

ABSTRACT

SPECULATIVE ESCAPISM IN CONTEMPORARY FANTASY: LABOR, UTILITY, AFFECT

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In Process

My dissertation examines the concept of escapism as it has been understood in the Western tradition and in its interactions with what we would now call speculative literature. Beginning with Plato's *Republic*, this project traces the concept of escapism in the trajectory of reactions to nonmimetic literary works as threats to the state, family, and individual character. In investigating these reactions, I identify a suspicion of the nonmimetic in such texts as Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* and J.R.R. Tolkien's "Of Fairy-Stories" that I argue is linked to Max Weber's Protestant ethic and a drive to render the imagination productive and utilitarian. I am interested in the tension between the scholarly defenses of escapism, which largely seek to justify allegedly escapist media as secretly instructive or therapeutic, and the affective drives that appear to motivate escapist modes of reading. Using the work of Lee Edelman as a foundation, my project leverages concepts of queer negativity and nonreproductive futurity as

potential hermeneutics for understanding modes of escapism facilitated by fantasy literature.

For my case studies, I turn to the portal fantasy genre as a fertile site of escapist affects. I argue that the portal fantasy can be understood as increasingly in explicit conversation with discourses of reproductive futurism and capitalist productivity, against which it juxtaposes powerful affective commitments to fictive Secondary Worlds. Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* trilogy and Seanan McGuire's Wayward Children novels are my primary texts, each exemplary of a growing reflexivity in the portal fantasy genre as it grapples with the specter of utility and an intense drive of both characters and readers to abandon the empirical world in favor of fantastical Secondary Worlds.