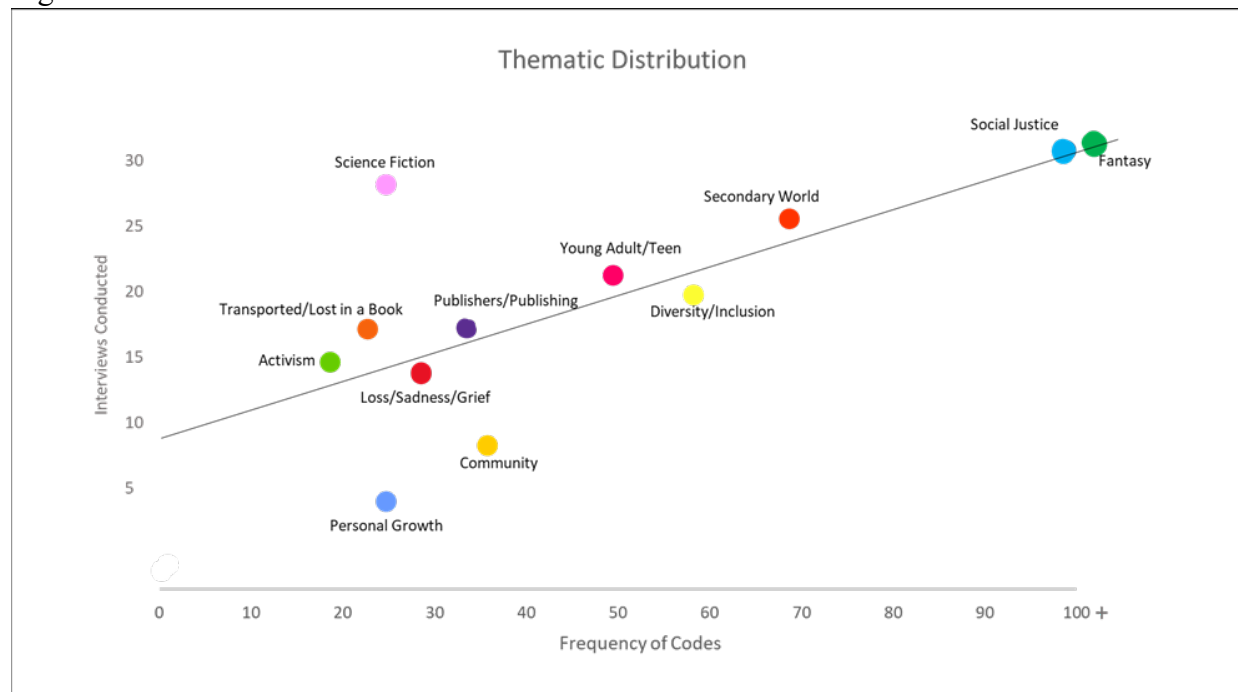
This conclusion reinforces how the integrated findings from both research phases systematically address all five research questions. It also highlights the crucial role of the publishing industry in either facilitating or hindering the transformative potential of fantasy

literature. By emphasizing the need for systemic changes within publishing practices, the research advocates for a more inclusive and socially conscious future for the genre, thereby aligning with all research questions focused on critique of norms, belief transformation, creation of transformative spaces, encouragement of activism and utilization of narrative elements for social change.

Further Research Insights & Outliers

According to Phoenix and Orr (2017), qualitative research does not always start and end with thematic analysis. In order to dig even deeper into my obtained results from phases one and two, I plotted my thematic codes from phase one and *a priori* coding for phase two in a scatter graph created with Microsoft Excel (see Figure 1 below) to move beyond the summaries of the participant interviews that a singular focus on central themes could provide. After the plotting was completed, I identified several outlier themes in the data, namely, science fiction, personal growth and community.

Figure 1



Nowak-Brzezińska and Łazarz (2021) state that an outlier can be defined as a data object that appears to be inconsistent with the rest of the dataset and deviates significantly from other observations. I determined that the themes of science fiction, personal growth and community are considered outlying but significant terms determined by their frequency, but distance from the other clusters of themes. The scatter plots of these themes located in relatively sparse regions from the positive correlation line are therefore declared as outliers. Within quantitative research, Phoenix and Orr (2017) contend that outliers are generally eliminated from analysis due to the significant yet somewhat unjustified influence they might have on the research results. However, in the case of qualitative research such as this study, outliers have implications for what is claimed to be observed within qualitative data and consequently the rigour and credibility of any concluding statements that might be drawn from it. Phoenix and Orr (2017) posit that overlooking outliers in research is problematic because it can overshadow the confidence held in one's thematic findings. Through my coding approaches in both phases of my interviews, I ran the risk that certain occasional themes that did not fit with the identified recurring key themes via a categorical-content analysis would be discarded. In order to maintain academic research rigour and to highlight some of the nuances of my findings I am, therefore, including the outlier themes in this research.

Theme #1: Science Fiction

While my research primarily examines the fantasy genre, the recurrence of the science fiction code during the qualitative research phases one and two is significant enough to explore as an outlying theme. Considering the fact that science fiction was mentioned briefly in nearly all phase one and two interviews, most of these were coded because respondents would group the genre with fantasy in passing discussions. One possible explanation for this might lie with how publishers, readers, fans, film/television and literary academics continue to cluster fantasy and

science fiction into one category. In fact, many scholars contend that science fiction can be considered a branch of fantastic literature that is located within the subgenre called *fantastika* (“*Fantastika*”, 2023; Franklin, 2009; Stableford, 2009; Thomas, 2013), which inadvertently or otherwise blurs the lines between the genres.

According to Franklin (2009) and Milner (2012), the literary genre of science fiction is a defining feature of modern culture and society. It is central to how society imagines space, time, the future and its place in the cosmos (Franklin, 2009; Milner, 2012). As opposed to fantasy, “science fiction’s domain is the possible [...] it is not a question of whether a fictive world is in reality impossible, actual, or possible, but, rather, how the text implicitly asks readers to respond to its invented reality as well as the state of science and technology when and where the work was composed” (Franklin, 2009, p. 23). In the same way, Stableford (2009) contends that fantasy depends on the fact that readers are at least as familiar with the mythic past as they are with the historical past and the experienced present, whereas science fiction stories are set in hypothetical futures, alien worlds or alternative histories that have no such recourse.

In light of Franklin and Stableford’s notions, there are some inherent similarities to the elements of fantasy I previously defined in my introduction such as the presence of magic or supernatural elements (i.e. Jedi abilities in *Star Wars* or psychic powers in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*). According to Stableford (2009), it is important to also consider more definitive characteristics of fantasy that overlap with science fiction borrowing elements such as intrusive fantasies (defined as when the known world is disrupted by a technological innovation or an alien incursion of some kind). Science fiction also contains elements of portal fantasy in which the protagonist sets off in a spaceship, or a time machine, or travels through some kind of interdimensional gateway to arrive in a different world (Stableford, 2009; Milner, 2012). There

are also similarities to fantasy through its characteristic of immersion, which plunges the reader directly into an imagined future, alien world, or alternate history, whose characters are native to it (Stableford, 2009; Milner, 2012). Another consideration considers that both fantasy and science fiction rely on cognitive dissonance to challenge preconceived notions. However, the difference between the genres lies in the idea that in science fiction this challenge must revolve around a scientifically or technologically plausible ‘device’ such as a new technology, scarcity scenario, distant location, or future time that provides the catalyst sparking examination of individual beliefs and expectations (Thomas, 2013).

Another consideration of this theme lies in how eight of the fantasy readership participant interviews (Phase One and Two) and in four of the interviews with the author group the respondents identified a personal bias and preference towards fantasy as a genre as opposed to science fiction. Participant #7 stated their preference for fantasy was because it is “so vastly different from science fiction”, while participant #11 stated their preference for fantasy because it is “divorced from the hard science in science fiction that I find confusing.” Similarly, author #2 stated that their preference for writing and reading fantasy places the genre as “more imaginative to others in order to explore themes of social justice.” Author #4 also reported their preferred choice of fantasy for “writing with a social justice lens.”

A final examination of the science fiction theme resides with the observation that three participants and one author mentioned science fiction as demonstrating the possibility of being a better literary genre for promoting social justice because it responds more quickly to social trends like climate change. To this effect, King and Churchill (2023) posit that science fiction intentionally reflects current societal trends and patterns and extends them into a range of alternative futures that is deliberately and creatively made plausible. Correspondingly,

participant #5 stated that they believed science fiction is more critical of society than fantasy because it “focuses on exploration and acceptance of different races and worlds.” Participant #2 reported that they thought other forms of literature, such as science fiction, “can also powerfully influence our sense of politics and engagement [and] fight for social justice.” Similarly, participant #13 stated that they found science fiction “more relevant in our technology-driven society where advancements like artificial intelligence are in their infancy”. In other words, science fiction stories can help us take hold of the present and engage its intense realities (Streeby, 2018, Delany, 2009). In this way, Delany (2009) contends that science fiction is not about the future; it uses the future as a narrative convention to present significant distortions of the present. Furthermore, critical dystopias depicted in science fiction narratives like Bong Joon-ho’s film adaptation *Snowpiercer* (2013) and its subsequent TNT reboot by the same name as well as Apple TV+ series *Extrapolations* (2023) and *Silo* (2023) also act in the same manner where science fiction is no longer simply a tool for reading the present: it generates the present society lives in (Paura & Colăcel, 2019) through multimodal interactions.

According to Paura and Colăcel (2019), science fiction is also a tool for understanding where humanity is going and envisioning the coming impact of technological acceleration on society. Participant #7 spoke to this by stating that science fiction allows readers to “imagine a world with synthetic droids, teleporters, replicators and it makes us question if this is the world we want for our future”, whereas participant #11 reported how science fiction extrapolates fears and concerns of current society into the future and acts as a mirror for the current reality by stating the following: “do I really want robots to make decisions for every part of my life? You know it’s sort of scary to think about.” Both participants highlight the dystopian imagery common to science fiction literature that embeds readers into the shared history of the

Panopticon society where the pervasiveness of technological and digital control systems removes any hope of individual life (Paura & Colăcel, 2019).

In prior sections I contended that fantasy might provide a ‘safe’ escape into a secondary world; however, this current section sheds light on notions that science fiction worlds raise potential issues about the Anthropocene era and humanity’s future as a species. There appears to be a prophetic and predictive anticipation within science fiction storylines that offers warnings about the current progression of society with little concern given to technological dependence, overconsumption, overpopulation, resource scarcity, global warming and climate change. While in previous sections I contended that certain genres of fantasy (see eco-fantasy) can serve a similar purpose, author #5 mentioned that the “futuristic settings and storylines in science fiction make it even more suitable because of its relevance to humanity’s current love affair with technology and AI [...] it makes us actually think about the future in a way that fantasy does not.” As Paura and Colăcel (2019) and Milner (2012) point out, the fact that contemporary science fiction is struggling with the problems of climate change, technological unemployment, artificial super-intelligence, radical longevity and immortality is quite meaningful as it proves the genre’s enduring ability to look forward and come up with legitimate narratives about humanity’s self-image. While fantasy has the ability to make us envision a future that semi-resembles a pre-modern state, science fiction’s appeal lies in the possibility of foreshadowing the long-term consequences of technological knowledge and social developments (Milner, 2012; Paura & Colăcel, 2019). In light of the aforementioned assertions, however, I contend that both fantasy and science fiction literature can equally promote social justice with narratives that disrupt the status quo and hegemonic oppression by raising critically reflective questions in secondary and distant worlds that are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar to fantasy readers.

Theme #2: Personal Growth & Societal Transformation

While the theme of growth was not mentioned among the author participants it was brought up with the fantasy readership group. In four interviews the participants spoke at great length of personal growth inspired by reading fantasy texts. To this effect, participant #11 stated that reading fantasy texts in their youth helped them see themselves as the “hero” in their life and that they felt “inspired by many fantasy characters who fought dangerous quests to overcome challenges and grow from them.” Additionally, participant #3 stated that reading fantasy was a “very important part of my development as a queer teen [whereby] reading about the various characters and their struggles helped me grow into the person I am today.”

These statements offer some insight into how individual transformational change aligns with the reading experience of fantasy and the Hero’s Journey. According to Williams (2019), the Hero’s Journey provides a template for all change. Sometimes the hero is motivated to change due to the nature of the quest and other times the change is unintentional, which can leave the hero in a state of loss, grief, confusion and uncertainty. In order to grow from the experience, the hero must learn new skills and discover new abilities. Each trial is a step toward solving their life problem, where the hero is required to do things they do not know how to do, may be reluctant to do and are unsure they can do (Williams, 2019). Through this process the hero, therefore, increases their understanding of both the problem and themselves to engage in personal transformation (Allison & Goethals, 2017). To this effect, participant #14 stated that their “connection to the characters on their journey” in a fantasy book allows them to see “glimpses of that journey in [their] day-to-day life which [they] can grow and learn from.”

While the four fantasy readership participants did not disclose – nor were they asked specifics regarding their reasons for identification with a protagonist – participant #3 mentioned that they “preferred characters” who represented the same gender as themselves, because they

found it “easier to identify with that character’s transformation” in relation to their own growth. To this effect, there have been a number of critiques regarding Campbell’s Hero’s Journey model in that it fails to address the journey of growth and transformation of contemporary women (Falconer, 2021; Sandars, 2019) and gender non-conforming people. In response to this oversight, Jungian psychotherapist and student of Campbell, Maureen Murdock, developed the Heroine’s Journey while treating her patients. Murdock’s model, as opposed to Campbell’s, illustrates a female journey as psychospiritual in nature, whereby the journey is internal (as opposed to the male’s exterior journey) and she reclaims her femininity and finds a union of masculine and feminine values (Falconer, 2021) through her transformation.

Taking Falconer’s ideas one step further, Barbara Creed, a professor of cinema studies with a research focus on gender and feminist film theory, reconsiders the Heroine’s Journey in an entirely new manner rather than looking to rework or fit a female’s journey into the existing ‘male’ framework set up by Campbell and Murdock (Falconer, 2021; Sandars, 2019). Creed’s model requires the heroine to:

Fight either physically or emotionally and be prepared to sacrifice herself; to contend with obstacles that put the heroine into an antagonistic relationship with the male symbolic order (i.e. emotional issues such as pressures or threats from an overbearing parent or partner, or a hostile protagonist); and assert her new beliefs and acquire a new identity through her challenging the patriarchal social order. (Sandars, 2019, p. 314)

As opposed to Campbell’s and Murdock’s models, Creed’s model specifically critiques the influence of patriarchy on the heroine’s journey. Creed’s Heroine’s Journey describes the female heroine becoming the anti-heroine who struggles against dominant stereotypes of female sexuality and enters into conflict with male power in her attempts to define her own identities and personal transformation (Sandars, 2019).

While Creed's model's critiques of patriarchy and its influence on both women and men are pertinent, there is still an essentialising aspect to the whole conception of the hero's and the heroine's journeys. Contrarily, my proposed concept of the Reader's Journey moves beyond the confines of the hero and heroine, beyond binaries and biological essentialism. It is a non-gendered term that takes into account that no matter the gender of the protagonist a fantasy reader may identify with, they have the potential to experience a journey of narrative-based belief change and personal transformation. The Reader's Journey is person-centric and focuses on the individual reader no matter who they are and where they are at on their living journey.

Along different lines, two other participants reported that they experienced personal growth after they had read fantasy novels to help deal with experiences of trauma. Participant #8, who had been in a car accident, stated that after reading *Lord of the Rings* she gained a "sense of hope and recovery for the future" where she was motivated to work harder at her recovery and "grow from the experience" of her trauma. Participant #10 similarly stated that the trauma of losing a parent in their youth was "eased by reading fantasy... because escaping into the world of the book and living through the heroine helped me process the grief and loss I felt." Participant #5, who reported having to deal with "the extremes of depression" where she "can't get out of bed, take a shower, eat food, or anything at all [...]" where sometimes [her] own painful emotions feel so debilitating that acting to 'fix' [her] life seems impossible", found that by going along an adventure with a character in a fantasy book helped "pull [her] through tough years in [her] life."

According to Allison and Goethals (2017), transformations as a result of the Hero's Journey can promote growth and healing. This can be seen as a form of post-traumatic growth and highlights that people can overcome severe trauma and even use it to transform themselves into stronger, healthier persons than they were before the trauma (Allison & Goethals, 2017). In

reading fantasy stories where the hero undergoes some form of transformation as a result of a traumatic quest experience, it can facilitate growth and healing by validating one's personal experiences. According to Neimeyer (2004), in this manner post-traumatic growth becomes a meaningful reconstruction in the wake of crisis and loss. Along similar lines, Harrington (2021) posits that the loss and grief attributed with trauma can be transformative by offering an opportunity for new self-narratives. In other words, post-traumatic growth is where individuals can learn to live with a deeper awareness and appreciation for healthy connection, meaningful growth and intentional purpose (Harrington, 2021).

According to Larsen (2013), an essential part of the hero's journey and their subsequent growth and transformation is the return to one's community to contribute hard-won knowledge from the quest. For the hero this growth comes from having altered their perspective upon the hurts and disappointments in their life in order to transform their wounds into a source of power (Larsen, 2013). As participant #3 stated "I grew with the main character [...] I learned to overcome the pain and shame I had as a queer teen and became stronger for it." In many ways this outlier theme sheds light on the Reader's Journey model I am proposing. With the Reader's Journey, the focus is on the fantasy reader's transformation of the self then to take their new-found knowledge and personal insights to transform the greater society in which they live. In order to do this, the fantasy reader (acting as a hero) must be cast out of their familiar world and into a different world; otherwise, there can be no departure from their status quo (Allison & Goethals, 2017).

In the Hero's Journey there are three distinct transformations: a transformation of setting, a transformation of self and a transformation of society (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Along this line, participant #5 stated that their post-traumatic growth inspired them to "do something for

others that were experiencing pain” and participant #8 stated that she was motivated to “write fan fiction with characters that experienced loss in some way to help other people not feel so alone in their sadness.” In the *Reader’s Journey*, a fantasy novel with progressive social justice themes would therefore provide the setting for change for the reader. The setting, being the secondary world of a fantasy novel, acts like a liminal space for the reader which can trigger emotional responses that have the potential to transform one’s thinking. Consequently, the liminal space thus becomes the “fertile soil from which heroic transformations may bloom” (Allison & Goethals, 2017, p. 388). This in turn can be linked to my previous discussion about the effects of literature on the mind and narrative empathy (see Chronis et al., 2012; Djikic & Oatley, 2014; Johnson, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013) which can have a transformative effect on the fantasy reader’s attitudes, altruistic responses and social activism. Similarly, Jayawickreme et al. (2021) propose that consideration and exploration of information from the environment (in this case the setting of a fantasy novel) may incite individuals toward increased prosocial behaviour following adversity or trauma. This type of growth following adverse experience may potentially lead to altruistic behaviours through a development of intellectual humility, open-mindedness to diverse perspectives on an issue, understanding the multiple ways in which situations may unfold and empathy (Jayawickreme et al., 2021).

While participants #5 and #8 reported that they did not have any inclination to change society based on their post-traumatic growth, participant #3 thought that “perhaps [their] fan fiction writing might do something for the greater good of the world.” According to Allison and Goethals (2017), for some fantasy readers using social media platforms and community fan fiction sites may act as a means for their transformation and may cultivate social change by moving readers on a “journey from egocentricity to socio-centricity and from elitism to

egalitarianism” (p. 382). Not unlike the transformed hero in the hero’s journey who returns from their quest ready to offer a contribution to society, a reader on the Reader’s Journey becoming involved in fan activism or some other social activism inspired by reading a fantasy book allows the reader also to offer a bestowal to society, whereby these newly acquired insights and benefactions can be used to better the world.

Theme #3: Community

Not unlike the fantasy genre, the concept of community is a multi-faceted construct consisting of shifting definitions. On one hand it can be a geographical boundary made by natural landscapes, roads, fences, borders or postal codes and on the other, a social space where individuals share common interests, ideas and beliefs. Community also has the capacity to promote coherence and wholeness that incorporates diversity. In the Phase One and Two qualitative research the outlying theme of community was mentioned in seven interviews solely within the fantasy readership group.

Several participants spoke to community and solidarity as a common theme found in fantasy novels and texts. Participant #6 reported that “fantasy offers lots of themes and plots that present opportunities for connection and community.” Participant #5 stated that she found fantasy novels “always have the hero needing help from others, sometimes even from their own community to save the world [...] I like how it’s a group effort that draws everyone together to fight evil.” More to the effect described by participant #5, Deszcz-Tryhubczak (2018) posits that western literature is usually seen as overwhelmingly about the self, which in turn has led to relatively limited attention being paid to narratives in which the self is depicted as participating in the interdependent network of individuals of a society. Most westernised storylines centre on one protagonist or one hero who single-handedly saves the world. However, within some progressive fantasy storylines, this redundant plot is rewritten with multiple characters and

protagonists forming pairs and small groups which makes solving problems easier by engaging in solidaristic thinking and action (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2018).

At this point in my discussion, I am briefly returning to the concept of liminality as it is not only a central notion to the Reader's Journey, but also sheds light on the current exploration of community. As I discussed previously in my introduction, the liminal space and liminality is a ritualistic passage of transition, an in-between location that opens up a reflective space in a fantasy reader's mind for a possibility of transformation and narrative-based belief change (see Stenner, 2021; Turner, 1977). What is interesting about liminality from Turner's (2010) perspective is that the "liminal experience offers a sense of homogeneity and comradeship and a generalized social bond through the concept of *communitas*" (p. 172). Turner (2010) contrasted social structure (i.e. status, power, top-down authority) with antistructure (bottom-up creative responses and pressures to change), where antistructure is a liminal space that responds to the need for *communitas* (positive community activities) when people experience high degrees of powerlessness (p. 172-173). Along similar lines, Rubenstein (1992) states that:

When society or groups of people enter *communitas*, no longer do power and privilege, status and role, law and institution determine social interrelatedness which is characterized by equality, immediacy, and the lack of social ranks and roles. A levelling process brings about the dissolution of structure, the absence of social distinctions, a homogenization of roles, the disappearance of political allegiance, the breakdown of regular borders and barriers. The liminal aspect of *communitas* therefore serves to unify, bond, and transcend structural relationships. By doing so, *communitas* reminds society that at a deeper level all of its members are human and equal, despite the accepted social and hierarchical differences. (p. 250-251)

Therefore, in the Reader's Journey during the reflective liminal space a fantasy reader might take the first steps towards *communitas*. This liminal space is where readers occupying less-dominant positions in society or those residing on the margins might begin to think about taking on a prominent role of giving voice to their oppression or disadvantage. If a fantasy reader

successfully passes through this liminal state, they can then engage with *communitas* in a greater sense towards social action. In this regard, fantasy novels containing themes of togetherness and solidarity can help establish a “sense of camaraderie and coming together to take on some larger negative force that is often inspiring [...] There is the sense of possibility to take on hegemonic power in the real world” (participant #10). Likewise, participant #5 stated that “the ways that ordinary, everyday people collaborate in a fantasy novel feels resonant with social justice struggles that we face today [...] it can give us an idea of how to organise ourselves to create change.”

With the final stage of the Reader’s Journey being action motivated towards progressive social change; fantasy readers that transition successfully from the liminal state therefore have the potential to establish *communitas* in fan-based communities that bring people together based on shared values. As compared to other genres of literature I would contend that fantasy is a better genre for promoting social action based on unification, community and solidarity. In fact, Selling (2002) states that modern fantasy is a text-centred, sub-cultural community of readers, writers, fan groups, critics and artists, which have been created by and in turn generated a wide network of social phenomena, most prominently within fan communities. Fantasy has from its more popular beginnings created a sense of community driven through fandom (Selling, 2002). From the 1960s when many of its founding followers were counterculture adherents outside the norm of society, to the mainstream movements of the 1970s and 1980s (see Chapter 3 Case Studies), fantasy has drawn numerous people from a variety of backgrounds into communities of belonging. Therefore, it is no surprise that fantasy fans are drawn into a community and themes of community are present within many fantasy storylines, whereby fantasy fandom groups can be seen as a space through which new cultural items are introduced, functioning as a potentially

subversive community of positive social change and intellectual creativity (Selling, 2002). In this manner *communitas* and the transition to the final stage of the Reader's Journey encompasses a form of participatory culture through role playing games, online fandom communities and cosplay, potentially leading to fan activism in a communal context.

According to Jenkins et al. (2018), participatory culture is characterized by low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; strong support for creating and sharing creations with others; members who believe that their contributions matter and members who feel some degree of social connection with one another. In the final stage of the Reader's Journey, fantasy readers may feel an inclination to become part of the bigger picture and join in groups motivated towards social change. In this regard, participant #2 mentioned that the "joining of different races and societies in fantasy books" helped her see "opportunities for how we can organise ourselves to fight social injustices." Participant #10 stated that the "community theme in some fantasy books" inspired her to "join fan sites that promoted social justice." In this manner, Jenkins et al. (2018) posits that communities where meaningful exchanges take place can form fandom groups that inspire participants to take stronger public stances on social justice issues. Participant #5 also reported that after she read books by Octavia Butler she had "a stronger sense of how people can band together to make change in the world." Deszcz-Tryhubczak (2018) contends that fantasy with storylines that promote balanced and symmetrical meeting of individual minds engaged in collective action and joint decision making can translate into responses to concrete forms of social injustice.

It should also be stated that while not every fantasy reader might engage in social activism after they reach *communitas* there can also be some challenges for those that do. Participant #2 stated that while she enjoyed how the fantasy novels she reads "have groups of

people coming together it never really works out that way in real life and if it does there are always problems between people in that group.” Participant #5 also said that “you have to negotiate so many things in a community of people who are very different from each other that even though you want to work towards social justice it can be really hard to get everyone on the same page.” The utopic vision of everyone coming together to fight evil and save the world as a theme in some fantasy storylines can be problematic for various reasons. Under ideal circumstances a group of people coming from disparate backgrounds working together in a secondary world can achieve change. However, in the real world, communities are systems of conflict as well as cooperation, whereby the social, political and economic macro-structure cannot be ignored (Bockstael, 2017). Individuals living within communities are continually shaped by the various institutions, systems and structures that govern their lives and inherent to the maintenance of these establishments is internal hierarchy. This can thus favour privilege-based power struggles and hierarchies that reinforce and propagate social inequities within areas like gender, race and class. Therefore, while themes of community-building, solidarity and togetherness portrayed in progressive fantasy novels can inspire readers to build these alliances in real life, the physical manifestation of these fan-based communities can still present challenges through the potential for the creation of hierarchies and exclusionary practices.

Conclusion

The contemporary case studies and the qualitative research conducted indicate that the fantasy genre serves as a suitable medium for examining contemporary societal contexts. Furthermore, the content of this genre has the capacity to encourage fantasy readers to critically assess detrimental ideologies, dominant narratives and oppressive forces. While my research has highlighted the strong likelihood of narrative-based belief change occurring within the context of fantasy literature with progressive social justice themes, it is necessary from an investigative

perspective to delve further into various facets that demand consideration concerning the concepts of the liminal space, fan activism and the Reader's Journey. Within this discussion, the section dedicated to outliers and exceptional cases brings forth additional insights that broaden understandings of these dynamics. Perhaps the most noteworthy revelation from this outlier section is the recognition that, despite the perception that reading and writing are often solitary pursuits, a fantasy reader is far from isolated when the role of media and fan communities are considered in the processes of narrative-based belief change and embarking on the Reader's Journey.

One of the most compelling findings that emerged from the outlier section is the acknowledgment that fantasy readers are not merely passive recipients of narrative content. Instead, readers often exist within dynamic and interconnected networks of fellow enthusiasts, both online and offline, who share their passion for fantasy literature. These communities serve as spaces where fantasy readers can engage in discussions, share interpretations and collectively explore the themes and ideas presented in the fantasy books they read. This sense of belonging to a broader community plays a pivotal role in amplifying the impact of narrative-based belief change and social activism.

Many of the participants in the study described their involvement in these fantasy communities, where they found like-minded individuals who shared their values and beliefs. Within these communities, discussions often revolved around the social justice themes presented in fantasy literature. This communal engagement frequently served as a stimulus for the participants' subsequent involvement in social activism efforts. These communities function as platforms for the exchange of ideas, the reinforcement of shared beliefs and the mobilization of collective action. Therefore, the findings from this section emphasize the interplay between the

solitary act of reading or writing and the communal aspect of being part of a fan community.

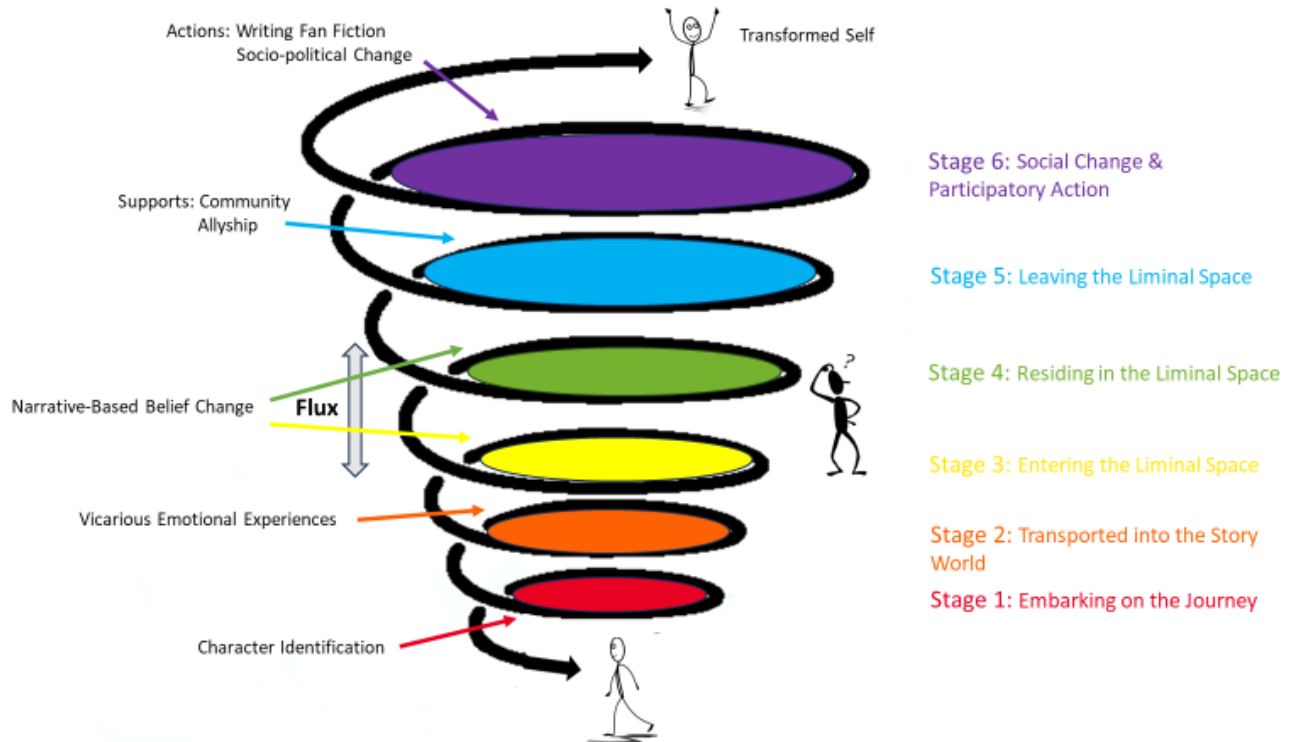
While the act of reading or writing may be solitary, the subsequent discussions, debates and interactions within these communities serve to amplify and reinforce the narrative-based belief change experienced by fantasy readers. Furthermore, they provide a supportive environment that encourages and facilitates the Reader's Journey, potentially guiding individuals towards taking concrete steps in the realm of social activism.

This insight spotlights the significance of recognizing the broader ecosystem surrounding fantasy literature and its readership. It highlights the influential role of fan communities and media platforms in not only enhancing the experience of narrative absorption, but also in channelling the transformative potential of fantasy literature towards meaningful social change. As I continue to explore the intersection of literature, belief change and activism with the Reader's Journey model in the next chapter it becomes increasingly evident that the collective power of fan communities and their engagement with narrative themes can be a driving force in shaping a more socially conscious and active society.

Chapter 6

The Reader's Journey

Figure 2: Reader's Journey Conceptual Model



"Spiral" #1903155, "Confused Clipart Transparent" #1480164 and "Stick Person Transparent Background" #1560304 & #2446493 images retrieved from <https://clipart-library.com>.

Introduction

Throughout the qualitative research and analysis in the previous chapter, it became clear that some individuals who read fantasy literature exhibit a proclivity towards engaging in social justice endeavours after encountering social justice themes in fantasy narratives. Within my scholarly inquiry, the primary objective has been to investigate the capacity of fantasy novels to foster a cognitive space for fantasy readers, one that may serve as a stimulus for introspection and imaginative ideation. By becoming immersed in the narratives of progressive fantasy literature, wherein readers encounter novel ideas and perspectives, known as threshold concepts, fantasy readers are afforded an opportunity to question their preexisting convictions and imagine

alternative ways of living for themselves and society. This transformative process can culminate in an inclination towards social activism. The qualitative research conducted herein has substantiated the phenomenon of narrative absorption, characterized by a fantasy reader's potential immersion in the fictional world of a narrative and its subsequent influence on their disposition towards the thematic content of the literary work and, consequently, their predilection for social activism. Thus, the initial intent of exploring the occurrence of fantasy literature's capacity to facilitate a reader's societal engagement within a self-reflective liminal space has evolved into a broader exploration and framework, at which point the act of reading fantasy literature itself can possibly become a conduit for social justice awareness and action.

The framework referred to as the Reader's Journey (RJ), illustrated in Figure 2, builds on the theoretical underpinnings of narrative-based belief change, narrative transportation and the liminal space. This framework elucidates the cognitive processes through which a fantasy reader might embark on a transformative journey that can lead to social justice activism. The RJ involves a six-step process through which a fantasy reader may experience a mentally perceived change in their preexisting attitudes, beliefs and/or values. Through these potential mental shifts, the RJ serves as a visual model for how a fantasy reader might experience narrative-based belief change, thereby possibly motivating the fantasy reader towards social justice activism.

While theories concerning narrative-based belief change and narrative transportation play a foundational role in the RJ model and its six-step process, it is important to acknowledge reader-response theory's relevance to the model especially with regards to the findings in Phase One. For instance, in theme #1, Multimodality in Fantasy Literature, reader-response theory helped to explain participant #5's experience with role playing games by explaining the immersive transaction of reading *Dungeons & Dragons*. By using reader-response theory in this

manner it can potentially highlight how multimedia engagements can enhance textual representations in fantasy, fostering an understanding of characters' lives. This could be significant to Stage One of the RJ which posits that fantasy reader identification with a fantasy character is an important step in establishing narrative absorption.

In light of the above, however, it is worth noting that my primary theoretical framework for the RJ model aligns with psychological theories, models and paradigms. My research is specifically focused on the internal psychological processes by which reading fantasy might have transformative effects on a reader's beliefs and attitudes around social justice-oriented change and activism.

Reader-response theory posits that a literary work involves an interaction between the fantasy reader and the text, where the reader interprets literature by relating it to their personal experiences (Mart, 2019, p. 81). Additionally, according to Dias and Hayhoe (1988) reader-response theory suggests that fantasy readers interpret texts by drawing upon their background knowledge and experiences. The RJ model hypothesizes that readers cannot fully interpret fantasy literature without first encountering threshold concepts that challenge their preconceptions and experiences. The RJ model examines cognitive processes and textual elements, particularly threshold concepts, through which fantasy readers may alter their beliefs. Progression through the RJ aims to prompt fantasy readers to critically examine their background knowledge and experiences in the liminal space. Moreover, Brooks and Browne (2012) argue that many reader-response theories overlook the cultural influences—such as values, attitudes and experiences—that shape how fantasy readers interpret texts. Building on this critique, the RJ model incorporates critical reflection within the liminal space, where fantasy readers can examine their own gender, ethnicity, or social contexts in relation to threshold concepts

emerging from fantasy works with social justice themes. This process is especially important in Stage 3, where critical reflection involves analysing the ideologies, narratives and social justice messages in the fantasy novel's secondary world and then applying these insights to the reader's own reality and primary world. By engaging in this inward reflection at this stage, fantasy readers begin to question their own assumptions, values, attitudes and experiences. This introspection helps fantasy readers connect their personal perspectives with the broader social, cultural and structural environment, addressing the gaps Brooks and Browne identify in reader-response theory by considering how individual beliefs and assumptions are influenced by social and cultural contexts.

What might be considered significant about reader-response theory for the RJ, unlike other literary theories that focus on the author's intentions or the text's intrinsic qualities, is that this theory suggests that meaning is actively created by the fantasy reader's interaction with the text (Rosenblatt, 1969). According to Rosenblatt (1969) reader-response theory suggests that each reader brings distinct backgrounds, experiences and perspectives to their reading, thus making connections and posing questions as they construct meaning. As such, this interaction is potentially important to mention with respect to the RJ, as fantasy readers must engage with the social justice themes in the text to envision "what if" scenarios about their own world and society.

According to Davis and Womack (2018), reader-response theory has significantly influenced literary criticism since the mid-20th century. Janice Radway (1983), a notable reader-response theorist, conducted influential research on the reading habits and motivations of women who read romance novels. She argued that readers' interpretations are deeply shaped by their lived experiences and the broader cultural narratives they inhabit (Radway, 1984). Consequently,

this perspective highlighted the active role of fantasy readers in making meaning from texts, rather than passively absorbing content.

In her seminal study, Radway (1981, 1983, 1984) found that romance novels provided women with a space to imagine alternative possibilities for themselves and their relationships. Radway (1981) suggested that these novels offered a form of escapism and a sense of utopia or idealized fantasy worlds for their readers. For many of the women in her study, reading romance was an act of agency, allowing them to explore desires and aspirations that might be constrained in their real lives (Radway, 1983). Radway (1983) further contended that this imaginative engagement helped the women cope with and sometimes challenge the patriarchal limitations they faced in their everyday environments as “nurturing wives and mothers” (p. 66). Therefore, Radway’s research examined more of the cultural and social implications of reading romance literature, which was not merely about distraction, but about envisioning different ways of being and relating.

In my research, the RJ builds upon Radway’s study by exploring how reading fantasy novels with social justice themes can ignite a utopian impulse in readers. Radway’s focus on romance novels showed how they empower women to envision alternatives to patriarchy on a personal level. Similarly, the RJ argues that fantasy literature, with its expansive worlds, can prompt fantasy readers to reevaluate broader societal norms and injustices like patriarchy, racism, sexism and capitalism. Much like Radway’s research into the romance genre, the RJ suggest that fantasy literature holds a utopian potential to inspire social change. Radway (1981) sees this impulse as transformative within patriarchal culture, while the RJ emphasizes how fantasy literature, especially in Stages 3 and 4 through engagement with threshold concepts, fosters utopian thinking as a catalyst for progressive change. Thus, by engaging with fantasy

narratives that integrate social justice themes along the RJ, fantasy readers are encouraged to critically examine existing social structures and imagine more equitable alternatives.

As my research in Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 have illustrated thus far, progressive fantasy novels often create immersive worlds where issues such as oppression, inequality and resistance are explored in depth. These stories can serve as tools for fantasy readers to reflect on real-world issues within the safe and imaginative space of the narrative. The RJ framework suggests that this process of imaginative engagement might lead to a deeper understanding of social justice and potentially motivate fantasy readers to advocate for change. Thus, while Radway focused on the personal and relational dimensions of reading, the RJ expands this idea to include the societal and communal impacts of literature.

Considering the aforementioned, the RJ implies that reader response to literature is not simply a personal isolated experience, but can also be influenced by social and political factors. According to Lewis (2000), reader interpretation of a narrative work is a social act and that understanding the transaction between reader and text involves examining the many social conditions that shape the stances readers take up as they interpret and respond to literature. Therefore, what Lewis suggests is that a reader's interpretation of a narrative work is a social act shaped by various societal conditions, whereby these conditions can include cultural norms, historical contexts, political ideologies and current social debates. This influence by social and political factors would be most seen at the final stages on the RJ as the fantasy reader emerges from the liminal space and potentially begins to seek out a readership community engaging in social activism.

In examining the communal impacts of literature that the activism stage of the RJ might speak to for some fantasy readers, I turn to Stanley Fish (1970), who made significant

contributions to debates about literary meaning and the reader's role in interpretation (p. 140).

Fish (2004) introduced the concept of interpretive communities, further arguing that interpretations are always situated within specific social and historical contexts (p. 220). He contended that meaning is not inherent in the text, but is constructed through the interaction between the text and the reader's interpretive community (Fish, 2004, p. 220).

Fish's (2004) theory emphasizes that interpretation is a social activity. Readers do not engage with texts in isolation, but as members of interpretive communities, which consist of groups that share common beliefs, assumptions and strategies for making sense of texts (Fish, 2004). These communities can include academic disciplines, cultural or social groups or informal reader communities (Fish, 2004). Each interpretive community brings its own set of perspectives and interpretive strategies to a text, thereby influencing how its members understand and derive meaning from it (Fish, 2004). Fantasy readers can become an interpretive community through their collective practices of interpreting, discussing and engaging with fantasy literature. For example, engaging in discussions and debates about the meaning, significance and interpretation of fantasy works helps to create a shared understanding and interpretation of a text. Online forums, social media groups, book clubs and fan conventions provide platforms for these interactions. Producing fan fiction, fan art and other creative works based on fantasy literature is another way for fantasy readers to interpret and expand on the texts. These creations reflect fantasy readers' interpretations and provide a way for the fantasy readership community to engage with and critique each other's work. It is important to also note that this communal aspect of interpretation might come into play in the later stages of the Reader's Journey (RJ), especially where I consider community development theories and also where social justice action is fostered and sustained within a community of like-minded fantasy readers.

Building off of Fish's notions of interpretive communities I will now explore Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities which refers to the idea that a nation is a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. Anderson (1983) also posited that although members of a nation may never meet most of their fellow-members, they share a sense of communion and identity. Much like how citizens of a nation imagine themselves as part of a larger community, readers of fantasy can create an imagined community through the shared experience of reading and immersing themselves in the same fictional worlds. Building off of Anderson's ideas, I contend that readers of fantasy books can become an imagined community through shared experiences, beliefs and interests that transcend individual differences. Furthering this notion, Strauss (2006) suggests that an imagined community of readers can help to create a reader's sense of belonging within a community of readership which can foster a sharing of concerns that can establish new identities and political groups.

In combining Fish's and Anderson's concepts, I argue that the RJ can potentially help individual fantasy readers see themselves as part of an imagined community that might establish the groundwork for motivating social justice-oriented action. Furthermore, Fish's notion of interpretive communities and Anderson's imagined communities directly relate to theories of fan activism discussed in Chapter 3. According to Carriere (2018), fan activism involves fans collaborating in collective and networked spaces to communicate and circulate their ideas, forming a shared agenda. Conceived in this manner, fan activists can then become part of interpretive communities that not only discuss the narrative and thematic elements of their favourite fantasy novels, but can also connect these discussions to real-world issues and social justice causes. Consequently, these interpretive and imagined communities might enable fans to

mobilize around shared values and goals turning their collective interpretations into actionable social justice causes.

These insights are integral to the RJ, as they demonstrate how fantasy fan activism thrives within participatory communities established in Stage 6. In this stage, fantasy readers who have been critically engaging with social justice themes in fantasy literature come together to form communities where their shared interpretations and beliefs can lead to concrete social actions. The collaborative nature of these communities ensures that the advocacy efforts are sustained and amplified, as members support each other and work together towards common objectives.

Transitioning to the conceptual framework for the RJ, it is acknowledged that inadvertent overlaps may exist with extant models, such as the Construction-Integration Model, which emphasises the active nature of reading and the synthesis of textual information with background knowledge (Kintsch, 2018), and the Reading Strategies Models, which emphasize metacognitive strategies employed by readers, including prediction, inquiry, clarification and summarization, to enhance comprehension (Allen, 2003). Given that these models highlight the cognitive aspects of reading and comprehension, the RJ goes beyond these cognitive models, focusing instead on the transformative impact of the reading experience which may serve as a catalyst for societal engagement. Diverging from extant models, the RJ specifically encompasses critical self-reflection, the vicarious engagement with characters within the literary narrative, a desire for heightened self-awareness, the expansion of social consciousness and the cultivation of motivation and inclination toward effecting societal and global change. Moreover, the RJ model introduces a distinct feature in the form of a six-stage progression, which fantasy readers may traverse. These stages, while not rigidly delineated and subject to potential overlap, require

successful navigation to advance to subsequent stages. Thus, the RJ exhibits a dynamic fluidity, wherein fantasy readers may oscillate between stages in the course of their journey, fostering a multidirectional and multidimensional progression.

Stages of the Reader's Journey

Stage 1: Embarking on the Journey

At this stage in the RJ the fantasy reader is embarking on the journey. It begins as the reader enters the secondary world of the novel. The secondary world and its characters draw the fantasy reader into the story world. Entering the story world involves an invitation that creates a strong desire to keep reading. At this early-stage, fantasy readers will begin to feel some identification with characters and the protagonist's adventure. There will also be a sense of vicarious connection to, or personal identification with, one or more fictional characters. Therefore, for identification to occur, a reader must be mentally placed in the author's fictional world (Oatley, 1999).

Reader identification is defined as "a form of narrative transportation, whereby one is transported into the first-person psychological perspective of a character adopting their viewpoint, goals and mental states within the narrative" (Wojciehowski & Gallese, 2022, p. 63). According to John (2016), Oatley (1995) and Thissen et al. (2021), reader identification through reading fiction literature refers to the psychological phenomenon where readers emotionally or mentally connect with characters, settings, or themes within a fiction story. Due to the individual nature of the reader, identification may involve empathizing with characters' struggles, aspirations and personal growth, which can evoke strong emotional responses and a sense of personal resonance (John, 2016; Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Wojciehowski & Gallese, 2022). In other words, readers of novels encounter realistic elements that are simulations of their everyday

experiences with others and their own thoughts. Consequently, for the fantasy reader the representations of the real world that they encounter in the secondary world thus reinforces my previous arguments that fantasy literature can and does offer representations in its novels inspired by the real world. In many ways there is a mimetic quality to the fantasy work that sees characters as humanlike, as non-actual, yet recognizably individual persons because they follow the modal logic of possible people in possible worlds or because they focus on the ways that readers build on folk-psychological knowledge about human experience and behaviour (Polvinen & Sklar, 2019). The realistic portrayal of characters in many fantasy works engages readers' full range of emotional and ethical sensibilities, allowing them to connect deeply with the characters and their experiences (Polvinen & Sklar, 2019). This mimetic approach in fantasy is crucial for the first stage because the reader draws on real-life knowledge to validate the authenticity of the content of the narrative (Polvinen & Sklar, 2019). For this reason, Hospers (1980), suggests that there is a reliance on the part of the reader based on the similarity between the novel's story world and real life, implying that while reading the character is imagined as part of the reader's reality; that one might find such a character in real life.

For the purposes of the RJ, I am using the term identification; however, it should be noted that while the term is still widely used and accepted, Gerrig (2022) points out that the concept is used inconsistently and often imprecisely by theorists and for this reason he refers to this type of reader response as 'goal alignment' (p. 306). For Gerrig (2022), goal alignment is seen as the extent to which a reader embraces a particular character's goals, whereby the reader's own characteristics become highly relevant to understanding how their narrative experiences unfold. It is important to note that these personal characteristics and differences among fantasy readers are most relevant to their narrative experiences. There are many things to consider when it comes

to character identification, such as personality, background/culture, personal experiences, memories, personal values and attitudes, emotional state of mind, positionality, etc. For simplicity, I am speaking in general terms for the typical fantasy reader. With the previous in mind, it is important to acknowledge the varied lives fantasy readers have which will ultimately affect their ability to live vicariously through, and identify with, a fictional character and their progression along the RJ.

A final point of consideration for Stage 1 and reader identification with a fictional character is based on the necessity for particular social justice content in a novel and successful affiliating impact of this work on the part of the fantasy reader, thereby reinforcing the notion that more fantasy with progressive social justice themes is needed on bookstore and library shelves (see Chapter 5: Phase One – Theme #4 and Phase Two – Theme #2). Asserting that works of fiction, or some of them, have the power to foster these social justice-oriented connections and interests also suggests the basis for the emergence of a new subgenre called Social Justice Fantasy (see Chapter 7). As Wojciehowski and Gallese (2022) state, it is impossible to care about the characters and their well-being in the way the text invites without having some very definite political and moral interests awakened in oneself (p. 68). Therefore, this is where the social justice messaging and thematic content of progressive fantasy is important and needed.

Stage 2: Transported into the Story World

In this stage of the RJ the fantasy reader enters the secondary world of the novel. The reader experiences feelings of being “transported” into the book (see Chapter 5: Phase One – Theme #2). A fantasy reader may experience the sensation of being lost in the book and losing a sense of time and possible reality as the secondary world becomes real in their imagination. Readers

might begin to see themselves in the book as one of the characters. They continue to have vicarious experiences as the adventure/quest unfolds. Readers also experience narrative absorption at this stage.

According to Gerrig (2022), a feeling of being transported into narrative worlds “creates a context for reader participation” (p. 308). The participatory perspective “conceptualizes readers as participants in narrative worlds in parallel to how people function as side-participants to real-world events” (Gerrig, 2022, p. 308). More specifically, participatory responses such as reader identification with a character or sensations that they are lost in a book, are expressions of readers’ emotional reactions to information that is inferred from or given by a narrative in the story world (Wimmer et al., 2021). Therefore, fantasy readers at this stage in their journey may become more mentally motivated to participate in the story world, thus enabling a stronger feeling of being transported and a higher degree of narrative absorption.

A crucial aspect of the transportation and narrative absorption a fantasy reader might experience at this stage in the RJ has to do with the role of imagination. The imagination is frequently cited “as the process that intervenes between a person’s interacting with the story and their adoption of beliefs and actions as a result of that interaction” (Sarbin, 2004, p. 6). Imagination in reading involves the “power to reproduce images stored in memory under the suggestion of associated language or of recombining former experiences to create new images that vitalize and animate the text” (Sadoski et al., 1990, p. 56). Imagination is especially central to understanding the way a reader experiences or lives through literature (Sadoski et al., 1990). According to Wojciehowski and Gallese (2022), people fare differently with their capacity to fantasize and make use of imagination: at one end of the spectrum are individuals characterized by a lack of imagery termed “aphantasia”, while at the other are people whose imagery is “as

vivid as real seeing”, a condition termed “hyperphantasia” (p. 67-68). Therefore, the stronger the ability to create mental imagery (or hyperphantasia) the stronger and more impactful the RJ will be for the fantasy reader.

Oftentimes imagination generated by reading fiction involves the reader projecting themselves into the story or sensations of being transported by the novel into the world of the story (see Gerrig, 1993; Kuijpers et al., 2017; Thiem, 2005). Within the RJ the imagination denotes an active constructive process based on the level of transportation and the detailed writing of the fantasy novel. Through constructing their imaginative worlds, fantasy readers at this stage are able to place themselves in the story world imaginatively through reference to objects and events that are present in the real world. According to Kuijpers et al. (2017) and Wimmer et al. (2021) the stronger the sense of immersion into the story, the more real the feeling of being transported and the more vicarious the experience for the reader will be, thus causing some readers to feel and act as if their imaginings are real and why some imaginings are believed to be of the same character as literal happenings in the distal world. In other words, the greater the feeling of narrative immersion in text-inspired imaginings, the more likely that the reader will share or identify with the protagonist’s efforts to resolve the moral issues (Wimmer et al., 2021) central to a particular fantasy story plot.

Stage 3: Entering the Liminal Space

At this stage, and if progression through the previous stages has been successful, the fantasy reader enters the liminal space in their mind. This is an inner self-reflective space that acts as an in-between threshold between the real world and the secondary world of the novel they are reading. The reader begins to ask themselves “what if”. They begin to reflect on the ideologies, narratives and social justice messaging in the secondary world of the fantasy novel and begin to

examine their reality and primary world through this lens. If reflection in the liminal space is sustained then the fantasy reader progresses to the next stage.

Rosenwald (1992) suggests that when it comes to literature much of the research and discussions are productive of effects rather than portraying the “private psychic state of affairs” (p. 266) that may be happening within the psyche or mind of the actual fantasy reader. Within the RJ, this psychic condition refers to the liminal state where the reader resides in between worlds and engages with threshold concepts. This thought-provoking reflective state highlights Drobot’s (2019) notions that a progressive, social justice themed fantasy novel offers society a means of critically reflecting on the past and on the current ways in which personal worldviews and values previously have and can further evolve.

With the previous discussion in mind, Hoggan and Cranton (2015) claim that fiction literature has a strong potential to operate as a medium for critical reflection. According to Mezirow (1990) critical reflection is used as a synonym for higher-order mental processes. Boud et al. (1985) refer to critical reflection as “a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation” (p.3). It involves turning one’s gaze inward to establish an internal dialogue pertaining to socio-cultural structures, which influences individuals and their interactions via the context in which they find themselves (Maccarini & Prandini, 2010). This in turn helps us make linkages between ourselves as individuals and the broader social, cultural and structural environment by understanding how individual ideas, beliefs and assumptions might be at least partially determined by social contexts (Fook, 2015). In praxis, research has shown that critical reflection is commonly used to increase awareness and efficacy of professional practices, especially considering how reflective practices have been found to be helpful in understanding

experiences in order to build on both previous and new knowledge (Brookfield, 1991; Mezirow, 1990; Pack, 2011). This further coincides with White's (2002) notions of critical reflection emphasizing the ability to look both inwards and outwards to recognize personal connections with socio-cultural understandings. This reflective process can be viewed as a precursor to transformative learning, which may lead to changes in personal understandings and potentially behaviour (Mezirow, 1990), a necessary step towards narrative-based belief change in the RJ.

According to Zapf (1988), critical reflection brought about through reading can be likened to the subjective consciousness turning back upon itself, distancing itself from immediate literary experience and questioning the apparent certainties and truths of the current world. Zapf (1988) contends that critical reflection brought on by reading involves the reader's psychological engagement, whereby a critical consciousness is further developed and defined by progressive acts of self-reflection. For Zapf (1988) critical reflection essentially "occurs in a timeless mental space because by its very nature of turning back upon itself it breaks up the objective flux of time and suspends the laws of temporal linearity and irreversibility, making past and present simultaneous in the potentially infinite space of subjective thought" (p. 294). Consequently, fictional literature, such as fantasy, can be a disruptive reflection-inducing force that changes the way a fantasy reader thinks by interrupting their ways of seeing and doing things (Mack, 2012). As such, the genre has the reflective-inducing potential, previously outlined by Mezirow and Zapf, to alter the ways in which an individual thinks about themselves and their society. Mack (2012) further states that there is a disruptive element to literature that offers alternatives to the status quo by allowing people to reflect on their unrealised or unacknowledged lives. In this way, Wolf (2012) contends that fantasy can offer people a way to engage reflectively with the political, social and philosophical thought experiments expressed in the genre's novels.

Therefore, in this stage of the RJ, the fantasy reader's encounter with threshold concepts in the liminal space such as progressive themes and plots centred on gender, race and class and questioning hegemonic ideologies like neo-liberalism will help to induce reflective "what if" pondering, thus setting the foundation for narrative-based belief change in Stage 4.

Stage 4: Residing in the Liminal Space

In this stage the fantasy reader is residing in the liminal space where narrative-based belief change occurs. The fantasy reader further engages with threshold concepts introduced in Stage 3 and begins to question dominant, oppressive and hegemonic ideologies in the world around them. The reader undergoes transformational learning by unlearning previous knowledge and replacing it with new insights. The fantasy reader becomes more observant of structural and systemic inequities in the world around them and begins to question how they are disadvantaging to others and perhaps themselves. Furthermore, during Stages 3 and 4 the fantasy reader may vacillate in a state of flux. As the reader grapples with the discomfort of challenging their entrenched assumptions, biases and values they may return to the reflective "what if" state of Stage 3 before they feel comfortable moving into the unlearning and questioning phase of Stage 4.

Mar and Oatley (2008) contend that "imaginative stories are one means by which individuals make sense of their history and their current life and by which they make predictions and decisions regarding their future world" (p. 174). In fact, Nussbaum (1990) argues that affection for a particular genre, in this case fantasy, changes an individual based on what they care for in a way that the reader starts to examine their relationships, community and society, asking questions of the connections one gathers from the characters and settings in the books they read, leading to possible shifts in worldviews. With regards to fantasy, Drobot (2019)

argues that the genre can provide frames of mind, attitudes and values in a world unlike the current one in which fantasy readers get the occasion to explore, thus directing the reader's personal reflections in a story world where they might be able to explore life philosophies in an unrestricted way.

During Stage 4 of the RJ the interactions a fantasy reader had with the threshold concepts introduced in Stage 3 continue to promote critical reflection in the liminal space. Smith (2016) posits that belief changes can occur in the realms of the conscious and unconscious as well as somewhere in between, or in the case of the RJ the liminal space. Therefore, the longer a fantasy reader resides in the liminal space at this stage the stronger and more transformative the effects will be on their beliefs and attitudes. More to this effect, Green and Brock (2002) introduced research examining the “phenomenological experience of being transported to a narrative world by exploring the causes and the consequences of this type of narrative-based mental processing and its impact on individuals’ real-world beliefs” (p. 318). These real-world beliefs include individual values, attitudes, worldviews, ideologies, opinions and convictions. In their study using “Murder at the Mall”, an adapted version of a true story published by Sherwin Nuland in his book *How We Die* (1994), Green and Brock (2002) revealed that individuals who were more highly transported into a narrative (such as the process a fantasy reader experiences in Stage 2) showed greater belief change, more positive evaluations of sympathetic major characters and less rejection of story content. According to Green and Brock (2000), one of the consequences of transportation is the psychological distance from reality where it is conceived as a distinct mental process, an integrative melding of attention, imagery and feelings. Green and Brock (2000), like Gerrig (2022), proposed returning from the transportation leaves readers somewhat changed by the experience as they access their opinions, previous knowledge, or other thoughts and

experiences in order to evaluate the messages within the story. Therefore, the more fantasy readers are transported into a narrative world, the more likely they are to change their real-world beliefs and attitudes to be more consistent with those beliefs embedded within the story (Fitzgerald & Green, 2002; Calarco et al., 2002).

To further study and articulate the process of narrative-based belief change that occurs in Stage 4, Green and Brock (2002) proposed the Transportation-Imagery Model, which consists of five postulates: 1) belief change is limited to story texts which are stories that evoke images whereby readers' beliefs are implicated; 2) belief changes occurs to the extent that the evoked images are activated by psychological transportation; 3) propensity for transportation by exposure to a given narrative account is affected by attributes of the recipient (i.e. imagery skill); 4) propensity for transportation by exposure to a given narrative account is affected by attributes of the text (i.e. level of artistic craftsmanship and adherence to narrative format) and 5) propensity for transportation by exposure to a narrative is affected by attributes of the context that might limit or foster opportunity for imaginative investment and participatory responses (p. 316-317). Under this model Green and Brock (2002) emphasize the "role of imagery in belief change, whereby it is limited to texts where narrative images can be recalled, recognized and responded to" (p. 321). These mental images generated by highly descriptive scenes within the story essentially take on new meaning as a result of their establishing connections with the experience of entering the narrative world through transportation. Therefore, Green and Brock (2002) contend that as long as there has been a powerful transportation experience, a previously held belief can be altered by an imagery-driven juxtaposition with new information in the story world.

Another aspect of Stage 4 is the continued need for critical reflection in the liminal space. If a fantasy reader has successfully experienced feelings of being transported into a book and is starting to engage with narrative-based belief change, then the inner reflections a fantasy reader engages with facilitate the exploration of one's values, attitudes and personal history which can encourage ownership of and deepen responsibility for learning. It is important to note that "reflection that just lets a person see what already is—without new lenses through which to view new possibilities, question old assumptions, and so on—is unlikely to lead to new actions" (Berger, 2004, p. 337). Consequently, Berger (2004) suggests that reflection that begins to unpack what is (to question assumptions, use new lenses, new perspectives, etc.) is by definition transformational. Therefore, once fantasy readers become aware of their assumptions and old perspectives, only then are they in a position to make productive, meaningful narrative-based belief changes.

It is also during Stage 4 that fantasy readers learn to be open to change as they deepen their reflective process involving a means of unlearning and re-learning. Unlearning is the manner of finding the assumptions about one's current knowledge invalid and letting go or discarding it (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). This unlearning requires the ability to transform readers' frames of reference, thereby challenging their lifelong assumptions, beliefs and habits of mind (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). More specifically, unlearning is about "unshackling oneself [...] about emancipating or liberating oneself from variously entrenched and often unquestioned ways of thinking, doing and living by radically questioning, criticizing and rejecting the assumptions and premises of much of what one has learned as part of the dominant and established systems of knowledge" (Chokr, 2013, p. 6). This important aspect of transformational learning (see Mezirow, 1990) involves shifts in a readers' assumptions, values

and beliefs so that new interpretations of experiences they gather while reading and reflecting on fantasy with progressive social justice themes are possible. Along similar lines, Meyer et al. (2010) suggest that reflection in the liminal state at this stage in the RJ, involves an integration of new knowledge, which requires a reconfiguring of the learner's prior conceptual schema and a letting go or discarding of any earlier conceptual stance. Furthermore, these transformative experiences foster an ontological and an epistemic shift seen as reconstituted features of the threshold concept and new learnings/understanding in the reader's mind (Meyer et al., 2010).

Due to individual-level unlearning being a typically difficult, challenging and time-consuming process to undertake successfully (Hislop et al., 2013), it is important to consider that transformational learning, much like the RJ, does not have a predetermined end-point or concrete finishing line. According to Hart and Montague (2015) transformative learning involves a constant state of becoming. Therefore, the RJ is essentially the same idea, where the fantasy reader will undergo this journey throughout their life and not necessarily every time they read a fantasy novel.

The significance of transformative learning at this stage in the RJ resides with its emancipatory element that militates against subordination to existing bodies of knowledge with their pre-established truths, approved ways of thinking, power structures and pedagogic regimes (Hodge, 2019). Thus, transformative learning can be seen as possibly threatening to learners and fantasy readers at this stage. Learners must (affectively) be open to the possibility of transformation in the first place and willing to accommodate alternative expressions of meaning (Meyer et al., 2010), which can be unsettling and uncomfortable and induce some resistance to change on the part of the fantasy reader. According to Hislop et al. (2013) this emotional challenge for fantasy readers on the RJ can be attributed to the extent to which people are

attached to their existing knowledge and ideas and how their existing knowledge and ideas shape how they make sense of events, which can make it difficult to understand the limitations of existing knowledge and ideas (p. 9).

On the flip side, however, discomfort is an essential catalyst to shifting the understanding of oneself and others. Simply put, conflict is another part of the unlearning/learning process. It is a doorway that can lead to transformation (progression to Stage 5) or if the fantasy reader's discomfort is too great, it may lead to stagnation (remaining in Stages 3 or 4) or even regression (dropping back down to Stages 3 or 2). This reinforces the notion that there is a dynamic fluidity to the RJ. As fantasy readers move along the spiral, they may return to a previous stage at any point in their journey. There is a back and forth and up and down movement throughout the journey. For example, during Stages 3 and 4 a fantasy reader may not be able to come to terms with certain assumptions or biases they may hold and are not able to begin questioning or engage in "what if" thinking. Therefore, they may return to Stage 1 or 2. Similarly, a fantasy reader may reside in one stage for the entire duration of a book and their reading journey. This could be due to the fact that not every fantasy book a person reads can induce the stages in succession. Another reason might be that the fantasy reader could be in a state of perplexity regarding their attitudes and beliefs or question how they might act upon their learnings beyond Stages 3 and 4. In spite of this, there is still the hope that fantasy readers will gain some form of insight no matter where they end up on the RJ. While it might be hoped that successful transition will occur seamlessly from one stage to another, leading to narrative-based belief change, this might not be the case for some fantasy readers as the incremental progression a reader might make along the RJ may occur over the course of their lifetime and many books.

Stage 5: Leaving the Liminal Space

During this stage, the fantasy reader has now gained a new perspective and is ready to leave the liminal space. The reader has altered their thinking from me-centred to we-centred. They begin to ponder how they can act on their newfound knowledge, learning and realisations in their community, culture and society. The fantasy reader begins to think about actions fostering social change and wonders how they can interrupt or disrupt the inequalities they see around them. The fantasy reader embarks on personal growth and transformation in their new thinking and takes the early steps of seeking ways to put their new learning into action.

In order for the fantasy reader to leave the liminal space successfully they need to take their new realisations and insights with them along their journey. Maintaining these new understandings is very important at this stage. Transformational learning in the reflection-induced liminal space of Stage 4 does not necessarily lead to action because a community of support to sustain the learnings from the liminal space is needed for maintaining the learning from the critical self-reflections. In other words, for the fantasy reader to successfully engage with Stage 5, and transition to the final stage, there needs to be the creation and maintenance of an environment in which critical reflection and the questioning of norms are supported and encouraged.

An important part of the RJ is that even though it is performed at the individual level the long-term learning and desire for action happens within the collective of other fantasy readers, fantasy fans or groups with similar goals. In other words, the fantasy reader engages with inner transformation at the individual level in conjunction with collective transformation through their relations with others. Therefore, to sustain a fantasy reader's transformational learning from previous stages, there needs to be a sustained interaction or a back-and-forth learning exchange

between or among individuals (Attebury, 2017) at later stages. In fact, Attebury (2017) posits that a stronger retention of information and ability to act upon that information is associated with long-term interactions among fellow learners. Therefore, while there is also a back-and-forth flow to the RJ, the sustained action needed in Stage 5 to continue onto Stage 6 must happen in a community with others.

It is important to note that critical reflection and transformational learning in Stages 3 and 4 are a developmental process rooted in experience, which also means recognizing that becoming more reflective is a developmental process requiring time and continuous practice. Barriers to this process can happen among fantasy readers who are resistant to inner reflection and reflective practices or those who do not desire social change. For these readers the RJ may take much longer or may never be completed. The maintaining of supports to continue the journey can also be problematic for some individuals. For example, if a fantasy reader finds interactions with a fan community, for instance, too uncomfortable based on issues such as disparate ideas, internal conflict, etc. the reader will face a disorienting dilemma, which can lead to questioning their own ideas and learning. In this context, it is advisable for fantasy readers to gradually spend more time engaging with others as this can introduce new ideas and perspectives, resulting in both minor and significant changes in their thinking and behaviour.

Considering that Stage 5 is the pre-action stage to social change for a fantasy reader, it centres itself in changing how one thinks. The fantasy reader is on a journey to alter their thinking from me-centred to we-centred. Micro, mezzo and macro level thinking occurs at these stages. There is a progression from individualised thought to societal and collective considerations. The transmutation of “me” to “we” takes place within the fantasy reader.

For the fantasy reader at Stage 5 on the RJ, they begin to contemplate how social justice relies on various modes of action and organizing, including advocating change, building community and improving leadership along three social levels. At the micro social level, social change corresponds to ordinary interactions between individuals and to the social environment that is closest to people with a sharper focus on the relations between individuals in daily and emotional life, in their families, local districts and at work (Barozet, 2022). Social justice at this level involves tapping into people's psychological responses to collective disadvantage, oppression and inequality (Zomeran & Iyer, 2009). At the mezzo social level, social change takes place along intermediary structures in society and is particularly concerned with the interactions on the level of the district, organisation, the city, the cultural or religious community or local networks (Barozet, 2022). At the mezzo level social justice involves tapping into the general conditions (poverty, discrimination, equity/equality etc.) that affect groups and their members within society (Zomeran & Iyer, 2009). At the macro social level, social change occurs based on an understanding of the interactions and interdependence of structures developed on a national, regional or even international or global level (Barozet, 2022). At the macro level social justice involves tapping into the strategic and political forces (systemic racism, hegemonic ideologies etc.) that facilitate or impede collective action (Zomeran & Iyer, 2009). Essentially, the RJ takes the fantasy reader through these social levels with the goal to bring their thinking to a more macro level initiated towards social justice action.

The idea behind macro level action thinking in Stage 5 centres on community development theory, which is the process whereby members of a community attempt collaboratively to promote what they consider to be their collective well-being through unity of action (Chile & Simpson, 2004). Community development focuses on the dynamics inherent in

the interaction among community members who seek to deal with social change (Chile & Simpson, 2004). Therefore, at this stage the fantasy reader will begin to think about collective social change. Operating from a community-oriented mindset the fantasy reader at this stage starts to imagine alternatives to the status quo and that inequality should be perceived as unstable, reflecting a sense of agency and that disadvantaging social structures can be changed (Zomeran & Iyer, 2009).

Through the fantasy reader's travels and experiences with the RJ there is also an emotional aspect to their thinking about social change. Scher and Heise (1993) contend that individuals do not simply perceive social injustice or inequality, but are often emotionally aroused by it. In other words, emotional reactions like anger, guilt and sympathy can motivate fantasy readers towards collective action. These types of reactions within the fantasy reader help to develop and politicize a sense of identification with a social justice movement motivated towards change. Through attitudinal support, the fantasy reader will thus become more inclined to join the mobilization potential of a social justice movement by sympathizing with its political and strategic aim(s) (Scher & Heise, 1993; Zomeran & Iyer, 2009). In this way, individuals' group-based perceptions of and emotional responses to inequality and injustice have been identified as important predictors of their willingness to engage in this sort of collective action (Scher & Heise, 1993; Zomeran & Iyer, 2009) described within Stage 6.

Social identity is another aspect pertinent to a fantasy reader's engagement at this stage in the RJ. According to Horowitz (2017), social identities involve a person recognizing that they are in a group with other similar people, even if they have not met them previously, and that all members of the group have a shared circumstance. When it comes to social change, social identity motivates people to take action by joining a collective identity, broadly defined as the

sense of “we-ness”, which binds activists together in a social movement (Horowitz, 2017).

According to Brinck, et al. (2017), social identity theory posits individuals (I-ness) are the building blocks of one’s identity and we-ness is the composed unity of these individuals. Pollack (1982) further suggests that individualist “I-ness” and community “we-ness” stem from Stechler and Kaplan’s (1980) research with mother-child engagement and its impacts on child development and the psychoanalytical concepts of personality. Borrowing an ecological systems approach, we-ness emphasizes the conceptualization of the individual as being simultaneously separate and part of an entity beyond itself (Pollack, 1982). According to Brinck, et al. (2017), the “I” and the “you” are conceptually and developmentally prior to the “we”. Therefore, a we-experience, a shared perspective and a sense of togetherness, involves an “I/Me/Self” interplay of identification and differentiation, integration and distinctness (Brinck, et al., 2017). In this way, the fantasy reader needs to be aware of the I/Self perspective (I-ness) to become reflectively aware of themselves as part of a we ideation (we-ness).

During this stage in the RJ, we-ness is an important concept to foster action in the next stage. We-ness creates a sense of “us” and notions of the collective involving a plural self-awareness to think and act from a common perspective acting as the basis for joint social action (Brinck, et al., 2017). Essentially, during we-ness the fantasy reader can experience themselves as a member of a community (e.g., a fandom website), can identify with other members of the same community and can have group experiences even if they are alone and temporally and spatially removed from the others (Klückmann, 2016). Therefore, thinking about engagement with others that promotes we-ness at this stage is pertinent to Stage 6 of the RJ, in that seeking a community to share experiences and thoughts together also allows the fantasy reader to move

into social action by taking part in collective group activities such as exploring novel ideas and concepts associated with a social justice movement (Brinck, et al., 2017; Klückmann, 2016).

Along similar lines, Tripathi (2019) contends that notions of the individual (I-ness) and the collective (we-ness) are less physical and more products of the mind. Their unity occurs in psychological space before it expresses itself in behavioural forms within social spaces (Tripathi, 2019). This space is likened to the liminal state encountered by the fantasy reader at Stages 3 and 4 on the RJ. This space lays the foundation for where their thinking and attitudes shift from “me” to “we” in Stage 5. As the fantasy reader’s thoughts shift to the “we”, individuals align their values in line with the preferred values of the collective (Tripathi, 2019). The “I/Me” evolves into a formation of “we” especially when the fantasy reader starts defining themselves in relation to other individuals, groups or collectives (Pollack, 1982; Tripathi, 2019) with similar views towards social justice. Consequently, the fantasy reader will thus start to think about and take steps towards actions fostering social change with the anticipation of leading to physical action in the next stage.

Stage 6: Social Change & Participatory Action

At this stage the fantasy reader has now left the self-reflective liminal space and the secondary world of the novel they are reading. They have returned to the reality of the primary world with a new outlook and inspiration with their thoughts and thinking transformed. They cannot return to their old way of thinking, as they now see the world around them in a different light. They are more critical and aware of the oppressive systems around them. They have altered their thinking from “me” to “we”. At this stage, the fantasy reader will want to act on their new thinking. The reader may choose to join in a fan activist community related to the book they have just read or

engage in some form of social justice activism corresponding to the themes they encountered in the book.

Once a fantasy reader has reached Stage 6 there is an increased social justice awareness. The fantasy reader has now exited the liminal space and is now more able to focus on paying attention to relationships of power. At Stage 6, this awareness inspires cognitive, emotional or intellectual insights on the part of individual fantasy readers or readership groups. According to Sanon et al. (2014) this new awareness can promote constant questioning of the influence of systems of oppression in creating privilege and marginalization or it can change the fantasy reader's individual and societal recognition about power and oppression, aiming to raise awareness, consciousness and transform actions to address inherent inequalities.

With this new awareness the fantasy reader is now motivated towards some form of social justice action. At this phase, the fantasy reader is wanting to engage in social justice amelioration impacts that involve actions to mitigate the immediate factors leading to disadvantaging conditions (Sanon et al., 2014). Additionally, social justice amelioration does not provide long term remediation of social injustices, but rather the social justice impact is an immediate reaction to address acute and emergent issues that are symptoms of oppression or power imbalances (Sanon et al., 2014). Consequently, during Stage 6 the fantasy reader is primed for action. They actively search for a community or social group motivated towards social change. The fantasy reader deliberately chooses organisations, groups and movements that align with their new thinking because these locations are viewed as spaces removed from the physical and ideological control of those in power (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). These communal places supply the solidary incentives that encourage social justice participation, but they also represent a free space in which the fantasy reader can develop counterhegemonic ideas and

oppositional identities (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). What this means for readers of fantasy along the RJ is that during Stage 6 they are inspired towards some form of fan activism geared towards social change.

As previously discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, fan activism forms the basis for civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself (Carriere, 2018). As fans participate with one another across these collective and networked spaces they employ their capacity to communicate and circulate their ideas, thus forming a collective and shared agenda (Thomas, 2019). Fan groups as activists enable the we-ness that can also provide a means of reimagining oneself in relation to others, thereby forming new social readership groups (Nestingen, 2011). Therefore, fan activism can happen through involvement in a participatory community in which various creative approaches can be used for discourse and political mobilization. In other words, the successful engagement and progression through Stages 3, 4 and 5 of the RJ from the experiences within the liminal space have the potential to establish reflections or responses that may provide stimulus for social justice oriented creative writing or activist fan fiction communities. Carriere (2018) further adds to this by stating that the self-reflective aspect of the liminal space has the potential to bring a collective readership together in a single voice (Stages 5 and 6) to express their protest, demand change and then work towards achieving it. By moving the fantasy reader from ‘me’ to ‘we’, fan activism takes the reflective and transformative effects of reading from the private sphere into the public sphere (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2018). This is where fantasy readers on the RJ at Stage 6 engage in we-ness by joining fan-oriented networked communities that are motivated towards collective agendas of social justice.

According to Sanon et al. (2014), if a reader effectively participates in social justice efforts within a fan activist community, they may persist in pursuing social justice transformation, targeting the root causes of the issue(s). The aim of transformative action at this stage is therefore to foster change in oppressive systems, encompassing ways of being, interacting and governing (Sanon et al., 2014). These changes can be clearly demonstrated at the systems, governance, or policy levels to reduce or eliminate the fundamental factors that create power imbalances and unjust conditions.

A significant aspect to Stage 6 social justice-oriented action is allyship. The first steps to this goal were in Stages 1 through 4, where the fantasy reader fosters social justice attitudes and awareness leading to narrative-based belief change about setting goals towards social change and transformation. Stage 5 leads the fantasy reader to question and think about how to enact this awareness through a shift in I-ness towards we-ness leading the reader towards social justice motivated action. In Stage 6 these actions can be carried out by an individual activist; however, actions executed as a member of a group are best performed by social justice allies. Social justice allies are members of dominant social groups (white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc.) who are working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based upon their social group membership (Bishop, 2002; De Souza & Schmader, 2024). By joining communities working towards social justice activism the fantasy reader essentially becomes an ally to those who might be like themselves or others from different backgrounds.

Bishop (2002) states that allies must focus on listening to and supporting others rather than leading (or co-opting) the social justice movement of the target group. The action of allies, according to De Souza and Schmader (2024), must be within the dominant group to which they belong; allies must educate their dominant group peers about oppressive behaviours and systems.

Allies understand that they must act with others to change oppressive systems (De Souza & Schmader, 2024). If a fantasy reader successfully progresses through all the stages of the RJ, they will eventually share characteristics common to allies, namely: their increased sense of connection with other people; their grasp of the concept of collectivism (we-ness) and collective responsibility; their lack of an individualistic stance and ego (I-ness); their sense of process and change; their understanding of their own process of learning; their realistic sense of their own power (somewhere between all powerful and powerless); their grasp of power-with as an alternative to power-over; their understanding that good intentions do not matter if there is no action against oppression; their knowledge of their own roots (Bishop, 2002, p, 91). Therefore, by acting as an ally in a fan activist group the fantasy reader is working for change alongside other members rather than controlling the direction of change and the community it is intended to impact.

It should be noted that the degree to which a fantasy reader on the RJ becomes an activist or engages with a social justice movement often depends on their experiences and prior history of political activity (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). A fantasy reader may have numerous affinities for a type of social justice action and, therefore, may identify primarily with a movement organization, style of protest, or degree of moderation or radicalism (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Another aspect relating to inciting a reader towards social action also depends on how a social justice group frames its identity based on the setting and the audience to which it is speaking, the kind of opposition it confronts and the organizational linkages it has to other groups and movements (Polletta, & Jasper, 2001), thus appealing to the fantasy reader or not.

Another aspect impacting the degree of a fantasy reader's interest and commitment to joining a social justice cause can reside with the fact that sometimes no matter the dedication,

intention or commitment towards social justice initiatives the reader might encounter setbacks, roadblocks and personal limitations to enacting social justice. While engaging with Stage 6 the fantasy reader might have the realisation that their own perspective on social justice might not match the needs and values of others (Sandage et al., 2014). Sandage et al. (2014) note that social justice work and activism can often be invalidating given that efforts at change can activate defensiveness and hostility within systems that are resistant to change. The red tape, barriers and time required by the fantasy reader to enact social justice initiatives sometimes prevent those fantasy readers working toward social justice because they fail to see immediate positive results or receive signs of appreciation (Sandage et al., 2014). This is why a community of fellow fantasy readers-turned-activists and allyship is needed to help re-orient the reader and foster support and ongoing positive encouragement. Additionally, Bishop (2002) and De Souza and Schmader (2024) note that being an active social justice ally and activist is difficult, which is why they stress the importance of maintaining hope and idealism while working towards social change. Bishop (2002) and De Souza and Schmader (2024) further state that recognizing a social movement as a long-term journey and holding to the belief that what is learned (racism, sexism, classism etc.) can be unlearned is requisite for sustaining a social justice ally identity. Similarly, with the RJ there is no endpoint to a fantasy readers' personal growth and social justice actions. While not every book a fantasy reader encounters or fan community they join will have the potential to add something to their ongoing self-development and narrative-based belief change, or make social justice waves, it can be hoped that what they do discover can be carried forward throughout their life.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this chapter, the qualitative research conducted in Chapter 5 highlights a noteworthy insight among readers of fantasy literature with social justice themes: a propensity towards social justice activism. Through an exploration of fantasy readership interview responses, it became evident that narrative absorption within these texts correlates with a heightened engagement with their thematic content, often resulting in a predisposition towards activism for social justice causes. The aforementioned finding serves as a cornerstone for the development of the Reader's Journey (RJ) framework, which seeks to elucidate the cognitive processes underlying this phenomenon and outline the transformative journey embarked upon by fantasy readers towards social justice advocacy.

While the theories of liminal spaces, narrative transportation and narrative-based belief change played heavily in the theoretical underpinnings of the RJ, it should also be noted that theories of reader-response and interpretive communities highlight that fantasy readers can also collectively engage in discussions and actions inspired by fantasy narratives. With these theories in mind, the RJ model suggests that fantasy literature can serve as a stimulus for fostering social justice awareness and motivating fantasy readers towards meaningful societal change.

By its very nature, the RJ framework provides a structured understanding of the transformative process experienced by fantasy readers as they navigate through various stages of engagement with social justice themes. Beginning with an immersive journey into the secondary world of the novel, fantasy readers progressively transition through stages characterized by deep narrative absorption, reflective introspection, critical examination of beliefs and eventual commitment to social change. The RJ culminates in the fantasy reader exiting a liminal space with a transformed worldview, poised to translate their newfound insights into tangible action

within their communities and beyond. Through this comprehensive framework, the RJ not only sheds light on the intricate dynamics of fantasy reader engagement with social justice themes in fantasy literature, but also highlights the potential of the genre as a stimulus for societal transformation and collective change.

Chapter 7

An Emerging Sub-Genre: Social Justice Fantasy

Importance of Genre Literature

According to Walder (2005), genre literature has a long history of influencing and shaping mainstream literature. Genre literature is important for its ability to provide diverse perspectives, entertain and engage readers, explore complex themes, inspire creativity, foster communities, contribute to commercial success, support education, influence mainstream literature and leave a lasting cultural impact (Harold, 2011; Holland, 2002; Walder, 2005; Wilkins, 2012). In light of this and in what follows, I will propose and discuss an emerging genre of fantasy literature called ‘social justice fantasy’ that has been inspired by the Reader’s Journey (RJ) and my qualitative research.

Throughout this research, I have exemplified and illustrated the inherent explorative, political and societal value of fantasy literature as a genre of fiction. Further, as my current research demonstrates, elements from genres such as fantasy and science fiction can both expand the literary landscape and expand storytelling potentialities (Walder, 2005; Wilkins, 2012). Through contemporary case studies I have shown that certain works of fantasy literature have had a profound cultural impact. For example, science fiction has inspired or directly informed technological innovations, while fantasy has influenced art, music, film and contemporary social movements (Bassett et al., 2013; Sergeant, 2020). In fact, phrases and iconic characters from fantasy literature, like Frodo from the *LOTR*, have become part of the cultural lexicon.

Through my qualitative interviews and the RJ model for narrative-based belief change, I have demonstrated that fantasy holds the possibility for contributing to the creation of a distinct and transformative liminal space for fantasy readers. I have also shown that the genre can immerse fantasy readers in alternative realities, fostering a space for reflection and imagination.

Similarly, Wilkins (2012) contends that genre literature provides a form of escapism, allowing readers to step into different worlds, whether they are fantastical, historical or futuristic. More to Wilkins' point, my research also discussed the immersive sensations of being transported into a fantasy novel, when fantasy readers step into these imaginative fantasy worlds. Likewise, by feeling transported into a fantasy novel, fantasy readers can be exposed to novel ways of "what if" thinking that can potentially challenge pre-existing beliefs and broaden their perspectives, on both personal and societal levels.

Along similar lines, my research has demonstrated that not only does fantasy as genre literature establish "what if" thinking and rumination, but it can also inspire tangible and positive changes in the real world. To substantiate the claims that Walder et al. (2005) and Wilkins (2012) make about genre literature's potential to foster societal and cultural critique, my research illustrates how contemporary social movements inspired by fantasy literature have motivated individuals and groups to take concrete actions in support of social causes. In a similar vein, genre literature often fosters vibrant communities and fandoms, whereby these communities can be a source of social connection and shared enthusiasm. Consequently, my research has established a nuanced understanding of how fantasy literature can transcend the boundaries of fiction, capable of influencing positive change in individuals' and communities' real-world, transformative initiatives undertaken by fantasy fan activism.

What might be considered the most significant result of this research is the creation of the RJ model and its lending further identification of an emerging new subgenre in fantasy. The RJ model itself speaks to the fantasy genre evolution that coincides with significant changes in the socio-political ideological values of fantasy readers living in our contemporary society. In fact, the value of the RJ model to this research lies not only in its supporting fantasy's ability to

represent or recreate society, but also in its ability to produce a sustained and powerful criticism of the society in which it was written (Walder et al., 2005).

As a literary concept, genre “identifies a cluster of textual characteristics and conventions which could include form, but also cover a range of features such as topic, theme, medium, historical context, authorship and intended or actual audience” (King, 2021, p. 262).

Additionally, “a genre is a collection of works and readership whose group boundaries are always permeable” (King, 2021, p. 262). Fantasy as genre literature demonstrates this with its numerous sub-genres and continual evolution, which is why in this chapter I aim to identify and discuss a possible new sub-categorisation of fantasy called social justice fantasy.

According to Walder (2005), literary genres are not timeless essences, but emerge through the circulation of ideas and practices within a specific culture. As this research has highlighted, fantasy is one such ever-evolving genre. It responds to the decade or so in which it was written and also to the current sociopolitical situation in which it was published (Dalton, 2019). In fact, my research has shown that, increasingly, readers of fantasy find themselves demanding more of the genre in the way of diversity content and character representation. Likewise, during the Phase One interviews, eleven of the sixteen participants reported a strong interest in reading fantasy with social justice themes and messaging. I also found that the majority of the participants aged twenty to 39 are attracted to fantasy literature with social justice-oriented themes. My research has also shown a shift in the type of fantasy being written, including for young adults and an increase in social justice thematic content. In point of fact, participants #3 and #10 from the Phase One interviews reported more social justice content in young adult fantasy because its thematic messaging aligns with the fantasy reader’s changing worldviews regarding inclusivity and diversity. Accordingly, it can be surmised that there is an

interest in reading fantasy that represents the diversity of its readership and social justice fantasy is, therefore, an evolutionary response to the changing ideologies and situations of its readers.

Defining Social Justice Fantasy

Throughout this thesis I have argued that fantasy literature can promote social justice thinking and action by using the genre to address real-world issues and advocate for social change. I have demonstrated through case studies and qualitative research that fantasy can challenge traditional norms and stereotypes by featuring diverse characters from different backgrounds, ethnicities, genders and abilities. Novels in this genre can use storylines to explore social and political issues related to power imbalances, oppression and discrimination. Fantasy narratives can also challenge prejudices and discriminatory attitudes by depicting fantastical societies where individuals with distinct abilities, appearances, or backgrounds coexist and collaborate. Not only this, but I have also contended that fantasy literature can offer a cultural critique of our current society. Through satire, parody, allegory or exploration of dystopian themes, fantasy literature can shed light on social issues and prompt fantasy readers to question established norms and structures. This critical dimension of certain works of fantasy literature is what lies at the heart of social justice fantasy.

While many contemporary academics and theorists have contended that fantasy is inherently critical of our current society (see Baker, 2012; Bould, 2002; Dalton, 2019; Grifka-Wander, 2019; Trębicki, 2011), this is in fact not a new notion especially when it comes to emerging fantasy subgenres. In his 1957 article titled “Alfred Bester: Science Fiction or Fantasy”, William Godshalk undertook a critical examination of Alfred Bester’s novel *The Demolished Man* (1952), naming it a work of critical fantasy because of its comical parody of the conventions of science fiction. Godshalk (1975) contended that “science fiction is a subgenre

of fantasy and falls under the umbrella of realistic fantasy and that the other umbrellas include pure fantasy, philosophic fantasy and critical fantasy” (p. 149). These four sub-categories of fantasy “underline the four basic functions of the genre: (1) to create a world which will never exist in reality; (2) to create a world of the intellect, a philosophy; (3) to criticize the world we live in; (4) to project a possible world of the future” (Godshalk, 1975, p. 151). In line with arguments about fantasy’s inherent cultural and social critique, Godshalk (1975) describes “critical fantasy as a subgenre where authors of such works discuss the world as they see it, where the author is offering a critique of his world [containing] critical awareness” (Godshalk, 1975, p. 150). Therefore, according to Wendell (1982), Bester’s novel is an example of the critical fantasy subgenre because the work offers glimpses of “a corrupt and hedonistic society which implicitly satirises contemporary reality” (p. 21-22).

With the previous in mind, social justice fantasy builds upon subgenres like critical fantasy that potentially offer a critique of our current society. However, social justice fantasy as an emerging genre encourages its readers to consider the role of fantasy novels in generating new forms of social relations and opportunities for societal transformation by prompting fantasy readers to examine their worldviews through critical self-reflection. Essentially, the social justice subgenre generates a critically reflective process that prompts fantasy readers to re-examine their beliefs, values and assumptions by offering insight into the inequality and authoritativeness often at the core of mainstream worldviews and dominant ideologies.

According to Wise (2020), a critical perspective highlights the notion that all texts are suffused with various dominant ideologies or structures of power which have become taken-for-granted or naturalized by readers and writers. However, the RJ and social justice fantasy works demonstrate that fantasy readers are capable of “reading against the grain” (Chandler, 1997, p.

4). Essentially, they are capable of explaining how the dominant ideologies in a fantasy narrative have been constructed, since anything constructed can be resisted (Wise, 2020). Readers of social justice fantasy are no longer prone to accept taken-for-granted assumptions, attention implicitly drawn to the potential uncomfortable disruption of our entrenched ideologies and beliefs through the critically self-reflective process of the RJ. Fundamentally, the identification of a social justice fantasy subgenre (which fosters narrative-based belief change in fantasy readers) is an attempt to subdivide the wider genre of fantasy in light of today's contemporary context of social criticism.

As outlined in the previous chapter, there are several important stages of the RJ that need to be completed/experienced in order for narrative-based belief change fostered by social justice fantasy to occur: namely, narrative absorption, entrance into the self-reflective liminal space, challenging a fantasy reader's entrenched assumptions, biases and values, embarking on personal growth and transformation as a result of social change thinking and participatory action. Therefore, social justice fantasy can help fantasy readers imagine an alternative future or society through the following:

Reflection: To help readers reflect on cultural codes, values and ideologies and to explore alternatives to the current social and political status quo. Critique: To offer readers a social and historical critique of social structure, power, politics and agency. Involvement: To motivate readers to become socially engaged by amplifying participation in the reflection of what future we want for our society. (Bina et al., 2017, p. 9)

With Bina et al's notions in mind and within the context of my current research, the RJ model from the previous chapter expands the definition of the social justice fantasy subgenre, thereby informing the structure, content and themes needed for a work to be included in the genre. The aims of social justice fantasy as a genre are to include works that promote themes, plots and characters centred on diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice.

While these definitions and objectives still remain the premise behind the subgenre, in light of my current research and the RJ model, social justice fantasy goes beyond typical genre fantasy fiction such as ‘cozy fantasy’. Where social justice fantasy takes the fantasy reader into possible psychological realms of “what if” questioning and discomfort, typical cozy fantasy tells a story that the reader is not expected to question (Mendlesohn, 2008). As I discussed in Chapter 2, there are many academic arguments contending that fantasy is apolitical, escapist, frivolous, formulaic, childish and historically and factually disconnected. For example, Moorcock’s (1978/2008) critique of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (1954) trilogy posits certain works of fantasy genre as “infantile, wistful, distanced and sentimental, frequently enjoyed for its lack of tensions” (p. 14). Much like Moorcock’s critique, cozy fantasy is a subgenre that emphasizes a warm, comforting and often domestic atmosphere that portrays a cozy world of security, affection and familial comfort (Ball, 1997; Craiker, n.d.; 24HR.YABOOKBLOG, 2023). In a number of ways, cozy fantasy can be likened to Godshalk’s (1975) subgenre called pure fantasy, which is described as “fantasy for the sake of fantasy” (p. 149). Similar to cozy fantasy, “pure fantasy has minimal or no ideological content, whereby readers hunt in vain for mature ideas, critical awareness, or scientific extrapolation because the author tries to engage our emotions without troubling our minds” (Godshalk, 1975, p. 149). Cozy fantasy tends to focus on smaller-scale, personal stories set in charming and inviting worlds, where the tone is generally light-hearted and the emphasis is on creating a sense of comfort and coziness for the reader (Craiker, n.d.; 24HR.YABOOKBLOG, 2023). Key elements often include small-scale settings that take place in small, intimate locations like villages and cozy cottages, an avoidance of dark and intense themes, and characters that have quirky and endearing traits (Craiker, n.d.; 24HR.YABOOKBLOG, 2023). Examples include Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937), with a cozy

focus on Bilbo Baggins' personal journey and group camaraderie, as well as Diana Wynne Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986), featuring a charming and eccentric cast of characters interacting with a magical, mobile castle. Therefore, as opposed to cozy fantasy, social justice fantasy takes the fantasy reader into a more critical stance, prompting them to question the world around them and unsettling their entrenched views. No longer is the fantasy quest undertaken by a hyper-masculinized male protagonist who is the only hope for salvation and where magic is wielded by the elite few. Women, gender fluid individuals and people of different races, class and ability share the spotlight in social justice fantasy novels, where social issues like slavery, racism, classism, colonialism and sexism are challenged thematically.

While incorporating any social justice-oriented ideological elements into a fantasy narrative is an optional, authorial choice, social justice fantasy writers deliberately make this choice to move away from conventional tropes that are so pervasive and oftentimes definitive of the genre. One author in particular who makes this conscious choice is N. K. Jemisin. As an author who identifies as African-American and who seeks to diversify writing perspectives, Jemisin represents a new frontier of critical writing in fantasy and science fiction that does not follow the traditional conventions typical of white authored writing (Iles, 2019). To this effect, Jemisin stated the following in an interview with Noah Berlatsky (2015) of *The Guardian*:

As a black woman, I have no particular interest in maintaining the status quo. Why would I? The status quo is harmful, the status quo is significantly racist and sexist and a whole bunch of other things that I think need to change. With epic fantasy there is a tendency for it to be quintessentially conservative, in that its job is to restore what is perceived to be out of whack. (para. 7)

Therefore, her *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017) fits well within the social justice fantasy genre because it not only invites fantasy readers to imagine our planet in the aftermath of drastic climate change and unlimited environmental exploitation, but it also considers issues around race

and gender. We might take the following excerpt from *The Stone Sky* (Jemisin, 2017) as an example:

Nies people looked different, behaved differently, were different—but every group is different from others. Differences alone are never enough to cause problems. Syl Anagist's assimilation of the world had been over for a century before I was ever made; all cities were Syl Anagist. All languages had become Sylanagistine. But there are none so frightened, or so strange in their fear, as conquerors [...]. It became easy for scholars to build reputations and careers around the notion that Niess sessapinae were fundamentally different, somehow—more sensitive, more active, less controlled, less civilized—and that this was the source of their magical peculiarity. This was what made them not the same kind of human as everyone else. Eventually: not as human as everyone else. Finally: not human at all. Once the Niess were gone, of course, it became clear that the fabled Niess sessapinae did not exist. Sylanagistine scholars and biomagestres had plenty of prisoners to study, but try as they might, no discernible variance from ordinary people could be found. This was intolerable; more than intolerable. Afterall, if the Niess were just ordinary human beings [...] the world built on their inhumanity would fall apart. So [...] they made us. (p. 210-211)

This quote addresses the trilogy's deep investments in notions of structural violence, otherness and the definition of the human from the specific perspective of the posthuman/transhuman (Ferrández, 2020). It prompts fantasy readers along the RJ to reflect critically on the notion that race is merely a social construct without biological meaning. In the reflective space of the RJ, fantasy readers can question how racial categories are increasingly perceived within books as an imprecise marker of the wealth of human diversity that is often reflected in the real world through othering, racial discrimination and colonialist ideology. As Ferrández (2020) highlights, Jemisin's future Earth is colour-blind, but structural oppression and discrimination on the basis of a collective's otherness survive unscathed. Therefore, if a fantasy reader successfully engages with the RJ and critically reflects on the above passage to produce a change in their beliefs and perceptions about race and otherness, they might leave with a new-found understanding of racial discrimination in the reader's current society. Furthermore, the narrative-based belief change brought on by Jemisin's work and the liminal space of the RJ can foster the idea that the need to

articulate oneself against what one is not, the foundation of subjectivity in Euro-western ideology and the drive to oppress the Other, have little to do with physical traits; instead, such a need is based on destructive assumptions, values and biases that run deep within our own minds (Ferrández, 2020).

Young Adult Social Justice Fantasy

During the second phase of interviews with young adult (YA) fantasy readers and authors it was discovered that (YA) fantasy was widely read amongst the participants. It was also revealed that the author participants found the YA market more receptive to social justice-oriented thematic content. As I stated in Chapter 5, YA literature written for individuals aged twelve to eighteen often features a first-person narrative, dynamic plots and an emphasis on the resilience and independence of teenagers. In the context of social justice fantasy, the YA genre is a very important area to consider. Intersecting with social justice fantasy, YA fiction protagonists often undergo a journey of self-discovery, contending with influential forces that shape societal norms. Furthermore, not unlike social justice fantasy, YA fantasy and speculative fiction offer insightful narratives for exploring themes of power, resistance and sociopolitical transformation. Characters in both social justice fantasy and YA novels strive to reimagine oppressive sociopolitical and economic systems, prompting YA fantasy readers to critically examine structural injustices within fictional worlds, scrutinize the misuse of power and reconsider the possibilities for a different world.

For a contextual example I look at Daniel José Older's *Shadowshaper Cypher* series (2015-2020), which centres on Sierra and her Bed-Stuy friends and how they address the issues of gentrification and police brutality. Older's books provide a window into how multicultural adolescents harness their past in order to liberate their futures (Myers, 2020). This series fits well

within the social justice fantasy subgenre because its central themes revolve around societal and communal social justice issues facing real-world metropolitan communities.

According to Myers (2020), the theme of gentrification and a changing community landscape is a constant in the novel, evidenced by the following passage:

The Tower had shown up just over a year ago, totally unannounced: a five-story concrete monstrosity on a block otherwise full of brownstones. The developers built the outer structure quickly and then left it, abandoned and unfinished, its unpaned windows staring emptily out into the Brooklyn skies. The Tower's northern wall sat right on the edge of the Junklot, where mountains of trashed cars waited like crumpled-up scraps of paper. Manny and the other old guys who played dominos in the lot had immediately declared war on it. (Older, 2015, p. 2)

This theme and excerpt also allow the fantasy reader to see how Older's narrative centres on refocusing and recentring the community of Bed-Stuy around people of colour by preventing the characters and their cultural artwork from becoming narratives of the past (Myers, 2020). The protagonist Sierra is, therefore, brought into a fight to preserve the past and save the artistic, creative mark of her community as demonstrated by the following example:

The portrait was fading; it seemed to disappear more and more every hour [...]. She looked back at the mural of Papa Acevedo, barely visible now against the crumbling brick wall. It wasn't just that there was a new tear on his face; his whole expression had changed. The man—the painting, rather—looked downright afraid. (Older, 2015, p. 1-3)

Consequently, these passages illustrate how Older's work fits well within social justice fantasy. The reflective component of allowing fantasy readers to potentially identify with Sierra's plight allows readers to think about the changing landscapes of their own neighbourhoods and communities. More than that, the social justice oriented reflective component also prompts fantasy readers to think about the space(s) they occupy and the land they live on.

As I have previously posited, fantasy readers have come to accept certain assumptions, beliefs and ways of thinking that become entrenched in their behaviours without their questioning them. Social justice fantasy, therefore, positions certain works of fantasy at an

intersectional crossroads. Along similar lines, Baker (2016) states that fantasy is a literature intrinsically situated at intersections: the intersection of history and culture; the intersection of ideas; the intersection of literary traditions; and the intersection of worlds. To this list I would also add the intersection of cozy fantasy's reinforcement of the dominant ideology with the challenging and critiquing narratives of social justice fantasy. Through the intersections of our previously engrained notions and beliefs and the formulations of new ones, social justice fantasy narratives can allow for a different way of shifting our perspectives by deepening our understanding of the world by presenting imagined alternatives to our current society. Moreover, Wolf (2012) posits that fantasy's literary experimentation with the invention of new cultures, races and species whose very existence can imply certain ideas or outlooks can also challenge oppressive hegemonic ideologies and worldviews in our current world. In other words, social justice fantasy literature can inspire its readers to anticipate the future of social and political movements (Termini, 2015).

Cancel Culture & Social Justice Themed Publications

While there are numerous other examples of fantasy novels that fit within the social justice fantasy genre, for example Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood & Bone* (2018) and Chuck Wendig's *Wanderers* (2019), to name but a few, it is important to note that there needs to be a social justice critique within the narratives themselves. Essentially, in order for a fantasy novel to be included in this subgenre it must contain social justice-oriented thematic content as described previously. This directly relates to my research highlighting that fantasy not only responds to the current social climate, but also evolves with the times. However, this also points out how social justice-oriented fantasy is now struggling to situate some of its texts in the social justice narrative of our contemporary world.

Additionally, this brings attention to my Phase Two research with fantasy authors who desire to write more social justice-oriented content in their works yet face increasing gatekeeping from publishers and editors invested in maintaining the status quo. Unlike the familiar, comfortable thematic content of cozy fantasy, for instance, author #4 explained that publishers are reluctant to publish social justice-oriented fantasy work which goes against the grain of typical fantasy that has been published over the decades.

Resistance from publishers ties into broader societal trends discussed in Chapter 3, where I examined how public backlash and cancel culture obstruct the publication of certain books based on their social justice-oriented content (see Anti-Fandom, Book Cancellations and the Hugo Awards' "Puppygate"). More to this effect, book-banning is especially connected to cancel culture, a term encompassing the mass opinions of online and social media users that come together to condemn negative behaviours and actions (Martinez, 2021). One such example of cancel culture is the backlash against J.K. Rowling in June 2020 after she tweeted her 'negative' opinions concerning the transgender community (Deol, 2022). After publishing tweets reiterating the fact that she supported transgender individuals, but believed that the issues they were fighting for were leading to her experience as a woman being erased, *Harry Potter* fans and actors from her movies spoke out against her comments (Deol, 2022). As a result, "people began removing their *Harry Potter* tattoos, stopped posting about the books and films on social media and took a stance against the author" (Deol, 2022, p. 9). Furthermore, Rowling's controversial tweets resulted in "those working on her newest title at Hachette to condemn her, some even refusing to work on her content at all" (Martinez, 2021, p. 1). Therefore, with the increase of criticism towards some books and their authors due to cancel culture, publishers are reluctant to promote works that might spark criticism from thematic content that is deemed too risky or controversial.

According to Harris (2021), increased demands for censorship and cancel culture have changed the way publishers sign book deals with authors due to the creation of a “moral clause, which allows a publisher to drop a book if the author does something that is likely to seriously damage sales” (para. 4). However, these moral clauses raise an important distinction that needs to be made between authors that are challenged based on the content of their work and authors that are challenged based on actions they have taken outside that work (“Addressing challenges”, 2022), like that of J. K. Rowling as described above. The American Library Association highlights the issue with publishing houses labelling controversial works or works that create controversy as penned by “problematic authors, which serves as a label used to highlight actions by authors that are objectionable to some and impact the author’s reputation (“Addressing challenges”, 2022, para. 3). While the term “problematic can include, but is not limited to, elements of sexism, racism, classism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, colourism, ethno-nationalism and other marginalizations” (“Addressing challenges”, 2022, para. 4), it can be useful in some ways, especially in offering constructive criticism and author accountability for what gets written and published. In many ways, cancel culture may not be an “ideal informant for such feedback, but publishers can learn where they are falling short in today’s social climate by looking at where readers, writers and authors are taking issue” (Martinez, 2021, p. 5).

Afterall, as Smith (2017) states:

The simple fact that a book contains repugnant ideas is not in itself a reason to condemn it. How are we as a society to come to grips with our own repugnance if we do not confront it? Literature has a long history as a place to confront our ugliness, and its role in provoking both thought and change in thought is a critical one. (para. 10)

Therefore, because controversial books and cancel culture have both positive and negative sides, it is important to highlight the conversations that can potentially arise from these debates. These discussions can ultimately highlight the inherent biases within and outside the publishing domain

and the world in which an author writes their work that may affect the publication and writing of social justice fantasy works.

Radical Fantasy versus Social Justice Fantasy

The debates from the previous section bring to light important discussions on inherent biases, both within the publishing industry and the broader societal context, which can influence the creation and publication of social justice fantasy works. Understanding these conversations also involves recognizing the overlapping nature of genres, as Chandler (1997) suggests and examining how Fredric Jameson's (2005) concept of 'radical fantasy' relates to social justice fantasy.

Jameson (2005) defines radical fantasy as a subgenre of fantasy capable of representing the concrete social worlds of alienation and class struggle (p. 280). According to Burling (2009), radical fantasy texts "depict political mobilization and transformation achieved through the collective efforts by ethically and biologically diversified groups of the oppressed who struggle against concrete economic and political exploitation" (p. 332). As opposed to social justice fantasy, radical fantasy therefore, contains exclusively distinct "Marxist undertones critiquing class struggles and socio-economic structures" (Jameson, 2005, p. 280) via a political lens.

One such example of radical fantasy would be the *Hunger Games* series (2008-2010), in which characters from the various districts participate in abolishing existing power structures and building new networks of social relationships in communities marked by alienation and distrust. A distinct feature of radical fantasy resides in its "thematic plots and visions of the combined efforts of younger and older generations in a struggle against political and economic injustice" (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2018, p. 2). As with the class struggles of Katniss and her companions, radical fantasy texts also propose a re-ordering of socio-economic contexts, by evincing an

interest in the militant, material struggles for progressive social justice and economic equality, as well as in the relationship of individual and collective identity understood on the basis of fighting against the prevailing capitalist status quo (Burling, 2009).

While the dynamics of class struggles may similarly manifest in social justice fantasy texts, this subgenre assumes anti-oppressive positions that delve more profoundly into the consciousness of fantasy readers. Social justice fantasy accomplishes this by highlighting the underlying and pervasive facets of cultural hegemony, privilege and power that perpetuate and cultivate inequalities and discrimination. One example to illustrate this point is Jessica Lewis' *Bad Witch Burning* (2021), about a Black witch named Katrell who possesses the power to summon the ghosts of the dead. The narrative portrays the realities of poverty and living in an unsafe household. The story arc also includes a portrayal of themes such as housing and food insecurity, living with an unemployed mother, mental health issues and domestic abuse, thus illustrating the pervasive or systemic gender-based and economic oppression many individuals face in the real world. Another example that looks specifically at power, privilege and gender equality is Tehlor Kay Mejia's *We Set the Dark on Fire* (2019). The story employs thematic content about immigration, equality, discrimination, prejudice and greed through protagonist Daniela's fight to free Medio society. Daniela's role as an instructor who trains girls to become wives at an elite institution and her moral decision to dismantle the strictly polarized gender roles of her society, implicitly provides a feminist critique that prompts fantasy readers to question and challenge the master-narratives of male patriarchal hegemony that disempower, exoticize, misrepresent, oppress and/or victimizes women. Therefore, these narratives not only highlight systemic issues but can also inspire fantasy readers to seek out and engage with social justice-oriented communities.

Social Justice Fantasy, Fan Fiction and Community

The previous section demonstrated how Lewis' and Mejia's books emphasize that social justice fantasy, unlike radical fantasy, explores thematic content focused on cultural dominance, privilege and authority. These themes highlight the perpetuation of inequalities and prejudice. Consequently, fantasy readers may be inspired to seek out supportive communities that strengthen their dedication to social activism, both online and in their local communities. In relation to this, an important aspect of social justice fantasy resides in the final stage of the RJ, which involves a fantasy reader's strong interest in finding a social justice-oriented community of fans and/or readers that helps sustain the reader's motivation towards social activism. This might result in writing fan fiction, joining an online fandom site or undertaking actual physical social action in a reader's own community. During my second stage of qualitative research, community was an outlier theme that was identified. In spite of this, the theme relates well to the final stage on the RJ, or more specifically, prompting the fantasy reader into becoming motivated towards finding a community focusing on progressive social change. As discussed in the previous chapter, if a fantasy reader transitions successfully from the liminal state, they have the potential to establish *communitas* in fan-based communities that bring people together based on shared values. Therefore, the community-building aspect of social justice fantasy and the RJ can help to establish a form of participatory culture through online fandom communities, like fan fiction sites, potentially leading to fan activism in a communal context.

When it comes to genre fiction, Chandler (1997) highlights the role of authorial experimentation in changing genres and their conventions, whereby it is important to recognize not only the social nature of text production, but especially the role of technological factors as well as changing audience preferences. An important aspect of social justice fantasy is that it can

transcend traditional notions of book writing and publishing. Since its experiential qualities lend themselves to a community of fantasy readership and multimodal engagement, the possibilities exist for the genre to evolve beyond bookstore shelving by lending itself well to online platforms of fan fiction. Furthermore, Black (2009) points out that fan fiction is reconceptualising traditional notions of the publishing industry through fan fiction writers who see themselves as creative agents who are undaunted by traditional notions of intellectual property rights, by claiming mass cultural materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions.

As I have previously contended in Chapter 5, fan fiction represents far more diverse characters and authors than traditional publishing, while also offering a model of community-based reading and writing that brings together marginalized individuals who may be unable to meet in a physical space. In this manner, the fan fiction writing community operates in direct opposition to traditional book publishing as it challenges the individualist activity of writing as a solo, author-centric, monolingual endeavour because it stands in opposition to the market fundamentalism within the neo-liberalist publishing industry (Black, 2009). Therefore, the community-building aspect of social justice fantasy combined with its social justice messaging can help bring fantasy readers, fans and fan fiction writers together based on shared values of unification, community and solidarity in direct opposition to rigidly adherent tropes and conventions of typical fantasy works. Furthermore, since social justice fantasy narratives are often aimed at inspiring fantasy readers towards social justice activism, so too are communities of fan activism often aimed at creating new social relationships and associations for increased collectivism and community motivated towards social change.

With social justice fantasy inspiring fan fiction, it can potentially become a very powerful medium in which its platform can communicate not only the particularly avant-garde and dynamic views of the authors, but also foster a web of readership and authorship that conveys potentially forward-thinking standpoints in broader society. Consequently, online fandoms' and fan fiction sites' ongoing process of popular creation is a process that builds upon community traditions (Jenkins, 1992). In this manner, fan fiction literature inspired by social justice fantasy narratives becomes a form of communication supporting and encouraging community formation and community-building.

As I indicated in Chapter 6, at the final stage of the RJ, the social justice fantasy reader is now motivated towards some form of social justice action. At this stage, the fantasy reader may actively seek out a community or social group dedicated to driving social change. They intentionally opt for organizations, groups and movements that resonate with their evolving perspectives, considering these spaces as independent from the influence of those in authority, both physically and ideologically. These groups form communities that are connected via participatory practices such as discussions, critiquing, composing and circulating ideas about their shared social justice interests, thereby establishing a sense of group identity and building a like-minded community (DeLuca, 2018). This "me-to-we" thinking (see RJ – Stage 5) establishes a sense of interconnectedness or global awareness motivated by intergroup empathy, an increased valuation of diversity, a stronger endorsement of social justice, a greater concern for environmental sustainability, increased helping of those outside one's own group and increased sense of responsibility to act for the betterment of the world (Plante et al., 2014). Therefore, the social justice-oriented fan-base of these communities is a useful structure for discussing a diverse range of fan activities that do not solely occur in public spaces, also establishing virtual spaces to

participate in, respond to, and engage with society and culture while exploring new avenues of expression, community identity and community-building (Hill, 2014; Rost, 2014). As such, these communal settings can offer supportive motivations for engaging in social justice initiatives, while also serving as liberated environments where the social justice fantasy fan, reader and writer can nurture counterhegemonic thoughts and oppositional identities.

It should be noted, however, that while social justice fantasy and the RJ prompts fantasy readers and fans to engage with a social justice-oriented community either through fandom or fan fiction writing, communities and groups can be highly contested places. While it is hopeful that these digital communities can represent the possibility for inviting fans to discuss and write about topics related to social justice that affect them personally, thereby creating affinity spaces that represent potential sites of digital civic engagement aimed at positive social change, these passionate, creative, opinionated communities can also have their detriments. It is, therefore, crucial (to social justice) to acknowledge the existence of oppressive and marginalizing practices that can exist within these communities where certain groups/individuals may find themselves disadvantaged or marginalized due to systemic inequalities. The aforementioned suggests that while there are shared beliefs and prevailing lifestyles that characterize the lives of individuals in these fan-based communities, there is also the potential for exploitation among members due to power imbalances so that those at the top tend to enjoy privileges and advantages, while those at the bottom face barriers and disadvantages.

Despite the presence of shared social justice values, passion for change and mutual recognition, individuals may systematically exploit one another within these communities (Mason, 2000). The shaping of individuals within communities is an ongoing process influenced by various institutions, systems and structures that govern their lives and internal hierarchy is

inherent to the maintenance of these establishments. The existence of privilege-based dominance emphasizes power relations within communities, raising questions about whose voices are prioritized and how mutual respect and equitable treatment can be promoted (Anderson & McCune, 2013). The social pyramids formed through hierarchical ranking contribute to the reinforcement and propagation of social inequities, particularly in areas such as gender, race and class, that underscore the stratification that occurs based on factors like wealth, power and social status. Consequently, these digital communities can establish interpretive constructions that influence perceptions of others, both within and across these community-based groups (Cohen, 1985). The interpretive constructions within digital communities have a profound impact on how individuals perceive others, both within their immediate community and across different groups. These perceptions can shape attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, potentially reinforcing or challenging existing social norms. For this reason, digital spaces can become arenas where stereotypes, biases and discriminatory ideologies are either perpetuated or dismantled, influencing the way individuals perceive themselves and others.

Social Justice Fantasy: A Call to Action

The previous section demonstrates how interpretive constructions within digital communities reveal the reinforcement of social hierarchies, impacting attitudes and actions in both online and offline settings. Building upon this idea, Chandler's (1997) argument emphasizes that genres, including social justice fantasy, are defined not just by their narrative elements, but also by the actions they inspire. Therefore, social justice fantasy as a subgenre is not only about inciting narrative-based belief change in the individual fantasy reader, but it is also a call to action. Traditionally, fantasy literature has tended to recycle certain tropes and ideas about story, plot and people (Walder, 2005). According to Barnaby (2008), the greater the presence of

conventionality in any artistic representation, the more easily it is consumed on the mass level and the less capable it is of producing heightened critical consciousness. Therefore, social justice fantasy offers the capacity to distance “readers from the generic expectations that they bring to a text and compels them to respond ethically instead of aesthetically” (Barnaby, 2008, p. 55).

In line with Barnaby’s point, within my research I have previously argued about the predominance of white-authored fantasy and white, Eurocentric fans limiting the progressive potential of the genre. My interviews with several fantasy authors of colour have shown that there is a movement towards and a need for fantasy texts that are interrupting these generic expectations and constructions and the dominant, hegemonic ideologies embedded within the tropes, themes and plots of cozy fantasy novels. Social justice fantasy, as such, interrupts this tendency for whiteness and Eurocentrism to dominate the fantasy genre and its publication industry. Social justice fantasy asks authors, publishers and fans to question their own assumptions, values and biases and disrupt their aesthetic responses to traditional fantasy narratives.

Social justice fantasy also presents fantasy authors as representatives of a more progressively oriented imagination because they possess the literary ability to generate societal critiques of the world through their narratives. Their words have the potential to challenge our worldviews in the communities they establish through their fans and fantasy readership. In this way, social justice fantasists question our current world and posit solutions for a more cohesive and just society. Authors writing with and from a social justice-oriented mindset offer written expression of the possibility for progressive change. Through their work, they challenge the many controlling meta-narratives of our neo-liberal society and in doing so contribute to the possibility for socio-political change.

Social justice fantasy is also a call to action for fantasy fans, publishers and editors. It asks fantasy readers and fans of the genre to expect more from the genre, its writers and publishers. As my research highlighted, many readers of fantasy want to read novels that represent the changing and evolving diversity of its readership by offering more than a mere means of escape and diversion. They want to read stories that speak to them through diversity representation and social justice-oriented plotlines in order to allow them to ponder the alternatives for our current society. Therefore, social justice fantasy asks readers, authors and publishers to move beyond commercial, cozy fantasy that aligns itself more readily with consumerism, a lack of individual choice and media-marketed realities (Botting, 2018). This emergent subgenre also leads fantasy readers to expect more of fantasy authors in terms of providing social justice-oriented content and puts more pressure on publishing houses to accept authors and works featuring themes of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to make the case for and define a new subgenre of fantasy literature called social justice fantasy. Based on the results from both phases of the qualitative research and the RJ, it was established that not only is social justice-oriented content important to many fantasy readers and writers, but it is a necessity for successfully navigating the RJ. Social justice fantasy is defined as a genre that generates a critically reflective process by prompting fantasy readers to re-examine their beliefs, values and assumptions, by offering insight into the inequality and authoritativeness often at the core of mainstream worldviews and dominant ideologies. It involves writing with intention on the part of authors to include works that specifically promote themes, plots and characters centred on diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice. It is therefore the reflective nature of the RJ and the narrative-based belief change that occurs through

that journey, coupled with the counterhegemonic narratives of social justice fantasy, that can potentially motivate fantasy readers towards creating social change. Locating oneself in a supportive community of like-minded fantasy fans and fiction writers motivated for social justice was also discussed as a contributing factor to the action component of social justice fantasy brought on by the final stage of the RJ. Community-building and calls to action were also discussed as additional features of the social justice fantasy genre. This implies that social justice fantasy not only encourages reflection, but also prompts fantasy readers, writers and publishers to take tangible actions towards social justice.

Chapter 8

Limitations & Future Directions

Despite the in-depth nature of this thesis, it is necessary to acknowledge and delve into several inherent limitations that inevitably influence the interpretation and generalizability of the findings. The primary constraint lies in the qualitative nature of the chosen research methodology. While qualitative methods share the common objective of unveiling novel perspectives within existing data, identifying gaps and paving the way for future research avenues, the exploratory nature of this approach hampers the ability to draw unequivocal conclusions from the findings. In spite of earnest efforts to derive definitive insights from the phase one and two interviews, the research design encounters impediments that prevent the attainment of precise outcomes. First and foremost, the intricacies of the theoretical and abstract components inherent in the liminal space and narrative-based belief change contribute to the challenge. Second, the outcomes of this research remain within the realm of possibility, given the inherent difficulty in measuring the translation of fantasy readers' social justice intent into sustained social change actions after engaging with a fantasy novel.

Furthermore, the limitations extend to the participant pool, as the study relies on a convenience population consisting of fantasy readers and writers from a specific local area. This narrow and localized sampling approach poses inherent drawbacks, such as a relatively small participant pool and potential participant bias. The homogeneity of the chosen population, united by a shared understanding of and affinity for fantasy literature, restricts the diversity of experiences and opinions available for examination. Although the methodology yields rich data from the interviews, the findings may not be easily generalized to other literary genres that might also incorporate social justice thematic content. Therefore, while the study provides valuable

insights within its specified context, caution must be exercised in extrapolating the results to a broader literary landscape.

Further Research Considerations

As this thesis has emphasised, genre literature, such a fantasy, can serve as a valuable tool for education and critical reflection. According to Sumara (2002), incorporating the use of fiction in teaching students in order to expand insight into social justice issues can help to increase their capacity to visualise through imagery. Additionally, the use of fiction literature in the classroom incorporates a narrative approach to learning about other lives by exploring multicultural diversity and inclusivity and understanding challenges, struggles and systemic ideologies that may be at play in our current society (Sumara, 2002; Turner, 1991; Turner, 2013). Sumara (2002) also contends that because fiction offers imaginative creation, often very complex and with its own peculiar coherence, it allows, even compels, the reader to explore new and remarkable possibilities, to confront difficulty and despair and take risks in imagined experience. Teachers often use science fiction, biographies or historical fiction to engage students in discussions about history, science and societal issues since they can provide a relatable context for learning (Sumara, 2002; Turner, 1991; Turner, 2013). However, little research has been done to see if the same might be said for fantasy, which would make for a very suitable future direction based on the current research.

During the Phase One interviews, participant #5 mentioned that in their youth reading fantasy as part of the curriculum “would have been enjoyable, and it would create a path to critically think about new information and social justice [because] it would have [helped build] important skills to learn and carry forward.” According to Hackman (2005), social justice education in a classroom setting encourages students to take an active role in their own education

and supports teachers in creating empowering, democratic and critical educational environments. Social justice education does not merely “examine difference or diversity, but pays careful attention to the systems of power and privilege that give rise to social inequality and encourages students to critically examine oppression on institutional, cultural and individual levels in search of opportunities for social action in the service of social change” (Hackman, 2005, p. 103).

Hackman (2005) outlines a comprehensive approach to social justice education that encompasses four key aspects pertinent for future research from this study: content mastery, critical analysis tools, tools for social change and tools for personal reflection. Content mastery involves acquiring factual information, historical contextualization and engaging in macro-to-micro content analysis while avoiding the reproduction of dominant ideologies (Hackman, 2005). Critical analysis tools empower students to critique power systems, question societal inequalities and understand the beneficiaries of such systems (Hackman, 2005). Social change tools can be implemented through intergroup dialogue and literacy development (Hackman, 2005). Personal reflection tools, such as critical self-reflection, provide a consistent commitment to self-examination, preventing feelings of hopelessness and fostering a motivation for change (Hackman, 2005). Lastly, an awareness of multicultural group dynamics is crucial, influencing how educators approach these dynamics and impacting the effectiveness of their implementation (Hackman, 2005). Furthermore, creating a safe space for diverse dialogues, emphasizing the value of varied life experiences and incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy are essential components in this approach. Therefore, as future research considerations it would be interesting to see how specially selected social justice fantasy texts and the RJ can help engage students in social action and formulate ideas for concrete ways to incorporate classroom content into their lives, communities and society through Hackman’s key aspects of social justice education.

Another future research consideration for social justice fantasy literature and the RJ resides in the realm of critical pedagogy and classroom curriculum content. According to Nagda et al. (2003), critical pedagogy argues for a concerted anti-oppression and emancipatory approach to education. For Freire (1970/2005), critical pedagogy is concerned with social transformation through education. He comes from a place of critical consciousness or “*conscientization*,” which focuses on perceiving and exposing social and political contradictions and taking action against oppression (Freire, 1970/2005). From Freire’s perspective, critical pedagogy is concerned with issues of privilege, power and discriminating “isms” of all kinds and has the potential to gather groups of students and educators around a more emancipatory vision of education and teaching. At the content level, transformative education and critical pedagogy include previously excluded perspectives and experiences of groups that historically have had marginalized participation and consideration in educational settings (Love, 2011; Nagda et al., 2003). For curriculum content it should include a comprehensive structural and contextual analysis of dominant–subordinate relationships in society (Love, 2011; Nagda et al., 2003). At the pedagogical level, or teaching–learning processes, transformative practice engages students as critical thinkers, participatory and active learners and visioners of alternative possibilities of social reality (Love, 2011; Nagda et al., 2003).

What social justice fantasy and the RJ potentially add to future directions in research is that the processes of reflection and dialogue are central to critical pedagogical and transformative education, learning and teaching in the classroom setting. Reflection, both self and social, coupled with dialogue can foster a critical consciousness by which students and teachers see their experiences situated in historical, cultural and social contexts and recognize possibilities for changing oppressive structures (Nagda et al., 2003). However, as Nagda et al. (2003) point out,

reflection alone is not enough. Therefore, an action component is needed to fully integrate critical consciousness into a daily ongoing reality for students. This is where investigations into the role social justice fantasy can play in fostering a successful completion of the RJ via a variety of different types of action would also be worthy of future study.

The nature of social justice fantasy narratives has the potential to tell untold stories, to offer perspectives unlike our own, to give voice to those who are silenced. The use of fantasy works in critical pedagogy can potentially serve as a medium of cultural emergence through which new images of society and new cultural systems move into focus and become tangible (Bender, 1987). If we come to understand the educational curriculum as “representative of a set of underlying interests that structure how a particular story is told through the organization of knowledge, social relations, values and forms of assessment” (Giroux, 1987, p. 13), then critical pedagogy focusing on the use of social justice fantasy novels comes to represent unheard voices and marginalised narratives. It is in this place of critical pedagogy that social justice fantasy can provide opportunities for transformational learning while emancipating forms of knowledge, history, language, culture and authority (Giroux, 1987). Therefore, future research examining social justice fantasy literary analysis in the classroom could potentially shed light on how fantasy might shift awareness towards social transformation, thereby potentially activating students as social justice crusaders contributing to greater social change.

Conclusion

In the course of this research, my primary objective was to delve into the ways in which fantasy novels carve out a distinctive liminal space for fantasy readers, fostering opportunities for reflection and imaginative exploration. However, the journey of investigation not only unravelled the intricacies of fantasy literature's impact on readers, but also yielded a plenitude of productive insights and observations.

Foremost among my research contributions is the development of the Reader's Journey model and the identification of the newly emergent social justice fantasy subgenre. These conceptual frameworks extend and enrich ongoing dialogues about the inherent value of fantasy literature. The Reader's Journey model provides a structured lens through which we can understand the transformative, critically reflective, narrative-based odyssey fantasy readers undertake when immersed in the social justice themed fantastical realms of a social justice fantasy novel.

My study, conducted in two phases involving qualitative research with both fantasy readers and authors, uncovered a compelling revelation. Thematic analysis illuminated the potential of fantasy literature not only to captivate the imagination but also to instigate belief changes with a pronounced orientation toward social justice. Although the research does not conclusively assert the superiority of fantasy over other speculative genres like science fiction, for this particular narrative-driven belief transformation, it undeniably underscores the genre's efficacy in initiating the Reader's Journey and motivation towards social justice action.

Furthermore, my exploration brought to light the dynamic nature of fantasy as a literary genre. It was demonstrated that fantasy is both reactionary and evolutionary, responding to and evolving alongside the shifting ideological and sociohistorical landscape of Euro-western

society. This inherent responsiveness positions fantasy as a genre capable of generating narratives aligned with social justice concerns. In contrast to other potentially progressive fiction genres (i.e. science fiction), social justice fantasy emerges as a sometimes more powerful conduit for exploring and expressing societal progress due to its consistent capacity to reflect, react and evolve. This nuanced understanding opens avenues for the genre to contribute significantly to the creation of socially conscious and justice-oriented content, marking it as a distinctive and influential force in the realm of imaginative literature.

Final Thoughts

As an avid bibliophile, something I inherited from my mother, and a lover of fantasy, it comes as no surprise to me that I chose to embark on a research journey that takes me into the realms of dragons, wizards and liminal spaces. Fantasy for me has not only been an escape from my everyday reality; it is also an exploration. It is a literary journey into unknown worlds, interactions with new and interesting people and races, and a place to reflect on the “what ifs” and “whys” that continually populate my mind.

When I return from my imaginative journeys, my current reality situates me as a daughter, sister, niece and friend who continues to benefit from my unearned privilege as a white, cisgender, able-bodied woman. As I reflect on this research project and the peregrination I have undertaken to its completion, I take note of how my own ethos around critical reflection and social justice has been transformed as a result. For nearly twenty years I have worked in the social domains of society, not as a registered social worker but rather as a worker in the realm of the social, that being with, for and among people. Now on my journey towards academia and my current experience as a social work educator I can look back to see how my worldview has shifted over the years and decades. This research in particular has helped me come to appreciate how fantasy literature can shed light on and critique the various systems of oppression in current society. Through my own independent research and the interactions I have had with fantasy readers, fans and authors, I have gained a deeper insight, understanding and appreciation of a genre that for so long has been labelled as trite, childish and escapist, going oftentimes unnoticed by academics and literary scholars.

Moving forward, it is my hope that above all else my research helps individuals understand that fighting against systemic inequality, historical influences like colonialism and all

the ism's created through imbalances of privilege, power and oppression are best fought together, not alone. I also hope that people can see the potential for the Reader's Journey and social justice fantasy to open up and offer a safe space to critique and postulate possibilities for a better world and to enact social justice as a community of fantasy readers, authors and educators!

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Appendix A

1. What are some fantasy novels that you have recently read? Or read in that past few years?
2. How long have you been reading fantasy books?
3. What are some reasons why you like to read fantasy?
4. Is there a particular fantasy novel that has stood out for you or left a lasting impression?
If so, why?
5. Has reading a fantasy novel inspired you in some way? If so, how?
6. Have you ever experienced the feeling of being “lost in or transported by” a book while reading a fantasy literature? If so, can you describe your experience?
7. Has a fantasy novel (or novels) you have read made you think about social justice in any way? If so, how?
***Social justice involves a vision for society that is equitable, respectful of human diversity, physically, environmentally and psychologically safe, where individuals have a sense of their own self-agency.
8. After reading a fantasy novel have you ever been motivated to engage in social justice initiatives in your own life, within your community or in an online capacity? If so, in what way?
9. Have you noticed any ways in which fantasy literature and/or fantasy writers have influenced social justice initiatives/movements in reader/fan communities, online, through social media, or another area? If so, in what way?
10. In your opinion, is fantasy literature a better literary genre for promoting social justice attitudes and civic engagement, as opposed to other genres such as science-fiction or autobiographies?

Please add any other comments or insights you might have regarding fantasy literature and social justice.

Appendix B



Researcher: Amie A. Brochu
English, Middlesex University, The Media Department, The Burroughs, Hendon NW4 4BT

Dear Participant,

Please take some time to read through the following information. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher, Amie Brochu, or contact them at: AB2977@live.mdx.ac.uk or amie.brochu@dal.ca.

You are being invited to take part in a PhD research study that is investigating how the imaginative world of fantasy literature might inspire changes in our own attitudes, beliefs and values when we read. Also, you can contact my supervisor, Dr Adam Dalton, a.dalton@mdx.ac.uk.

You have been asked to participate in an anonymous interview session, lasting approximately 30 minutes or an hour. This will be arranged for a time and date of your convenience. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you decide to take part, you may withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

In this interview session, you will be asked questions about how reading fantasy literature might foster beliefs about social justice and actions about changing the world. If you take part in the interview, this form will be given a copy of the information sheet and asked you to sign.

For the purpose of the thematic content analysis of the data from our interview session, I will audio record and transcribe the conversation in the interview session. Also, you have the right to obliterate any responses without giving a reason and the right to delete the recordings of the interviews up to one week after the interview was conducted. The data will be unnamed and stored in an encrypted file, and all proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by academic staff in English at Middlesex University.

Thank you for your participation and thank you for taking your time to read the information sheet.

Middlesex University Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries
English (ENG) Written Informed Consent

I have understood the details of the research as explained to me by the researcher, and confirm that I have consented to act as a participant.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, the data collected during the research will not be identifiable, and I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without any obligation to explain my reasons for doing so.

I further understand that the data I provide may be used for analysis and subsequent publication, and provide my consent that this might occur.

Print name

Sign Name

Appendix C

Phase 2 Research Questions

After reading a book, sometimes people describe that they can't stop thinking about the fictional world, or that they have a sentimental longing for the characters or the atmosphere of the novel. Have you ever experienced an emotional response (i.e., sadness, confusion, anger, happiness, grief, an urgency around finding more to read or to share your experience with others, obsession) after you finished reading a fantasy book or series? If so, can you describe this experience?

***Follow-up questions to the above:

- How long did this experience last (i.e., a fleeting/passing duration, days/weeks, months/years, forever)?
- What did you do to help lessen or sustain the emotional response?
- Why do you think you had these emotional after-effects from reading the book(s)?
- What was it about the story world, characters, plot and/or themes that created this emotional experience for you?
- How do you feel when the protagonist of a fantasy novels dies?

After reading a fantasy novel have you ever had the desire and inspiration to write your own fantasy story, whether as fan fiction or a full novel? Why/why not?

Do you think any fantasy novel has ever changed you as a person? Positively or negatively?

Do you think that fantasy literature has more capacity for changing you as a person than other types of genre literature?

Do you read teen/young adult fantasy? Why/why not?

In your opinion, how does teen fantasy differ from adult fantasy?

Do you find teen and young adult fantasy representing more social justice issues? If so, why do you think this is?

How effectively do you think fantasy literature deals with social justice themes such as class, race and gender issues?

Can you name some current fantasy authors that you believe contain more social justice messaging in their novels?

Do you think you are more or less inclined towards social justice activism as you become older? Why might that be?

Appendix D

Interview Questions for Fantasy Writers

Within my research I have found some scholars state that they believe fantasy has the potential to create a new version of what could be within the real world, thus positioning fantasy as a category open to proposing radical and progressive change. Do you think fantasy has this progressive potential? Why/why not?

***Follow-up to previous question:

- Could you name a fantasy book that you believe does this particularly well?

Do you think fantasy literature is a comment upon current society at all, or do you see it as unconnected to/from our current society and our lived experience?

Do you believe a fantasy novel has the capacity to change the beliefs of a reader, and do you consciously set out to do that when you write fantasy?

In your opinion, is fantasy a better literary genre for promoting and containing social justice attitudes as opposed to other genres such as science-fiction or autobiographies? Why/why not?

Do you think it is important to write about social justice themes and have diversity representations within your novels? Why/why not?

***Follow-up to previous question:

- Are there any particular social justice themes that you look to address with your own work?

Do your readers, agent or publisher(s) ever mention or discuss such themes to you with regard to your work?

How effectively do you think fantasy literature deals with social justice themes such as class, race and gender issues?

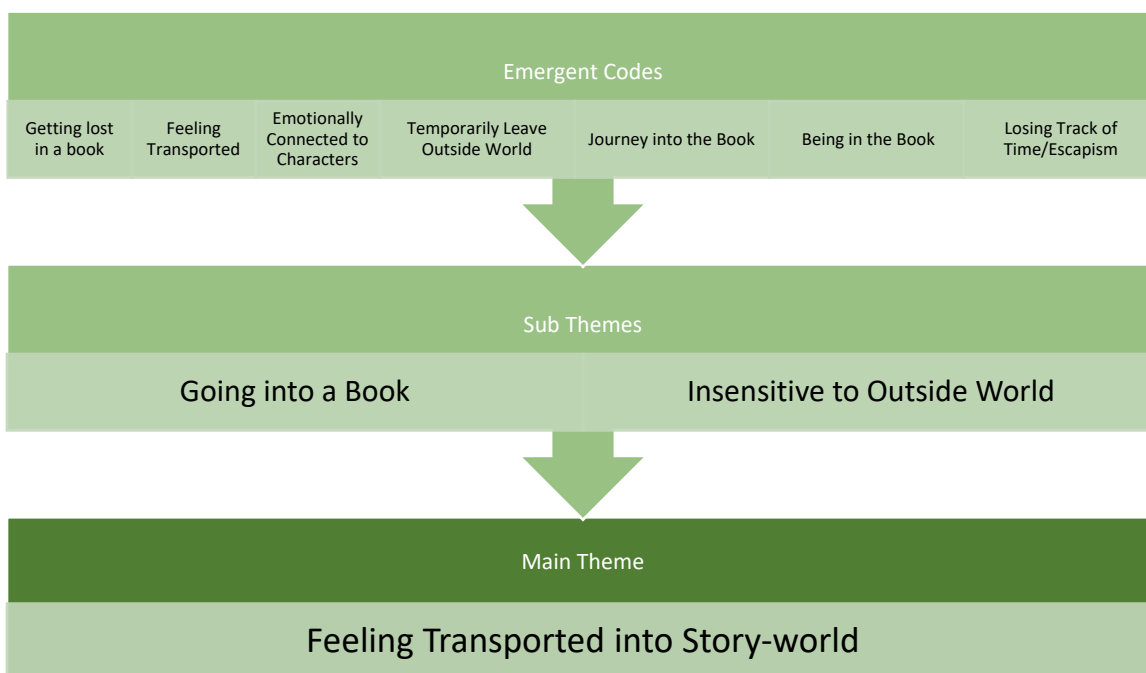
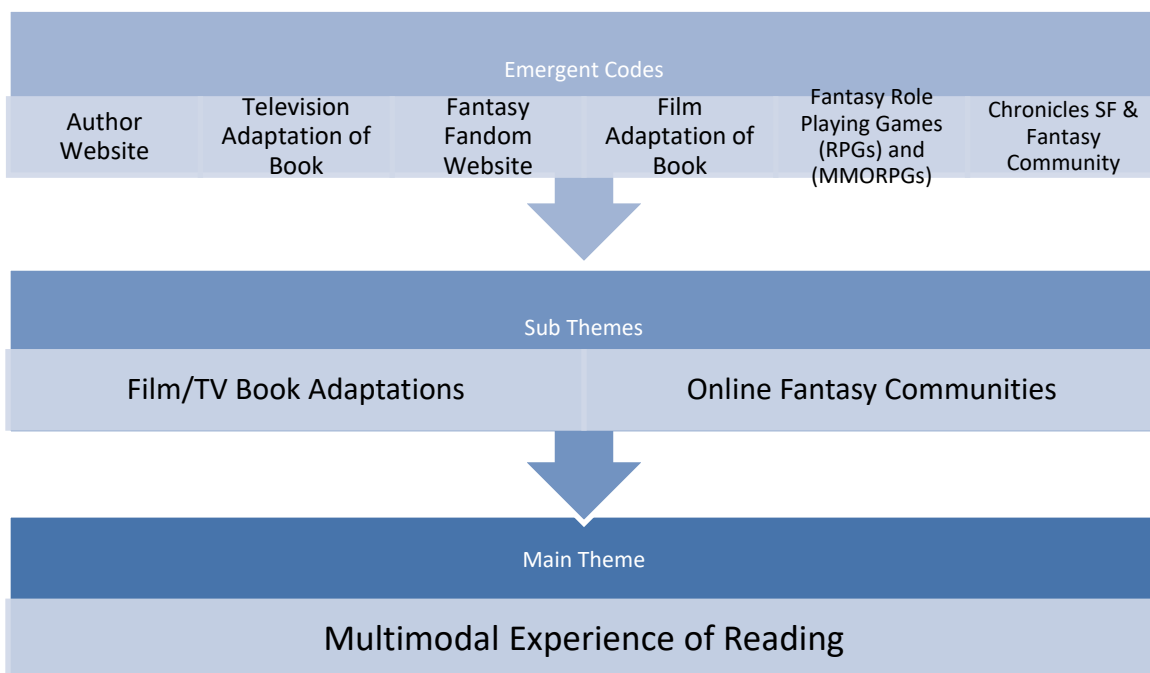
Do you think teen fantasy versus adult fantasy contains more social justice themes/content? Why/why not?

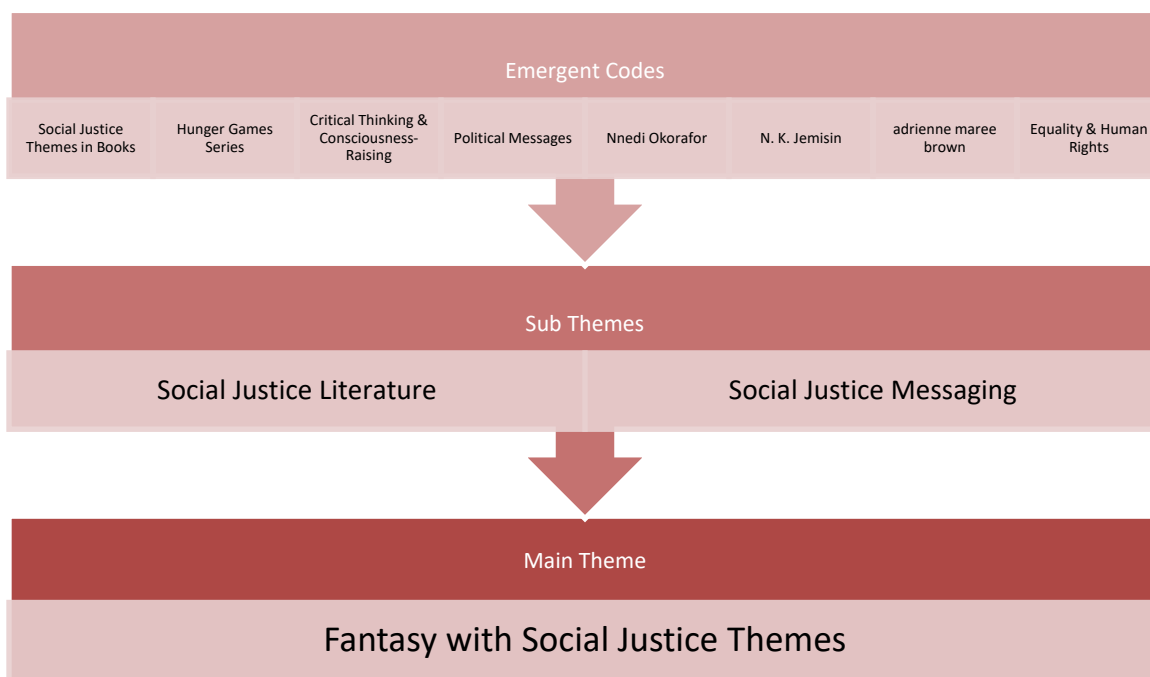
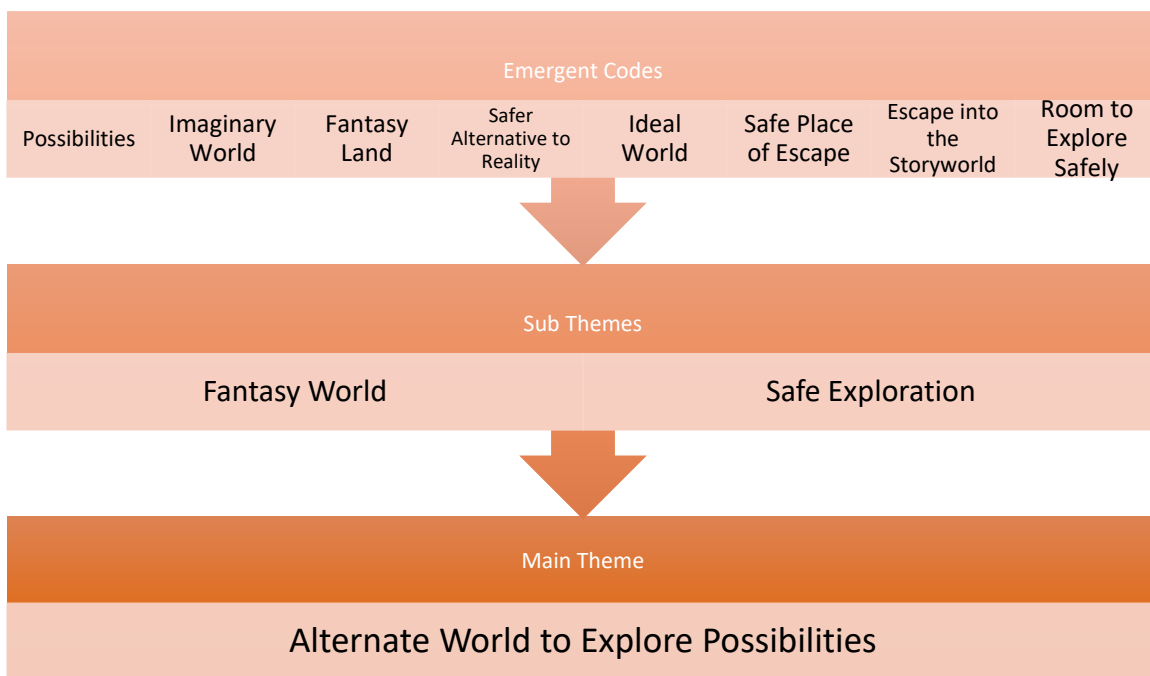
Do you see your work as a fantasy writer as ‘political’ or as a form of social justice activism? How and why?

Do you look to prompt activism in your readers at all?

Appendix E

Thematic Coding Charts





Appendix F
Codebook

#	Code	Sub-codes	Definition	Descriptions and when to use
1	Social justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social issue • Social equality • Fairness • Human rights 	A vision for society that is equitable, respectful of human diversity, physically, environmentally and psychologically safe, where individuals have a sense of their own self-agency (Bell, 2016).	Mention the words 'social justice' and sub-codes in any capacity.
2	Social justice themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oppression • Marginalisation • Othering • Discrimination • Social issue • Diversity • Inclusion 	Terms relating to prior definition with a specific focus on human rights, equity, participation in society and access.	Mention of the following words: race(ism), gender/sexism, heterosexism; class(ism)/hierarchy, ableism, prejudice, diversity, unequal power distribution etc. Social issue topics such as: climate change, immigration, healthcare, gun violence, education, addictions, poverty, mental health stigma etc.
3	Social/political activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warrior • Advocate • Change agent • Anti-capitalist • Pro-democracy • Ally • Supporter • Protestor • Radical 	Activism that is an intentional action by an individual to bring about social or political change.	Inclination to social activism after reading a fantasy novel; mention of the words progressive or radical change; writing fan fiction, the novelist promoting activism

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defender • Revolutionary/revolutionist 		in their works or on fan site.
4	After-effects of reading a fantasy book	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotions (sadness, happiness, anger, confusion etc.) • Feeling lost/not knowing how to cope after the book has completed • Grief that book has ended • Replacement/substitution • Moving forward 	The feeling(s) a reader receives upon completing a book and they can't stop thinking about the fictional world where they have a sentimental longing for the characters or the atmosphere of the novel (Barnett, 2020).	Descriptions of the following: emotions (sadness, happiness, anger, confusion, etc.); grief/sense of loss; obsession/obsessive behaviour regarding the completed book; coping strategies; duration of effects; attempt to replace/substitute the book with something else (another book or activity), strategies for moving forward after reading the book.
5	Teen & young adult fantasy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tween • Teen • Teenage • Youth • Middle years 	Fantasy literature written for individuals between the ages of 12 and 18.	Mention the words 'teen' or 'young adult' in any capacity.
6	Personal development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth • Awareness • Transition • Change • Personal/Individual • Improvement • Development 	The personal act of acquiring knowledge, skills, understandings, self-awareness with the intention of making changes towards something such as personality, beliefs, attitudes, abilities etc.	Reading a fantasy novel has resulted in self-identified change in behaviour, habits, actions, thoughts, beliefs etc.; inspired the reader to change beliefs because of what they read. Mention of the following: personal growth, increased awareness, improvement, enhancement etc.

7	Reader(s) & fan(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer of fantasy genre • Enthusiast • Lover of fantasy • Fanatic • Follower • Writer/author engagement 	Readers are defined as individuals who read fantasy novels. Fans are defined as individuals who are enthusiastic followers, admirers, supporters of the fantasy genre.	Mention of writer engagement with readers/fans online or in-person; participant self-identification as a reader and/or fan.
8	Publisher(s) & agent(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Book world/industry • Bookstore(s) • Publication • Literary agent(s) • Publishing world/industry • Writer engagement with publisher/agent 	Publishers and agents are defined as those involved with story publication and author representation in the book industry.	Mention of writer engagement with publishers and agents; reader mention of publisher/publishing industry.
9	Social justice content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character diversity • Diversity representation • Plot content referring to sub-codes 1 & 2 	Involves the inclusion of written content in a fantasy novel relating to the definitions outlined in Code 1 & 2.	Describes a writer's deliberate inclusion of social justice themes and diversity in their novel.
10	Current world commentary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First world • Real world • Critique • Criticism • Comparison 	Indicates the actual (primary) world in which we live as opposed to the fictional (secondary) story world in a fantasy novel.	Make mention of the words fantasy and real world; mention the fantasy genre as a commentary on current society.