

Female Identity and Intersectionality in Contemporary Speculative Fiction

Abstract:

The goal of this project is to understand how contemporary science fiction and fantasy (speculative fiction) utilize female identity and intersectionality through character agency to explore structural inequality in contemporary society. How do fictional worlds prompt us to look critically at our own? Intersectionality theory demands work at the connections between aspects of identity, so this project examines three categories which intersect with female identity: race, disability, and age. I will analyze novels and short fiction through the application of feminist theory, critical race theory, disability theory, and aetnormative theory (an approach that considers age). My project contributes to a growing body of scholarly research on the literary analysis of science fiction and fantasy. Contemporary media highlight speculative fiction's relevance in popular culture; however, it is important to engage critically with these works to understand what they have to say about inequality in our own societies.

Personal Statement:

I did not want to begin this personal statement with a declaration of my long-standing love of reading, the comforts and supports it gives, and how it has shaped the person I am today. While true, such an assertion seems trite. But without this background information, I am not sure how to explain my decision to pursue a project centered on contemporary science fiction and fantasy. Science fiction and fantasy, often collectively referred to as speculative fiction, has always sparked a sense of wonder within me. My favorite stories, past and present, have introduced realms of imaginative possibilities. As I have engaged with wider reading communities, I often recognize the same spark in others; however, as I grew I also began to notice that wonder is often tempered with a critical lens. What does a magic system have to say about traditional gender roles? What can the ramifications of space travel teach about race? These were some of the panel topics at my first genre-fiction convention, and the presenters included fans, publishing professionals, and academics. Speculative fiction draws people of different ages, backgrounds, and professions together, in a space where their insights can be valued and shared equally.

I noted these connections formed by wonderful stories again and again, at author readings and online communities with international membership. Drawing together analysis and the arts was not a foreign concept for me. My parents encouraged me from a young age to embrace both creativity and academics. I learned to approach education with an

innovative eye, and to see the scholarly value in the arts. Thus, I felt prepared to ask similar questions that I noted from other fans, especially with the rising popularity of speculative media like the adaptation of Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" and Marvel's "Black Panther." What are the benefits to a more inclusive speculative fiction genre? How does representation impact readers? What can fiction do to support the positive transformation of our own world? I was able to engage with some of these questions on a small scale during my 2019 Winter Term course on the Ethics of Resistance and Dissent, where I explored how visionary storytelling can provide a space for activists to develop new frameworks to view the past and imagine alternative futures.

Other academic experiences at Elon have given me the opportunity to leverage the skills I gained as a homeschool student. Since middle school I have had the freedom to explore additional topics to the curriculum requirements mandated by the state. This experience gave me an intense ownership of my learning and inspired a passionate curiosity. The availability of dual-enrollment courses at Barton College complemented my independent study with an appreciation for the mentorship of experts. My early education in the balance of creativity and academia provided me with a flexibility and an ability to incorporate learning from different disciplines. At Elon, this has manifested in my pursuit of two majors: English Literature and Philosophy. In many ways literature and philosophy both require a scholar to stretch what they think is possible in their interpretations of material or in the formulation of new concepts. My majors encourage questioning identity, representation, agency, and inclusion. It makes sense, then, that I would want to apply these questions to a genre which I have loved and which prompted me to think in new ways, always with a sense of wonder. I know the passionate curiosity and critical focus I have valued for a long time will be further honed as I pursue this project.

Project Description

In this project I question how readings of fictional systems of power and character agency are related to our understanding of real-world inequalities, expressly through the lens of intersectionality and female identity as presented in contemporary science fiction and fantasy. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1991 to describe a concept of identity which recognizes the interrelated nature of different social locations and the resulting effects of structural inequality. Building on her approach, I examine the agency of female-identified characters with a focus on three intersections: race, disability, and age. Each of these three nodes of inquiry reflects an important aspect of intersectionality while also narrowing the focus of my research. Intersectionality looks at the convergence of multiple aspects of identity, thus the common thread of female identity running through my research will unite my project as well as maintain a reasonable scope. I will not be leaving the idea of "female" unquestioned however; indeed, I draw from a history of gender fluidity in speculative fiction such as Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Left Hand of Darkness" in questioning the category of female. As Judith Butler states in "Gender Trouble," "the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed" (Butler 19-20). Her important concepts resurface in intersectionality scholarship.

I do not attempt to ask whether science fiction and fantasy are more diverse or intersectional than other genres; rather, I question how such instances of intersectionality are employed. In exploring the relationships between fictional and real-world inequalities, I also explore how speculative fiction might provide a space to engage with issues of inequality within my chosen categories. Employing intersectionality in my analysis allows me to engage with multiple axes of power relationships, where more singular critical approaches may only focus on one aspect of identity. Science fiction and fantasy provide authors the flexibility to approach inequality in a similar fashion, they are less limited by what is considered "realistic" as they imagine how the world might change. In exploring these imagined worlds, we are prompted to understand our own world more closely.

Speculative fiction has its roots in the traditions which brought us "The Odyssey," "Beowulf," and works of Shakespeare with fantastical monsters and epic scopes, while Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" is commonly regarded as the first major work of science fiction. These examples showcase how speculative fiction can have a significant impact on culture. Representation of marginalized groups varies within particular contexts or types of stories, and speculative fiction can showcase distinct perspectives on important social issues. The existing scholarly work on science fiction and fantasy typically focuses on authors such as Tolkien, Lewis, and Asimov; while they are influential, they do not encompass the diversity of

speculative fiction writers. I examine works largely from the 21st century, authored by people of many races and genders, which, combined with my focus on intersectionality, will contribute to the growing scholarship in this area.

I begin with the aspect of identity most commonly regarded as fixed, race, which I will examine through the lens of Afrofuturism. Mark Dery was one of the first scholars to articulate a definition of Afrofuturism in the mid-nineties, explaining it as “Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture” (Dery 180). Dery and other scholars point to the confluence of past and present in Afrofuturism, which Ruth Mayer frames as “setting out not so much to rewrite the history of the African diaspora, but to systematically deconstruct it, rendering Africa an ‘alien future’” (Mayer 564). I will use these and other scholars to inform my readings of female identity and agency in Afrofuturist fiction.

My second node explores speculative fiction narratives of disability. My critical readings include works that apply to ableism more generally, such as Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s book “Extraordinary Bodies,” which highlights her focus on “reframing ‘disability’ as another culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality” (5) and to “probe the relations among social identities – valued and devalued – outlined by our accepted hierarchies of embodiment,” (7). Thomson also references the relative fluidity of disability, because it is an aspect of identity which one can either gain at birth or acquire later in life. The works of Thomson and other scholars provide strategies I adapt for my own analysis of characters with disabilities in speculative fiction.

Finally, I look at the inevitably changing aspect of identity, age. Ageism gives primacy to one stage of life over the other or is actively discriminatory towards a particular age group. I utilize Maria Nikolajeva’s tool of aetonormative inquiry, which views all stages of life as consistently normative rather than giving one stage priority over another (Nikolajeva 16). Some narratives in science fiction and fantasy push at boundaries of age, either through the inclusion of particularly young or particularly old heroines. While Nikolajeva’s initial work focuses on youth disenfranchisement, I extend her concept of aetonormative inquiry to explore older characters in conjunction with Margaret Gullette’s scholarship on middle-aged characters in fiction (Gullette). Age represents a commonality of experience which my other nodes of inquiry might not have, because while other aspects of identity impact how we age, we all experience the process of aging. Oddly, age is the least explored of the three nodes I am investigating. Consequently, the importance of age as marginalization in speculative fiction is another place where my work will add to the field.

Through my chosen nodes of race, disability, and age, my research demonstrates how female intersectionality affects character agency and our understanding of inequality in

contemporary speculative fiction. My work exploring different facets of intersectionality is timely, addressing a gap within existing scholarship.

Scholarly Process:

My research methodology includes analysis of works of science fiction and fantasy which fit within at least one of the three nodes. Because of my chosen intersectional approach, I will be utilizing several strains of critical theory including feminist criticism, critical race theory, disability theory, and aetnormative inquiry. A tentative bibliography of primary sources (fiction) is attached to this application.

Each critical theory will help parse a different aspect of the way character agency is constructed in the texts. For example, with the category of age I will look at how a character's age is described by the narrator, secondary characters, and the character themselves. Details about a character's age and how that affects her agency are also relevant, whether they are found within internal monologue, dialogue, or descriptive prose. What are the explicit and implicit assumptions that the characters (internally) and the societies (externally) make in the texts? What are the affordances and constraints such an identity provides? How stable are these aspects of identity? How is a character's identity situated within the larger narrative? I will replicate these questions across each node of race, disability, and age.

I will be reading at least two key novel-length texts from each node as well as eight to twelve pieces of short fiction; novels have had considerable impact on speculative fiction's development, but including short fiction will allow me to engage with a wider variety of authors. Thus, I will read ten to fourteen works in each category, but I will aim to complete more in-depth written analysis on five to seven. I am cognizant of both the popularity as well as literary quality of my chosen texts; I want to include material which is impactful as well as artful enough to grow in influence over time. Many authors on my tentative list of primary sources have been recognized with awards at high professional levels. These include N. K. Jemisin, the first person to win three consecutive Hugo awards, and Ursula K. Le Guin, who has been recognized by the Library of Congress and the National Book Foundation.

Proposed Products:

The product of my research will consist of a multi-chapter thesis with a chapter on each node of inquiry. While I recognize that each node on its own could provide ample analysis for a research project, intersectionality theory demands deep examination of where the strands of a person's identity knot together rather than following the breadth of each individual strand. Recognizing the multiplicity of identity is part of the challenge and the joy of working with intersectionality. I will submit sections of this project to undergraduate publishing opportunities, alongside professional journals with open submissions policies. I will apply to present portions of my work at undergraduate conferences nationally and internationally,

such as SURF, NCUR, and the British Conference of Undergraduate Research. Additionally, I will attend genre-focused workshops such as Sirens Conference, and formal academic venues such as the Popular Culture Association and the American Literature Association.

Feasibility

Feasibility statement:

For some projects, access to certain equipment is a defining feature of feasibility, however, my project's execution primarily requires the development of a strong theoretical foundation which I have begun through 499 independent research and additional coursework. First, I worked with English Professor Paula Patch in Fall of 2018 to explore the concept of intersectionality so I could familiarize myself with the major themes within the scholarship and develop my thoughts on how I can apply the concept to research in literature. I am currently working with Dr. Ann Cahill in the Philosophy department via a 499 to deepen my understanding of standpoint theory, a concept related to intersectionality but more firmly situated within epistemology. While I do not plan on implementing standpoint theory specifically in this research project, understanding the development of standpoint theory will give me the tools to further unpack the development of intersectionality scholarship.

Additional coursework which has prepared me to execute this research project includes literature courses from both Barton College and Elon University, including the application of critical race theory in ENG334: Native American Literature, and my current study of methodology in ENG220: Introduction to Literary Methods. My major in Philosophy has provided opportunities to engage with several critical theories through my coursework, including, but not limited to, feminist theory, critical race theory, and intersectionality in classes such as PHL230: Philosophical Methods, and PHL370: Ethics of Resistance and Dissent. In addition to the courses required for my majors and independent research, my Honors seminars, particularly HNR133: Art History – Vision and Difference, and HNR244: Sexual Ethics have also provided opportunities to engage with disability studies and other critical theories. In my first two years at Elon I have made intentional choices to lay the foundation for the intellectual theories which will undergird my research project.

In my future work, participation in SURE 2019 with Dr. Isaac will provide additional time to begin my research. During the eight-week summer program I will review critical theory resources and analyze short fiction in each of my three nodes. In Fall 2019 I will work with Dr. Bloch-Schulman as a Teaching and Learning Assistant (TLA) for PHL230: Philosophical Methods. Working as a TLA will include engaging with philosophical material in a new way, as well as the chance to help select readings and lead classroom discussions. I am applying this semester to study abroad through the Advanced Studies in England (ASE) program in Spring of 2020. ASE offers students the opportunity to pursue independent study in the form of a research tutorial with an Oxford professor while residing in Bath, UK. I have discussed the feasibility of my proposed research tutorial with the director of the program.

I will likely be able to work with a scholar of contemporary literature such as Professor Ankhi Mukherjee at Oxford, or Nicola Presley from Bath Spa University.

In addition to pursuing a tutorial study while in Bath next spring, I will also be completing English and Philosophy courses at Elon that complement my research in my junior and senior years. Courses such as ENG338: African Literature will reinforce my understanding of nodes such as Afrofuturism by broadening my familiarity with canonical literature from African and African American authors. Participation in conferences and workshops at Elon and beyond will further enhance my future learning.

Dr. Megan Isaac's experience as a literary scholar and a reader of speculative fiction makes her an excellent mentor for my project. She has taught a course on Ursula K. Le Guin, a course on Utopian and Dystopian literature, and regularly includes fantasy in her other literature courses. Her published work includes analyses of speculative fiction, and she is deeply familiar with aetnormative and feminist theory. While Dr. Isaac does not have extensive experience with intersectionality theory, I will draw support from my coursework in philosophy and the relationships established through my 499 experiences and tutorial research through ASE if I need further guidance in this area.

Budget:

■ Books: \$650

- Copies of primary sources: \$300
- Books on critical theories: \$300
- Photocopying: \$50

■ SURF poster: \$30

■ National Conference of Undergraduate Research deposit: \$100

■ Study Abroad with ASE in Bath, England: \$2,900

- Travel: \$1,750
- ---Round trip plane ticket: \$1,400
- ---Railcard and train tickets to travel to conference venues in England: \$350
- Tuition: \$1,150
- ---Independent tutorial fee: \$1,000
- ---Books for classes: \$150

■ British Conference of Undergraduate Research (April 2020): \$590

- Registration: \$90

- Cab from train station to hotel and back: \$100
- Accommodations and meals: \$400

- American Literature Association Annual Conference (May 2020): \$1,150
 - Registration Fee: \$100
 - Travel to Boston and roundtrip taxi: \$300
 - Accommodations: Attendee Rate for three nights: \$600
 - Meals: \$150

- Sirens Conference (October 2020): \$1,610
 - Registration fee: \$350
 - Travel to Denver and roundtrip airport shuttle: \$475
 - Accommodations: Attendee Rate for four nights: \$660
 - Meals: \$125

- Popular Culture Association Annual Conference (April 2021): \$1,225
 - Registration fee: \$175
 - Travel to Washington, DC: \$100
 - Accommodations: Attendee Rate for four nights: \$800
 - Meals: \$200

- Graduate School Applications: \$1000

- Total: \$9,255
- Tuition: \$10,745
- Grand total: \$20,000

List of sources:

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Feasibility Cont.

	Proposed Experiences	Proposed Product(s)
First Summer Term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ SURE 2019 with Dr. Megan Isaac to apply chosen areas of inquiry to short fiction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ SURE 2019 research paper and presentation materials ■ Completed paper to submit to Sigma Tau Delta journal of undergraduate research
First Fall Term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Take three HNR498 hours ■ TLA for PHL230: Philosophical Methods with Dr. Bloch-Schulman 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Honors thesis proposal ■ BCUR abstract (adapted from SURE 2019) ■ Draft of analysis of race
First Winter Term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Research work on disability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Partial draft of analysis of disability
First Spring Term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Study abroad in Bath, England ■ Take one HNR498 hour while abroad ■ Research tutorial with faculty at Oxford University ■ Attend and present at BCUR (pending acceptance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Conference paper for ALA Conference (adapted from SURE 2019 material) ■ Conference paper for Sirens Conference ■ Draft of analysis of disability
Second Summer Term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Attend and present at American Literature Association annual Conference (pending acceptance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Partial draft of analysis of age
Second Fall Term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Take two HNR498 hours ■ Attend and present at Sirens Conference (pending acceptance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Draft of analysis of age ■ Completed NCUR application ■ Conference paper for PCA conference
Second Winter Term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Begin revising chapters ■ Finish Graduate School applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Progress on Thesis Revision ■ Graduate School Applications
Second Spring Term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Thesis defense ■ Two HNR498 hours to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Revised thesis ■ SURF Poster

	<p>revise chapters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Attend and present at the Popular Culture Association Conference (pending acceptance)■ SURF Presentation■ NCUR Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Completed article to submit to academic journals
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