



PhD program Intangible Heritage in Socio-Cultural Innovation

Cycle XVIII

Anthropology of the Fantastic: Intangible Heritage, Community Engagement, and Socio-Cultural Innovation in Museum Practice

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Introduction

The PhD course *Intangible Heritage in Socio-Cultural Innovation* was established in partnership with the Universities of Perugia and Basilicata and is funded within the framework of the *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*¹ (PNRR). This plan allocates resources provided by the European Union through the *Next Generation EU* program, created to support the economic and social recovery of member states after the pandemic. The PNRR serves as the national tool through which Italy implements these funds, translating European objectives into concrete reforms and investments.

The program promotes close integration between academic research and applied cultural practice, developed in collaboration with public entities and cultural institutions. At the core of the programme lies the study of intangible cultural heritage as a dynamic and living resource, capable of contributing to processes of socio-cultural innovation. Through collaboration between academic and institutional partners, the PhD fosters an interdisciplinary and practice-oriented approach, creating a continuous dialogue between research and real-world application. This dynamic framework enables engagement across diverse institutional contexts and the testing of research outcomes in practical settings. The project involved a nine-month placement at the Italian partner institution, complemented by a six-month stay abroad to conduct fieldwork research.

The project was co-organized by the University of Milano-Bicocca and the Fantasy and Science Fiction Museum of Turin (MUFANT) – through its directors and co-founders Davide Monopoli and Silvia Casolari² – and included a collaboration with the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, Canada.

The choice of UBC was guided by several considerations. First, while the socio-cultural contexts of Turin and Vancouver are quite different, there is significant potential for analysing how selected realities and institutions implement participatory practices and community engagement strategies, using them as a model to inform their meaningful adaptation to the context of MUFANT and to the cultural heritage of the fantastic that the museum represents. The comparability of these selected settings and the opportunities they

¹ Translation: National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

² I would like to take this opportunity to thank Davide and Silvia for the opportunity they have given me, and all the staff at MUFANT for their support and collaboration throughout these three years of research.

offered for learning and experimentation made Canada an ideal context. The Canadian museological sector is highly advanced, with a strong emphasis on participatory practices, community engagement, and the social role of museums within their local contexts.

There is also a pronounced focus on nationally relevant social issues, particularly reconciliation – the ongoing societal and institutional process of addressing the legacy of colonialism and rebuilding relationships between Indigenous peoples, the state, cultural institutions, and broader society. Another factor influencing the choice of UBC was prior familiarity with Vancouver, where fieldwork had been conducted for the master's thesis in 2019. That research focused on Indigenous art of the Pacific Northwest Coast and its role in processes of self-determination, cultural revival, and socio-cultural practices among First Nations communities. Building on this background, the doctoral research integrated attention to the experiences of BIPOC and marginalized groups, exploring works of fantastic fiction produced by authors from these communities.

The selection of postcolonial fantastic fiction as a case study was guided not only by personal interest and prior experience in the field, but also by MUFANT's ongoing research focus: the museum had already extensively explored Italian science fiction through its own expertise and network, and was interested in deepening the study of non-Western fantastic fiction making this a complementary area for the research. While the study focused on the fantastic more broadly and across diverse contexts, careful attention was given to inclusivity in the choice of references and case studies. The research did not dwell on technical or content-specific aspects of the fantastic, except when needed to support conceptual discussion; rather, it aimed to explore the general features of the fantastic and their anthropological significance across multiple forms and expressions.

This thesis supports the hypothesis that the fantastic can function as an effective tool for socio-cultural innovation and community engagement when approached through an anthropological perspective and situated within museum practice. It argues that the fantastic operates as a cultural language through which individuals and communities interpret reality, imagine alternatives, and explore different modes of coexistence.

The research did not focus on the technical or content-specific aspects of the fantastic, except insofar as they supported the conceptual discussion. Rather, it aimed to explore the general features of fantastic storytelling across its multiple expressions and forms, examining how these features can be interpreted and analyzed through an anthropological lens. Drawing on contributions from an emerging body of work at the

intersection of anthropology and the fantastic, the research understands imagination, speculation, and fictional narratives as practices embedded in everyday social life. This approach echoes the principles of the anthropology of literature – or literary anthropology (Capello & Scandurra, 2025) – a strand of the discipline based on the recognition of common ground and in the use of each domain to interpret the other and to reflect on their respective dynamics. The anthropology of literature thus interrogates the encounter between the two fields, exploring their convergences and divergences, similarities and differences, reciprocal influences, and points of contact. Carlo Capello and Giuseppe Scandurra in the introduction to the edited volume *Nate da una stessa risata* (2025) identify five approaches and dimensions within the anthropology of literature that bring the two disciplinary fields into dialogue in different ways, some of which resonate with the approaches adopted in this work in the following analysis of the anthropology of the fantastic.

The first dimension is the comparative one, focused on the recognition of similarities and differences, affinities and divergences, and intersections between literature and anthropology, both as final outcomes and as processes of production. This approach is evident in the first part of Chapter 3, where epistemological, ontological, and thematic relations shared by anthropology and the fantastic are analysed.

The second dimension focuses on the use of literature in anthropology as a model and stimulus for ethnographic and anthropological experimentation. This is also examined here, in particular through the work of Ursula K. Le Guin and her anthropological science fiction, where fantastic storytelling is conceived as a cultural laboratory and a thought experiment. Conversely, the analysis also considers the use of anthropology within fantastic productions as a tool for worldbuilding.

The third approach is based on the conception of novels and other literary texts as ethnographic sources for understanding the socio-cultural contexts in which they are produced and which they also actively shape and influence. In this sense literature is conceived, in the words of anthropologist Rose De Angelis, as «both a creation and creator of culture, with anthropology as observer/reader/interpreter. The dual role for literature and the repositioning of anthropology allows for a multiplicity of possibilities in reading, writing about, and interpreting people, places, and perspectives, real or imagined» (De Angelis, 2002, p. 2). Parallel to this framework, forms of fantastic expression are conceived in this work as cultural artifacts that both narrate and relate to the broader cultural system

in which they are produced and consumed. Analysing them thus goes beyond their content and can serve as a means of understanding the wider cultural context, as well as those who produce them. This dimension is developed especially in Chapter 5 through the case study on postcolonial fantastic fiction.

The fourth dimension addresses the ethnography of literary worlds and the ethnographic description of both writing and practices. This approach has informed the sections of the research, which engaged with authors and artists working in the field of the fantastic, shedding light on how they relate to the fantastic in their practice. It is also developed in Chapter 4, which addresses the potential use of the fantastic for communicative purposes across different domains of application.

The fifth and final approach is grounded in the idea that literary texts are forms of culture and thus open to interpretation through the conceptual and methodological tools of anthropology, which can uncover conceptual structures, thematic dimensions, and layers of meaning that might otherwise remain unnoticed within purely literary interpretative frameworks. This dimension is particularly reflected in the use of readings of fantastic fiction during the guided walks organised in Borgo Vittoria within the practice-based component of the research, where the texts and their anthropologically informed interpretations were connected to the experiences presented during the tours. The account of these activities is presented in Chapter 6.

Building on these dimensions of approach, the anthropology of literature functions in this work as a general framework of reference within which the fantastic can be situated and examined, and from which analytical concepts and tools can be drawn. At the same time, it is not conceived as a restrictive analytical structure, since the fantastic is understood as a phenomenon that exceeds the boundaries of literature. In fact, this dissertation does not analyse the fantastic within the confines of its literary expressions, exploring instead the general features of fantastic storytelling across its multiple forms and media. The works and cases analysed here are selected instances aimed at exploring and understanding the affinities between the two disciplinary domains. However, the existence of these affinities does not exclude the presence of numerous cases in which the fantastic and anthropology do not enter into dialogue, as well as aspects in which they differ radically. Perhaps the most evident of these concerns the fact that, beyond the often utopian aspiration to objectivity historically pursued by anthropology (Scandurra, 2024), the discipline nevertheless maintains, at least at the level of intent, a commitment to objective and realist

representation. Literature, by contrast – particularly the novel, and even more so fantastic storytelling – does not share this orientation; on the contrary, it is explicitly grounded in the premise of producing fiction. This also entails a difference in ethical accountability, as anthropological texts must remain accountable to real people and communities, whereas literature is not bound by the same ethical obligations toward its subjects. This, in turn, shapes the differing degrees of freedom of expression that characterize the two fields: anthropology is constrained by disciplinary norms and truth claims, while literature is relatively free to experiment with form and meaning. The divergences between the two are as important as their affinities and, although they do not constitute the central focus of this research, this awareness remains a constant underlying thread throughout the work. The relationship is not approached in an uncritical or automatic manner; however, since the aim of the study is to focus on the applicative potential of points of convergence between anthropology and the fantastic in socio-culturally oriented projects within museum contexts, these are given greater emphasis than the areas of divergence.

While not constituting a fully established field, this line of inquiry has demonstrated the capacity of such narratives to shape relationships, meanings, and shared horizons, and to be mobilized within cultural institutions to foster relational and participatory processes. Within this framework, the study aims at investigating the potential of the fantastic to activate participation and support community engagement practices, contributing to processes of socio-cultural innovation when situated within specific territorial and institutional contexts. Particular attention is given to museums and cultural institutions as relational spaces and territorial actors, where intangible heritage, applied anthropology, and participatory practices can intersect. Through qualitative and practice-based methodologies, the research investigates how these approaches can be translated into concrete experiences, tested in the field, and negotiated through collaboration with communities. It proposes an analysis of the fantastic as an innovative tool in museum contexts, highlighting its potential to support museums in strengthening their presence within the territory and in assuming a more active and meaningful role in the social fabric of the communities in which they operate.

The research questions and objectives were developed over time in close dialogue with MUFANT, in alignment with the museum's strategic goals and areas of interest, while also proposing new pathways aimed at bringing the institution closer to current trends in contemporary museology. At the same time, they were shaped in relation to the objectives

of the PhD programme and designed to enable a meaningful and useful interaction with the partner institution in Canada.

During the first year, starting in November 2022, alongside attending the courses required by my study plan, I spent several months at MUFANT familiarizing myself with the institution and conducting bibliographical research. This work was guided by insights and suggestions gathered through interviews and informal conversations at the museum. During this phase, I focused on developing a theoretical understanding of the anthropology of the fantastic, drawing on both the material and human resources of MUFANT and engaging with its heritage community.

The first part of the second year focused on establishing a relationship with the territory surrounding MUFANT, the Borgo Vittoria neighborhood, especially through the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria*, involving regular visits and the mapping of potential areas for the practice-based component of the research. Considerable time was also spent at the museum, observing, participating in and contributing to its ongoing activities. From May to November 2024, fieldwork was conducted in Canada in collaboration with the Department of Anthropology at UBC. This included interviews with scholars and professional experts, participant observation, and the development of an international network of knowledge and relationships. The research examined how the languages of the fantastic can be translated into practical, context-sensitive applications, while also focusing on the observation and analysis of community engagement strategies across diverse institutional and cultural contexts. These insights informed the identification of approaches potentially transferable to Borgo Vittoria. The third and final year of the program focused on applying these theoretical and empirical insights in the local context. Through the design and implementation of community engagement initiatives, this phase tested how methods and perspectives developed during fieldwork could be adapted to the neighborhood in collaboration with the realities that operate there, contributing to MUFANT's ongoing efforts to strengthen its presence and relationships within the territory.

This research adopts a qualitative, ethnographic methodology, combining semi-structured interviews with participant observation, informal conversations, and visits to exhibitions and institutions relevant to the research themes. It also incorporates practice-based approaches. In addition, statistical data were consulted, and a sample survey was conducted at MUFANT to gain a better understanding of the composition of its audience. Ethnographic observation was conducted during public events, including lectures,

workshops, panels, exhibitions, and conferences relevant to the research themes, both at MUFANT and in Canada. Observational notes also encompassed interactions and practices observed while collaborating directly with the museum, with the *Tavolo* and the local actors active in Borgo Vittoria, focusing on patterns of engagement, audience responses, and the social and cultural dynamics that emerged in these contexts.

In Italy, data collection was carried out primarily at MUFANT and within the Borgo Vittoria neighborhood, while the Canadian fieldwork took place mainly in Vancouver, with additional observations carried out in other institutional, public, and online contexts across Canada and the United States. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person whenever possible, or remotely via online platforms (e.g., Zoom) to accommodate participants' availability, preferences, or logistical constraints. Interviews followed an open-ended guide, enabling participants to freely reflect on their professional practices and personal perspectives. With explicit consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The resulting transcripts were analyzed using NVivo (software for assisted qualitative data analysis) to identify patterns, organize themes, and extract insights relevant to the research objectives. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, either in written or oral form depending on the context. Given that many participants were professionals, they were offered the choice to have their identities anonymized or disclosed; this preference was explicitly recorded during the consent process. When anonymity was requested, pseudonyms were assigned, and identifying information was stored separately. In such cases, participants were referenced in the thesis using a code composed of "P00" (participant number in chronological order) followed by their initials. Personal data were omitted, leaving only reference to the participant's professional role. Data management and storage procedures were implemented to ensure confidentiality, security, and compliance with institutional and legal requirements.

Some of the individuals involved in the research were engaged only for the duration of the interview. This was often the case for professionals, scholars, authors, and artists whose work intersects with the fantastic or with practices of community engagement. These interviews were conducted at both in Turin and in Canada, with a particular emphasis on the Canadian context. At MUFANT, exchanges of information and experiences were primarily based on informal conversations during events, meetings, or daily work at the museum, occasionally supplemented by targeted advice and guidance from professionals.

In many cases, the roles of participants were not sharply distinct: most authors are also scholars, some residents of Borgo Vittoria are members of the *Tavolo*, and roles often overlapped. Whenever relevant, the thesis highlights this complexity of roles. In other cases, longer-term personal relationships were established during the course of collaboration. This occurred primarily in Italy, through MUFANT and local realities in Borgo Vittoria – particularly via the *Tavolo* – but also in Vancouver, where connections were formed that remain active.

The way I positioned myself throughout the research shifted continuously, adapting to the contexts and the people I was interacting with, and the specific aims I was pursuing at any given moment. Beyond the more contingent elements, which I will examine in relation to each field site, the broader, overarching factors shaping my positionality were linked to my identity as a young female anthropologist.

During my ethnographic research, both in Italy and abroad, I benefited from relatively easy access to authoritative voices by presenting myself as an academic and through my affiliation with the University of Milano-Bicocca and the University of British Columbia. I recognize that this constituted a significant advantage, as such access is not equally available to individuals working in other fields or institutional contexts. In fact, in my experience, institutions tend to engage more readily with academic actors and are often willing to position themselves as objects of study, particularly in the socio-cultural sphere, where such engagement is frequently perceived as enhancing visibility and reinforcing legitimacy. My positionality as a student and my age also influenced the research, as I was often perceived as young. This most of the time elicited sympathy and led my work to be perceived as innovative, interesting, and contemporary, with potential for further development. At the same time, this did not generally undermine my perceived authority. I was not, on any occasion, dismissed based on youth; instead, I more often experienced recognition of my work as legitimate despite, or sometimes in relation to, my age.

Also beneficial for me as an ethnographer was the fact the people I engaged with in Canada were already familiar with the concept of anthropology, which facilitated my introduction of the research and the communication of its aims. At the same time, I sometimes had to navigate pre-existing understandings and assumptions about anthropology – assumptions grounded in the discipline's historical association with colonial dynamics and extractive forms of knowledge production. In my interactions, these framings sometimes overlooked the significant transformations anthropology has

undergone in recent decades, particularly the increased attention to ethical practice, reciprocity, and relational accountability. This required me to position myself as a researcher committed to situate my own practice within those ongoing disciplinary shifts. By contrast, in Borgo Vittoria I frequently found myself in the position of having to introduce anthropology from the ground up. Rather than being framed through established preconceptions, anthropology was often encountered with curiosity and openness. In these contexts, I became more aware of how I was representing both the discipline and my own role within it, as attention tended to focus less on inherited meanings of anthropology and more on how they could be translated into practice, including what I – as an anthropologist and collaborator of MUFANT – could potentially do or contribute to the activities of the *Tavolo*.

Finally, as a woman researching a field that has long been dominated by male perspectives (see section 1.2), I have found myself often drawn to the growing number of impactful, high-quality works produced by women artists and authors in fantastic storytelling across various media. This inclination initially felt instinctive: perhaps an unconscious drive to amplify female voices that have historically been excluded from discourses on the fantastic, as well as from many other cultural fields. At the same time, I have remained attentive not to tokenize women's work. My engagement with these texts and artworks is grounded in their intrinsic qualities – because they are compelling, captivating, and inspiring – rather than in the gender identity of their creators. The aim has never been to dismiss the contributions of cisgender men in the field, but rather to highlight and re-centre women's contributions, placing them on equal footing within the discourse. While analyzing the choices of works included in my selection and taking this potential bias into account, I also observed that, particularly in narrative forms and especially within postcolonial fantastic fiction, the contributions of women authors were often foregrounded in the research process I conducted to identify relevant texts. I have considered that this may, at least in part, be related to marketing dynamics or to the contexts in which these works are promoted, as well as to the influence of the critical readings and references I consulted during my research. Although this line of inquiry does not find space within the present work, I nonetheless believe that this significant and striking emergence of women's writing deserves further analysis. I do not exclude the possibility that it may become a central focus of my future research.

Throughout this doctoral experience I had to continuously renegotiate my positionality, engaging in ongoing reflexive work to reconsider how it shaped my perceptions, interactions, and analytical choices. This involved adapting my behaviour and interpretive stance in relation to bias, personal investments, relational dynamics in the field, my role as a researcher, and the shifting aims of the research process. In hindsight, certain aspects of this positioning became clearer, while at the time they often remained partial, unstable, and at times difficult to navigate. While I remained consistently attentive to the importance of positionality and reflected on it extensively – perhaps at times excessively – it would be misleading to state now that it was fully transparent or stabilised in the moment of fieldwork. Rather, it has been reconstructed through the retrospective work of writing, and through the very process of analysis itself. For this reason, the reflexive annotations included in this thesis are as much the outcome of the entire research journey as the findings and discussions themselves, and should be understood as grounded in anthropological approaches to situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) and reflexive ethnography. I included them whenever they were analytically relevant to situate findings and interpretations within the specific epistemic conditions under which they were produced.

In a sense, these reflections on positionality represent what has affected me most profoundly on a personal level: the more enduring lessons of this Ph.D. journey, extending beyond the themes and objectives of the research, and relating instead to my development as a researcher – insights that will continue to inform my future work.

This thesis is structured into six chapters that follow the research journey from initial conceptual exploration to applied experimentation, tracing how questions, methods, and practices gradually took shape over the course of the project and in relation to fieldwork conducted in both Italy and Canada.

The opening chapter addresses the question of what the fantastic is and how it functions as a cultural mode rather than a fixed category. It analyses the conceptual and terminological frameworks through which the fantastic has been defined and debated, in both academic and commercial contexts, with particular attention to their socio-cultural implications. By tracing key debates and historical influences, the chapter highlights how the category remains open and contested. It also examines the socio-cultural consequences of these influences on the practices and perceptions of authors, publishers, and readers, emphasizing how the growing visibility of non-Western fantastic fiction challenges established boundaries. The chapter concludes by clarifying the working definitions

adopted in this research, providing a conceptual foundation for their use throughout the dissertation.

The second chapter focuses on the presentation of the ethnographic contexts in which the research was conducted and how they dialogue with one another. The first paragraph introduces the Fantasy and Science Fiction Museum of Turin, outlining its history, mission, administrative structure, and daily practices. It shows how the museum, through its collections, events, and networks, functions as a relational hub and a contact zone for its heritage community, while also tracing the first year and a half of my collaboration with the institution. The chapter then situates the museum in its territorial context presenting the neighborhood of Borgo Vittoria, through its history and socio-cultural landscape and exploring residents' perspectives, needs, and expectations. This is followed by a presentation of the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria* as a key local actor, framed as a community of practice in which MUFANT can find a strategic partner. Throughout these sections I reflect on my role in the field as researcher, participant, and collaborator, showing how my positionality influenced the relationships and observations I developed. Finally, the chapter introduces the fieldwork in Canada, with an account of the context where it was carried out and the way it connects to MUFANT through the research project.

Chapter three explores the intersections between anthropology and the fantastic, showing how the two fields can inform and enrich one another. It establishes a theoretical framework for the anthropology of the fantastic, drawing on insights collected through participation at MUFANT, conversations with scholars and experts, and fieldwork in Canada. The chapter presents the thesis that anthropology and the fantastic share epistemological, ontological, and thematic affinities, particularly in relation to alterity, storytelling, and the representation of otherness. Key concepts such as estrangement and familiarity, perspective-shifting, and imaginative recentering are examined as shared tools. The chapter also considers the role of culture in constructing fantastic worlds, with a focus on anthropological science fiction and the work of Ursula K. Le Guin. Overall, the chapter sets the theoretical groundwork that will inform the discussions presented in the following sections.

The fourth chapter explores the fantastic as a language and a tool for communication, across different forms of expression and media. It addresses how the fantastic can bridge the gap between specialized academic knowledge – particularly anthropology – and the general public, offering an alternative to technical or institutional

discourse, and making complex ideas more relatable and engaging. The chapter examines the features of the fantastic that make it especially suited for public engagement: its presence in popular culture, its diffusion through mass media, its role as a repository of shared symbols, and its capacity to foster empathy and emotional connection. By framing the fantastic as a form of intangible cultural heritage, the chapter highlights its potential to shape collective imaginaries and contribute to socio-cultural innovation. These insights set the theoretical foundation for the following case study on postcolonial fantastic fiction, framed as a tool for social reflection and mobilization, with power to foster and sustain significant change.

Chapter Five examines how fantastic fiction functions as a descriptive tool, metaphorically reflecting present realities and highlighting socio-cultural phenomena. It addresses the research questions related to representation, social critique, and resistance by analyzing how mass media portrayals of BIPOC and other marginalized groups shape social perceptions and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. The following sections frame the fantastic as a strategic asset for challenging dominant narratives, addressing collective traumas, and offering imaginative and engaging alternatives that inspire social action. By focusing on the experiences of postcolonial authors and creators, as well as on insights gathered during fieldwork in Canada, the chapter shows how these narratives foreground “otherwise” perspectives, fostering hope through imagination and encouraging socio-cultural change. The final section discusses how an anthropology of the fantastic can contribute to these processes of transformation by offering an alternative analytical perspective.

The final chapter presents the practice-based phase of the research, analyzing how theoretical and empirical insights from the previous chapters, as well as from Canadian fieldwork on community engagement, were applied in the context of MUFANT and Borgo Vittoria. The first part offers an account of the main strategies discussed with Canadian practitioners working across art, theatre, and museum education, which informed a set of guiding principles adapted to the local context. The following sections present three initiatives developed during the final year of the research in collaboration with MUFANT, the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria*, and local associations that are part of their communities of practice: *CarnevAlien*, a guided tour, and two role-playing game events. Each case is analyzed both as a concrete outcome and as a site for reflection on my role as a mediator and on community engagement strategies, considering their outcomes and potentialities,

while also highlighting the expressive capacity of the fantastic to translate anthropological concepts into practical action.

The thesis concludes with final considerations on the research trajectory, revisiting it in relation to the initial research questions, the answers it has provided, and the challenges encountered along the way. It then offers a summary of the recommendations on community engagement and reflects on their potential application at MUFANT. The chapter also presents concluding reflections on the role of the fantastic in processes of socio-cultural innovation and discusses possible future trajectories for this line of research. The final section adopts a more personal perspective, reflecting on my experience of the research process and on what it has contributed in terms of personal and professional growth.

Chapter 1. Defining the fantastic

This chapter introduces the key categories and definitions that will guide the analysis in this dissertation, along with the critical reflections that inform their use. Rather than offering a detailed technical or historical account of the fantastic and its subgenres – an approach that lies beyond the scope of this work – my goal is to reflect on the ideas and perspectives that have shaped how the fantastic is understood in both academic and commercial contexts, as well as by readers and audiences. The focus is not on establishing fixed definitions, but on exploring the conceptual frameworks and discourses commonly used to think about and discuss the fantastic.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of major scholarly attempts to define the fantastic, particularly within literary studies, and considers the terminological ambiguity that often surrounds this category. I then introduce a number of influential socio-cultural frameworks that have shaped the genre's development and reception. These frameworks reflect ongoing debates and contested legacies that continue to influence how the fantastic is interpreted and positioned today. The third section looks at how this ambiguity and cultural background affect the practical experiences of authors, publishers, and readers, and how these factors help shape how the fantastic and its subgenres are perceived and understood in popular contexts. In the following section, I reflect on the growing presence of non-Western fantastic fiction and its role in expanding the boundaries of the genre, introducing how these global perspectives fit into the previously discussed framework. The chapter concludes with a clarification of the most ambiguous terms used in this work, explaining how I interpret and apply them in the analysis that follows.

Overall, this discussion provides the groundwork for the dissertation's anthropological approach to the fantastic, offering the tools and context needed to engage with the subject in a critically informed way.

The insights presented in this chapter are drawn both from research conducted at MUFANT and in Canada, as well as from the suggestions and observations provided by my interlocutors in these contexts. They are further reinforced by discussions and information gathered during two conferences I attended: the *ACCSFF Academic*

*Conference on Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy*³ at York University, Toronto, in June 2024; and the *16th Annual Meeting of the Society for Fantasy Research*⁴ at Justus Liebig University in Giessen, Germany, in August 2025. On both occasions, I had the opportunity to engage with experts in the field and confirm my understanding and use of the terms presented in this chapter.

1.1. The definition(s) of the fantastic

When I first began exploring the more theoretical aspects of the fantastic, it quickly became clear that defining the concept is far from straightforward. Using the words of Irina Golovacheva: «The notion of “the fantastic” is one of the most controversial issues discussed in literary and interdisciplinary studies» (Golovacheva, 2018, p. 61). The main challenge lies in the highly volatile, hybrid, porous, and boundary-defying nature of the fantastic, which resists being confined to a single, clear-cut definition. Its fluidity allows it to intersect with multiple genres and narrative modes, complicating any attempt at strict categorization. A vast range of theories and critical perspectives offer valuable tools for interpreting and engaging with the fantastic from different angles. Yet, despite the abundance of scholarly debate and definitional efforts, no comprehensive or universally agreed-upon definition of the fantastic has emerged. Since the earliest cultural productions now associated with the notion appeared⁵, scholars have continuously grappled with the question of how to classify them. For centuries, theorists of the fantastic have attempted to identify its defining features, aiming to establish clear criteria for what constitutes a work of the fantastic and to formulate a satisfactory, all-encompassing description of the concept (Boulding et al., 2011; Sandner, 2016).

The richest and fruitful debates on the fantastic have primarily originated within the literary field, which not only gave birth to the concept as we understand it today but also served as the site of its earliest development (Boulding et al., 2011). However, interest in the fantastic has since expanded beyond literature, permeating a wide range of media and

³ <https://www.yorku.ca/accsff/>

⁴ <https://fantastikforschung.de/en/jahrestagung/jahrestagung-giessen-2025/>

⁵ The historical origin of the fantastic and its related genres is itself a matter of debate. For a detailed analysis see Boulding et al., 2011.

forms of expression. This expansion has extended the discussion to various disciplines, including philosophy, semiotics, and visual arts. Moreover, as Sarah Faber explains, «the notion of “text” [also] expanded, into a much broader, more inclusive field, venturing beyond literature and traditional texts to consider storytelling in all shapes and sizes, and narratology’s more recent definitions hold true for stories in a broad variety of narrative media» (Faber, 2018, p. 220). To maintain clarity and avoid redundancy, I will refer to terms and categories derived from literary studies throughout this work, while remaining fully aware that, unless otherwise specified, the same insights could apply equally to other manifestations of the fantastic. In the next section, I will introduce some key literary concepts that will serve as foundational tools throughout this dissertation.

Within a structuralist and primarily literary framework, the fantastic is often understood as a mode – that is, a «way of writing usually based on a genre». A genre, in this context, refers to «a type or kind of art defined by its form, content or function» (Weiss, 2021, pp. 1-2). The fantastical mode finds expression in a variety of forms – novel, short stories, poems, comics, and, to extend the discourse to other media, movies, tv shows, plays, video and board games (Faber, 2018); it can serve different functions – from provoking an emotional response in the audience to addressing specific issues, representing alternative perspectives and denouncing critical situation; but what distinguishes it from other literary modes is its content.

Firstly, fantastic works fall under the broader category of fiction, which includes all artistic and literary productions shaped by imagination and portraying characters, situations, and interactions that are not factual. While all fiction involves elements that are not real, some forms aim to closely imitate the primary world – featuring realistic characters, familiar settings, and narratives that reflect everyday life. These works are typically classified as mimetic fiction, as they strive to mirror the structures, behaviors, and appearances of real society. By contrast, non-mimetic fiction shows no interest in replicating the real world. Instead, it presents secondary worlds where the usual boundaries of experience are transcended, often introducing elements that defy natural laws, logical consistency, or everyday expectations⁶ (Weiss, 2021).

⁶ The typological distinction between mimetic and non-mimetic fiction provides a framework for understanding how narratives relate to reality. However, works of fiction often do not fit neatly into one category or the other. Instead, they tend to exist along a continuum, blending mimetic and non-mimetic elements in complex and dynamic ways. This fluidity challenges rigid classifications and reflects the diverse

This conception of the fantastic is grounded in the relationship between what have been referred to as the *primary* and *secondary worlds*. As Mark J. P. Wolf explains – drawing on J.R.R. Tolkien’s terminology – the primary world is commonly understood as «the material, intersubjective world in which we live» (Wolf, 2012, p. 23). Other expressions that refer to the same concept include *real world*, *empirical reality* (Boulding et al., 2011) and *actual world*, the latter described by Marie-Laure Ryan as «the center of our system of reality [...] the world where I am located» (Ryan, 1991, p. vii). In contrast, secondary worlds – hierarchically subordinated to the primary world, since the former «rely on the Primary World and exist within it» (Wolf, 2012, p. 23) – are defined as the «imaginary worlds created by authors» (Wolf, 2012, p. 23). These are the fictional settings where fantastic narratives unfold. Alternative terms for secondary worlds, also used in this dissertation, include but are not limited to: *subcreated worlds*, *diegetic worlds*, *constructed worlds*, *imaginary worlds* (Wolf, 2012, p. 13)⁷, as well as *fictional world*, *narrative world*, and *fantastic world* (Bertetti, 2024).

What distinguishes the fantastic from other forms of fiction is its incorporation of otherworldly, supernatural, or futuristic elements – features that are impossible within the framework of our reality (Caillois, 1965; Castex, 1962; Todorov, 1975; Vax, 1970; Weiss, 2021). These elements often deviate sharply from the primary world’s familiar notions of time, space, natural laws, or socio-cultural norms. In a broad sense, as Irina Golovacheva notes, building on Roger Caillois (1965), the fantastic encompasses «anything but the exact, i.e. realistic, representation of objects and living beings» (Golovacheva, 2018, p. 65). In fact, while fantastic works may incorporate mimetic aspects, they ultimately depict «a fictional world that contains at least one element considered impossible in our primary reality» (Faber, 2018 p. 214). Defining the fantastic by the presence of impossible elements is undoubtedly a general approach and comes with several challenges and limitations, which will be addressed later in this chapter. However, choosing to adopt an open and inclusive definition better aligns with the aims of my research, as it allows for a broader range of media and narratives to be examined. This, in turn, enables a more comprehensive exploration of the varied experiences and representations that shape the understanding of

strategies authors use to engage with both real-world and imagined dimensions (Golovacheva, 2018; Weiss, 2021).

⁷ Wolf notes that while these terms are occasionally used interchangeably, each highlights different facets of the same phenomenon. For a more detailed explanation of the distinctions, see Wolf (2012, p. 14).

the fantastic and its intersections with anthropology. Moreover, as Sarah Faber (2018) notes, this kind of “maximalist approach” reflects a growing trend within the field over recent decades.

In each of the different genres on which the mode is based, and according to their specific characteristics, these elements are rendered and interact with one another and with the surrounding environment in distinct ways. Some themes, subjects and narrative styles – referred to as conventions and tropes⁸ – are particularly recurring to the extent that their presence immediately signals to the audience the specific genre to which a work belongs (Weiss, 2021). Some emblematic examples are: magic, prophecies, the hero’s journey, ancient settings, fantastic kingdoms and creatures, for fantasy (Lissauer, 2015); encounters with alien cultures, interplanetary travels, technology, utopian and dystopian speculative scenarios, and futuristic extrapolation (Roberts, 2011) for science fiction; fear, shock and disgust, uncertainty and suspense, distressing settings, for horror (Aldana Reyes, 2016). Genres are relational units of meaning: they assume significance when compared to other, distinct ones, and are defined by what differences and similarities they share with them. As Weiss argues: «If all fiction were science fiction, the term “science fiction” would not exist; we would just call it “fiction”» (Weiss, 2021, p. 2). The affiliation of a work to a genre is determined by comparing it to other works and by assessing the degree of similarity between them. In this sense, genres «consist of a web of resemblances established by repetition across a large number of texts» (Rieder, 2008, pp. 18-19). The prevalence of relationality as a benchmark of categorization is particularly evident when a work gets classified within a genre based on its affinity to a specific, particularly influential text. One of the most frequently cited examples is *The Lord of the Rings*, by J.R.R. Tolkien (1954) considered, by scholars and readers alike as the most typical, paradigmatic instance of a modern fantasy novel (Jackson, 2003; Mendlesohn, 2013; Weiss, 2021). Most genres also encompass various subgenres, subcategories that include works where only some of the defining tropes and conventions of the genre are present or take on different yet related forms. For instance, alternate history, apocalyptic sci-fi, dystopia, hard sci-fi, space opera and weird fiction are all considered subgenres of science fiction (Boulding et al., 2011).

⁸ Allan Weiss states that, although the distinction between conventions and tropes has never been precisely outlined, the former may be intended as «a larger structural feature» while the former «is something more specific and concrete» (Weiss, 2021, p. 3).

Commenting on the literary use of this configuration, Irina Golovacheva observes that «the discussion of the generic nature of fantastic literature is vital because it provides a major instrument of investigation and assessment» (Golovacheva, 2018, p. 68). The division into genres and subgenres is indeed convenient, widely recognized and used. Nevertheless, not unlike the definition of the fantastic itself, the delineation of its genres raises issues that must be considered. These categories and their subgroups are not static, fixed or immutable: while some aspects – synchronic – tend to remain the same and to be identified as conventional, others – diachronic – change depending on socio-cultural developments, intellectual influences and innovations introduced by specific works and authors (Weiss, 2021). Moreover, genres and tropes frequently overlap and influence one another, creating hybrid forms and blurring the boundaries between established categories. As eloquently expressed by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, «when it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefended, and things slip back and forth across them with insouciance» (Atwood, 2011, Introduction, para. 14). The inherent flexibility of genre classifications prevents the rigid fossilization of the discourses surrounding them, allowing for ongoing adaptation and evolution in response to changing contexts and advances in the literary and artistic fields. This adaptability ensures that genres remain dynamic and relevant over time, reflecting shifts in cultural, social, and artistic trends. However, this very flexibility can also lead to confusion and inconsistency in terminology, since the boundaries between genres and their subcategories are permeable and open to interpretation, complicating their definitions' precision and clarity.

Indeed, the field of studies on the fantastic has long been marked by what Weiss (2021, p. 9) describes as a considerable «terminological confusion», particularly regarding the classification and definition of the mode and its many subcategories. This issue has been extensively debated, even leading some scholars to question whether a clear definition is necessary at all. Some argue that this effort may be superfluous – or even counterproductive – since reducing such a complex, evolving, and wide-ranging concept to a single, overarching definition risks imposing limitations that are viewed as unnecessary, or even undesirable (Percec, 2014, p. VIII). David Gaertner, Assistant Professor in the Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies at UBC shared his perspectives on this matter during our interview:

«I've seen a few scholars try to make delineations between genres and I don't see the point of that, to be perfectly honest» (D. Gaertner, interview, October 15, 2024).

Adopting rigid classifications of the fantastic can risk reinforcing problematic assumptions and longstanding imbalances that have influenced both the development and reception of the genre. These issues will be explored in more detail later in the chapter. Defining strict boundaries around what is considered “authentically” fantastic can create mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion privileging certain cultural narratives or aesthetic traditions while sidelining others. Such approaches not only narrow the interpretive possibilities of the fantastic but also obscure its dynamic, diverse, and constantly evolving nature.

Nevertheless, while it's important to acknowledge the inherent fluidity and limitations of any categorization – and despite the concerns mentioned above – defining the fantastic as clearly and precisely as possible remains essential. Doing so allows for coherent engagement with the subject and provides the necessary linguistic and conceptual tools for meaningful discussion and exchange (Golovacheva, 2018). Identifying the key characteristics of the fantastic, along with its stylistic conventions and recurring themes, gives writers and artists a framework to inform their creative processes. At the same time, scholars, critics, and audiences benefit from a structured reference point to evaluate, interpret, and discuss works within the genre (U. K. Le Guin, 1993; Parrinder, 1980). These definitions also shape audience expectations – what one anticipates from a fantasy novel or a science fiction exhibition, for example – which creators can use to their advantage. Moreover, clear genre boundaries are often favored in the commercial sector: publishers, bookstores, film studios, and game developers rely on genre classifications to market cultural products effectively and to position them within recognizable categories (Golovacheva, 2018; Haslam, 2015; Weiss, 2021). Overall, while a flexible and critical approach to definitions is necessary, their use is often both practical and indispensable for analysis, communication, and cultural production.

Given the importance of the tension between openness and structure in the study of the fantastic, a closer examination is warranted. Since these definitions are widely used, rather than simply rejecting, condemning, endlessly revising them, or delving into detailed literary technicalities – which falls beyond the scope of my research – I believe it is valuable to explore their history and underlying implications to apply them as critically and consciously as possible.

1.2. Cultural legacies of the fantastic mode

The categories of the fantastic carry with them significant political, cultural, and historical weight. Beyond their commonly understood, and often simplified, popular definitions, they come loaded with implicit meanings and assumptions that shape both their usage and their social implications. Despite the broad appeal and accessibility of terms like “science fiction” and “fantasy,” these genres are embedded in complex, and at times uncomfortable, legacies that merit closer examination if we aim to use them more consciously and critically, especially when discussing their role in shaping social imaginaries and cultural discourse.

One of the most pressing issues surrounding the fantastic is its historical entanglement with ethnocentrism, gender inequalities, and structural violence. From its early development, the field has been overwhelmingly shaped by white, Western, and predominantly male authors. As a result, the perspectives represented in fantastic narratives have often been narrow, reinforcing worldviews aligned with whiteness and masculinity. Despite important evolutions and growing diversification in recent years, the fantastic has, for much of its history, remained a space largely produced by and for straight, white men in positions of cultural and institutional power (Haslam, 2015; U. K. Le Guin, 1993). This imbalance is especially evident in the representation of women, who have historically occupied marginal roles in fantastic narratives – when included at all. Female characters are frequently relegated to the status of love interests or passive sidekicks, and in an unsettling number of cases, depicted as «squeaking dolls subject to instant rape by monsters» (Le Guin, 1993, p. 93; also see Haslam, 2015; Kac-Vergne, 2017). While there have been remarkable women writers and artists working within the fantastic (see Chapter 3), their presence has mostly been overshadowed by the male-dominated nature of the field – resulting in a long-standing predominance of gendered perspectives in both the creation and reception of fantastic works. While the gender gap in the field of fantastic fiction is blatantly evident, it should not be treated as an isolated issue. Rather, it must be understood within a broader, integrated framework that analyzes sexism alongside other forms of structural oppression, such as racism, classism, ethnocentrism, and systemic violence. Intersectionality, a key concept in critical gender and feminist theory, offers a lens through which these overlapping systems of domination can be examined collectively. Although

the term “intersectionality” had not yet been coined⁹, American author Ursula K. Le Guin articulated a similar perspective in her 1975 essay *American SF and The Other*. There, she questioned whether the subjugation of women in science fiction was merely the byproduct of male elitism or, rather, «a symptom of a whole which is authoritarian, power-worshipping and intensely parochial» (Le Guin, 1993, p. 93). She approached the issue through the broader concept of otherness and identified four types of alien figures marginalized in the genre: the *sexual Alien*, the *social Alien*, the *cultural Alien*, and the *racial Alien*. These categories do not operate independently but are deeply interconnected, reinforcing one another in narratives that often uphold dominant norms and hierarchies. For instance, just as women are frequently sidelined or reduced to passive roles, working-class characters in fantastic fiction have often been rendered invisible or portrayed as nameless, faceless masses. A clear example can be found in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (Coney, 1974), where the working class functions as a mechanical backdrop to the ambitions of an exploitative elite. These characters are not portrayed as individuals but as instruments of a rigid, classist system. In the case of racial and cultural Aliens, the depiction differs in tone but often leads to the same reductive outcome. Le Guin points out that these figures are «the Alien that everybody recognizes as alien» (Le Guin, 1993, p. 94). Unlike the social or sexual alien, they often appear in central roles, typically as invaders, threats, or adversaries – particularly in early pulp science fiction (Boulding et al., 2011; Slusser & Rabkin, 1987). In other instances, they are depicted as benign, naive, or reverent toward humans, echoing colonial tropes like the “noble savage”. Regardless of the narrative resolution, they consistently represent a threatening unknown – an entity that, by its very difference, is framed as incomprehensible and inherently other. Such portrayals are frequently tied to the theme of violence, which recurs throughout classic fantastic fiction. The fear of the unknown often escalates into hostility, and hostility into war. Le Guin herself repeatedly expressed discomfort with the genre's tendency to glorify militarism and conflict. Reflecting on her early disappointment with science fiction in the 1940s, she remarked that it seemed «all about hardware and soldiers» and «starship captains in black with lean rugged faces and a lot of fancy artillery» (Le Guin, 1993, p. 22). These were, in her view,

⁹ The term was introduced in 1989 by American advocate for civil rights and scholar of critical race theory Kimberlé Crenshaw in her essay *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (Crenshaw, 1989).

expressions of patriarchal dominance and valorized violence – elements she actively resisted in her own writing.

In sum, many traditional narratives within the fantastic have historically reinforced structures of exclusion, reflecting dominant ideologies tied to gender, race, class, and power. Misogyny, classism, and racism are not isolated flaws but interconnected symptoms of a broader attitude of reductionism and reification – an approach that strips individuals of self-determination and agency, reducing them to objects defined solely by their deviation from a normative standard. That norm, implicitly upheld across much of the genre’s history, has been male, powerful, and white. As a result, the fantastic carries the weight of a legacy shaped by ethnocentric and exclusionary principles – where imbalanced power dynamics are not only prevalent but often celebrated. These patterns are deeply tied to the socio-cultural and intellectual environment in which the genre took form. The very categories and subgenres used to define the fantastic are rooted in Western frameworks that prioritize hierarchical relationships, a positivist view of knowledge, and a reverence for domination and control. Acknowledging and unpacking these dynamics is essential to fostering a more inclusive, critical, and forward-looking understanding of the genre and its potential.

1.3. The impact of terminological confusion and controversial heritage

The terminological confusion surrounding the fantastic, along with its controversial heritage, historical development, and considerable political, cultural, and literary weight, may seem like a purely theoretical concern. However, this confusion has a tangible impact on the lived experiences of authors, publishers, and readers alike¹⁰. It shapes how works are categorized, marketed, and interpreted, ultimately influencing the broader perception and legitimacy of the fantastic as a literary mode. The ambiguity in terminology affects not only academic discourse but also the way these genres are understood and used in popular culture.

¹⁰ Chiara Saroglia’s insights into readers’ perceptions on the genres of the fantastic, drawn from her experience as a librarian in the public library system of Piedmont, were particularly valuable in shaping my understanding of the subject (C. Saroglia, personal communication, May 28, 2025).

While fantasy is generally recognized as a distinct literary category – largely due to the genre’s strong association with Tolkien’s works – science fiction¹¹ has been more susceptible to terminological ambiguity. As its name suggests, the genre was originally closely tied to scientific (or at least pseudoscientific) content rooted in Western positivistic science: its defining feature was that the fantastical elements and events within the narrative could be explained through scientific principles and technological advancement, either already established or plausibly foreseeable in the future. This clear distinction began to blur with the rise of pulp magazines¹², which increasingly published "science fiction" stories that lacked any real scientific foundation. As a result, the genre became associated with popular pulp content – commercially successful and appealing to a broad audience, but often regarded as lacking literary sophistication and thus excluded from serious critical consideration (Boulding et al., 2011).

Debates about the precise definitions, shaping characteristics, and appropriate use of the term “science fiction” have been extensively explored in academic and literary circles (Bainbridge, 1986; Boulding et al., 2011; Clute & Nicholls, 1995; Parrinder, 1980; Suvin, 1979). Nevertheless, this broader and more ambiguous conception of the genre became deeply ingrained in popular culture—shaped not only by the readership but also by the publishers who marketed and commercialized science fiction magazines and books. These publications often included stories that bore little or no connection to science; in many cases, they even featured outright fantasy narratives. Yet they continued to be labeled and sold as science fiction magazines. This contributed to a popular understanding of science fiction as an umbrella term encompassing much of mass-market fantastic fiction. On one hand, the label *science fiction* came to include virtually all non-realist narratives that were not explicitly categorized as fantasy. On the other hand, it retained a residual distinction: it

¹¹ Commonly referred to as sci-fi, sf or SF.

¹² Science fiction began to emerge as a recognizable literary category in the pulp magazines of the 1920s. *Amazing Stories*, launched in 1926 by Hugo Gernsback, was the first magazine devoted exclusively to science fiction and played a crucial role in defining the genre’s early identity. Pulp magazines were widely popular from their beginnings in the 1890s through the 1940s, reaching their peak during the 1920s and 1930s. Their decline began after World War II due to factors such as paper shortages, the rise of television and paperback books, and changing audience preferences (Boulding et al., 2011). Interestingly, the Fantasy and Science Fiction Museum of Turin houses a vast collection of American pulp magazines, including rare and collectible issues of *Amazing Stories*, *Weird Tales*, *Astounding Stories*, *Wonder Stories*, and many more. These items come from the personal archive of Riccardo Valla, one of Italy’s leading scholars and key editorial figures in the field of science fiction.

referred to fantastical stories not set in medieval-like worlds, but instead imagined futures, alien planets, advanced technologies, extraterrestrial beings, robots, spaceships, and monstrous otherworldly creatures (U. K. Le Guin, 1993; Weiss, 2021).

Several scholars and authors have examined how *science fiction* has been repeatedly redefined, simplified, and reified to serve commercial rather than conceptual purposes. In many cases, this process of commodification has led to the use of the label in ways that prioritize marketing appeal over fidelity to thematic or narrative content. In the introduction to *Other Worlds*, Margaret Atwood reflects on her own attempt to grasp what “science fiction” meant at the time, highlighting several issues surrounding the term’s definition and connotations. She notes that the label is often marked by a lack of clarity and a tendency to be used inconsistently, superficially, and opportunistically – guided less by the actual content of the works and more by the marketing strategies they serve:

«Is this term a corral with real fences that separate what is clearly “science fiction” from what is not, or is it merely a shelving aid, there to help workers in bookstores place the book in a semi-accurate or at least lucrative way? If you put skin-tight black or silver clothing on a book cover along with some jetlike flames and/or colourful planets, does that make the work “science fiction”? What about dragons and manticores, or backgrounds that contain volcanoes or atomic clouds, or plants with tentacles, or landscapes reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch? Does there have to be any actual science in such a book, or is the skin-tight clothing enough? These seemed to me to be open questions» (Atwood, 2011, Introduction, para. 4).

American sci-fi author Bruce Sterling also reflected on the implications of the terminological lassness that afflicts fantastic genres and denounces the tendency shared by writers and publishers to consider science fiction as a category, «a self-perpetuating commercial power-structure, which happens to be in possession of a traditional national territory: a portion of bookstore rack space» – more than a valuable genre, which is «a spectrum of work united by an inner identity, a coherent esthetic, a set of conceptual guidelines, an ideology if you will» (Sterling, 1989, para. 10-13). The reification of science fiction – its reduction to rigid genre boundaries and superficial marketing categories – has led to a significant flattening of the genre’s conceptual richness. This simplification has contributed not only to the misrepresentation of its narrative and thematic possibilities but also to the broader marginalization of non-realist literature. As a result, critics and cultural commentators have often adopted a stance of condescension or outright snobbery toward all forms of imaginative fiction, relegating them to the realm of “subliterature” regardless

of their actual literary merit. Ursula K. Le Guin has been one of the most incisive voices in challenging this attitude. In her pointedly titled essay *On Despising Genre*, she critiques the misuse of the term *genre*, describing it as «A) an unpronounceable French word; B) a very useful descriptive tool; and C) a pernicious instrument of Prejudice» (Le Guin, 2002, Ch. 9, *On Despising Genres*, para. 1). For Le Guin, the careless and preconceived use of genre labels has led to the ghettoization of the fantastic – a process that, far from being inoffensive, actively harms both the perception and the development of the genre. Not only is it deeply disrespectful to talented authors working within fantastic traditions, but it also creates a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the expectation of low quality justifies the production and circulation of subpar work. She laments that «SF and fantasy of real merit and real interest gets treated as junk by definition» (Le Guin, 1993, p. 295). Because serious critics often refused to engage with the fantastic, no robust critical framework emerged for distinguishing quality within the genre. This absence of critical legitimacy allowed low-quality material to circulate alongside more accomplished works, marketed and received with the same superficial categorization. Consequently, neither publishers nor many writers were incentivized to uphold higher standards, reinforcing the notion that science fiction and fantasy were inherently second-rate literary forms. Le Guin is particularly scathing in her critique of what she calls “gentrification-by-shelving,” a practice in which books are assigned to genre categories not on the basis of literary substance but according to marketing convenience. This process, driven largely by what she terms «intensely commercial» publishers and «appallingly ignorant» reviewers (Le Guin, 2002, Ch. 9, *On Despising Genres*, para. 12) entrenches the idea that popular literature is inherently inferior. For Le Guin, such reductive classification reveals more about the intellectual neglect of gatekeepers than about the actual literary value of the works in question.

The long-standing stigma attached to fantastic fiction – and science fiction in particular – has led many authors to distance themselves from the label altogether. In an effort to avoid association with what is often perceived as a marginalized or devalued genre, some have repeatedly asserted that their work does not fall within the bounds of science fiction but should be understood as something else entirely. Ursula K. Le Guin, while a strong defender of the value of the genre, acknowledged the impulse behind such distancing. She expressed understanding for authors who wished for their work to be taken seriously and not confined to what she described as a literary pigeonhole (Walsh & Le Guin, 1995, p. 198). The desire to escape genre-based condescension is, for many writers,

a matter of professional survival as much as integrity. However, even when authors simply attempted to navigate the terminological confusion or sought more precise definitions for their work, they often faced criticism from both within and outside the science fiction community. One of the most well-known examples is Canadian author Margaret Atwood, who drew controversy after stating that she did not consider her novels to be science fiction, preferring instead the term *speculative fiction* (see section 1.5.). This position led to accusations – from both readers and writers of her being, in her own words, «a silly nit or a snob or a genre traitor» (Atwood, 2011, Introduction, para. 3). Beyond the backlash it provoked, Atwood’s stance reflects a broader concern shared by many authors working within the realm of the fantastic, including Ursula Le Guin: the inadequacy of traditional genre labels to meaningfully describe or contain their work. Over time, categories such as *science fiction* and *fantasy* have become simultaneously too broad and too restrictive – too broad in the sense that they often serve as catch-all labels for any form of non-realist fiction, regardless of quality or intent; too restrictive in that they carry fixed expectations regarding themes, tropes, and plot structures that may not align with a given author’s creative aims. This tension has led many writers to seek alternative terms and conceptual frameworks, drawing from various theoretical traditions to better articulate the specific nature of their works. Atwood herself has emphasized this need for clarity. Referring to her widely discussed novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), she questioned its categorization as science fiction, stating:

«The Handmaid’s Tale [...] is set in the future. This conned some people into believing it is science fiction, which, to my mind, it is not. I define science fiction as fiction in which things happen that are not possible today—that depend, for instance, on advanced space travel, time travel, the discovery of green monsters on other planets or galaxies, or that contain various technologies we have not yet developed. But in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, nothing happens that the human race has not already done at some time in the past, or that it is not doing now, perhaps in other countries, or for which it has not yet developed the technology. We’ve done it, or we’re doing it, or we could start doing it tomorrow. Nothing inconceivable takes place, and the projected trends on which my future society is based are already in motion» (Atwood, 2005, p. 59)

Because of these distinctions, Atwood aligns her fiction more closely with speculative fiction, which she defines as focusing on «things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books» and «that descend from Jules Verne’s books» (Atwood, 2011, Introduction, para. 13). Her choice of the term

speculative fiction reflected her belief that her work was better described by a category focused on plausible futures grounded in reality, rather than the more technologically driven or fantastical elements often associated with science fiction. While she was accused of trying to distance herself from a stigmatized genre, Atwood clarified that her intention was not to reject science fiction, but to use terminology that more accurately captured the nature of her narratives (Atwood, 2011; Weiss, 2021).

Despite ongoing debates and numerous attempts to refine the terminology, no definitive solution has emerged regarding which definition or category best captures the complexity of these narratives. A wide range of alternative terms – such as *slipstream* (Sterling, 1989), *wonder tale* (Weiss, 2021), and others – continue to emerge and circulate, each attempting to offer a better framework. Yet none have proven entirely satisfying or comprehensive. These labels are often too broad, too narrow, too obscure, or too inconsistently applied to gain widespread acceptance. Still, they may serve a useful function in specific contexts, particularly when describing distinct narrative strategies or reader experiences. Despite the controversies, *science fiction* remains, especially in popular discourse, an umbrella term often used without nuance, explanation, or meaningful distinction. The confusion surrounding these definitions highlights a broader truth: that categorical systems frequently fall short in capturing the full complexity of human experience – particularly in areas shaped by imagination and creativity. The persistent questioning and re-evaluation of these terms reflect not just the instability of genre, but the broader challenge of trying to fit fluid, multifaceted phenomena into rigid conceptual boxes. This resistance reflects a perspective long embraced in anthropology, a field that has consistently questioned the validity and usefulness of imposed, static categories when attempting to understand dynamic cultural realities.

1.4. Beyond Euro-American fantastic fiction

Another important consequence of the historically Euro-American-centric development of the fantastic is that the categories commonly used to describe and define it are neither inclusive nor adequate to account for the diverse global experiences that fall outside the narrow parameters of Western literary production. Until recently, fantastic fiction produced predominantly by – Western often male – authors, with its culturally

specific themes, tropes, and narrative conventions, was taken to represent the entirety of *the* fantastic. Alternative experiences and traditions were not even acknowledged, let alone debated or defined on their own terms. This dynamic exemplifies what Venezuelan sociologist Edgardo Lander (2000) describes – building on the work of his Peruvian colleague Aníbal Quijano – as *coloniality of knowledge*: the enduring dominance of Eurocentric epistemological frameworks within the social sciences and beyond. Coloniality of knowledge describes the structure of knowledge production that was consolidated during European modernity, and which continues to subordinate or marginalize non-European ways of knowing. Through this mechanism, Western cultural and intellectual paradigms are naturalized as universal, while other epistemologies are rendered peripheral, irrational, or invisible. In Quijano's words:

«Por el carácter universal de la experiencia histórica europea, las formas del conocimiento desarrolladas para la comprensión de esa sociedad se convierten en las únicas formas válidas, objetivas, universales del conocimiento. Las categorías, conceptos y perspectivas [...] se convierten así no sólo en categorías universales para el análisis de cualquier realidad, sino igualmente en proposiciones normativas que definen el deber ser para todos los pueblos del planeta» (Lander, 2000, p. 10).

In fact, the term *fantastic* is often used as a generic label, yet it frequently refers – implicitly or explicitly – to a geographically and chronologically situated literary phenomenon. In this context, it is particularly interesting to consider the definition proposed by Canadian-born author and critic John Clute (2017), who introduces the term *Fantastika* to describe a specific branch of the fantastic rooted in the European tradition. According to Clute, this form of the fantastic emerged during the Romantic period (late 18th to mid-19th century), when subversive literary productions began to challenge the dominance of realism and introduced new perspectives in direct opposition to previously established norms. By coining the term *Fantastika*, Clute seeks to narrow the scope of what is often too broadly referred to as "the fantastic," and to reposition it as *a form of* the fantastic rather than *the* fantastic in its entirety. *Fantastika*, then, provides a set of temporal and geographic boundaries that are useful for avoiding generalizations and for resisting the inappropriate inclusion – or exclusion – of works that do not share the characteristics of this specifically European tradition but nonetheless belong to the broader field of the fantastic (Clute, 2017). Although *Fantastika* is not a widely adopted term in scholarly debates, it offers an important conceptual tool that allows us to recognize the culturally and

historically situated nature of dominant definitions (Golovacheva, 2018). In this dissertation, I use *the fantastic* as an inclusive and flexible category, consciously expanding it beyond the European literary tradition. However, I acknowledge the historical and colonial foundations of literary classification systems, which have long treated this Eurocentric form of the fantastic as universal. Recognizing the specific origins and limits of terms is essential in resisting the assumption that Western traditions represent the entirety of fantastic literature. While I do not adopt *Fantastika* as my working definition, I find its ethnolocated nature a valuable reminder of the need to question the presumed universality of Western literary categories.

In recent decades, authors and artists from non-Western backgrounds have increasingly gained visibility in the realm of fantastic fiction. This growing presence has been marked by the publication of numerous anthologies, collections and critical texts, the organization of exhibitions, the establishment of awards (Băla, 1993; Bell & Molina Gavilán, 2003; Dillon, 2012; Hopkinson & Uppinder, 2004; Imarisha, 2015; Justice, 2018; Lavender, 2019; Nicholson, 2016; Tidhar, 2015; Whitehead, 2020; Womack, 2013). Writers from diverse cultural contexts have contributed to the expansion of the genre, infusing it with distinct worldviews, local mythologies, and socio-political concerns. Many of these narratives explicitly address postcolonial visions (see section 1.5.), racial dynamics, colonial oppression, and resistance, offering alternative imaginaries grounded in non-Western epistemologies. This global and political expansion of the fantastic has fostered further debates about genre definitions and the limitations of traditional literary categories. While this ongoing process of re-evaluation remains unresolved, it has prompted critical self-reflection among scholars and critics alike.

A key issue that emerges from this discussion is the distinction between fantastic fiction and other narrative forms that incorporate supernatural or non-realistic elements. Not every story involving impossible or magical phenomena can be classified as fantasy or science fiction. If that were the case, myths, sacred texts, folktales, and cosmologies from various traditions would fall under the umbrella of fantastic fiction. However, because these stories are – or historically were – perceived by their originating communities as true or real (not necessarily in an empirical sense), they occupy a different conceptual space. This distinction becomes especially relevant when analyzing those forms storytelling, where elements rooted in local cosmologies and cultural knowledge systems are often incorporated into narrative frameworks that appear fantastical to outsiders. Determining

whether a story includes a “fantastic” element requires an understanding of the epistemological context in which the story was produced. In Western literary traditions, drawing this line has always been complicated. For instance, works like Dante’s *Divine Comedy* or Milton’s *Paradise Lost* feature angels, devils, and supernatural phenomena that today may seem fantastical, but were originally embedded in belief systems taken as real and meaningful by both authors and audiences. Their plausibility would not have been put into question, since they were perfectly explicable based on the intellectual traditions of their time. Allan Weiss (Weiss, 2021) addresses this issue, calling attention to the importance of separating cosmological narratives from works of the fantastic and critiquing the tendency of scholars to categorize stories from other cultures as “fantasy” merely because they contain supernatural beings. He argues that:

«If people actually believed in those gods and other such spiritual entities we have no right to call such work fantastic. Just because a text is about supernatural beings does not mean it is a work of fantasy like the novels of Tolkien, who, we can reasonably assume, did not believe there really was a Middle-Earth or that elves and wizards ever actually existed» (Weiss, 2021, p. 10).

Weiss cites the emblematic examples of Greek mythology and First Nations’ origin stories¹³ and points out that, especially when dealing with Indigenous or non-Western traditions, blurring the line between cosmology and the fantastic risks misrepresenting culturally embedded worldviews and reinforces colonial patterns of knowledge production that delegitimize non-positivistic belief systems. Nonetheless, while the two must be analytically distinguished, meaningful overlap does exist. Myths and traditional knowledge have frequently inspired the creation of modern fantastic works. This is particularly evident in Indigenous science fiction and fantasy. As Grace Dillon notes in the introduction to *Walking the Clouds*, «Indigenous sf is not so new—just overlooked» (Dillon, 2012, p. 2). In many cases, contemporary non-Western authors reinterpret and reframe traditional stories within new narrative formats, enriching them with imaginative and political dimensions¹⁴. Since most traditional narratives include elements that are fairly compatible

¹³ Weiss (2021, p. 10) reports the example of Canadian author John Robert Colombo who, in his anthology of Canadian fantastic fiction, grouped North American Indigenous myths and origin stories under the label of high fantasy, equating them with works like those of Tolkien that, although secularly worshipped by many, do not bear any spiritual or religious significance (Colombo, 1979; Weiss, 2021).

¹⁴ See for example: Cherie Dimaline (2020); Nalo Hopkinson(2012); Lee Maracle (2014); Nnedi Okorafor (2014); Eden Robinson (2017).

with fantastic fiction, the shift from one context to the other is often appropriate. As contemporary Indigenous storyteller, playwright and novelist Drew Hayden Taylor, from the Curve Lake First Nation in Central Ontario explained to me during our interview:

«There were always elements of what is now called science fiction as opposed to the fantastic in a lot of our traditional story telling. We've got many wonderful, scary and amazing evil spirits and monsters in our mythology, our cosmology, that exist within the stories of many different people across the country. You have stories of a big flood, you have stories of Sky woman coming through a hole in the sky, landing on the back of geese, then landing on a turtle and terraforming the turtle into Earth. So that's interdimensional traveling, that's terraforming, there are already so many different elements of sci-fi and fantasy that exist within our storytelling. [...] a lot of that stuff was already there, I'm not recreating it, I'm just sort of adding a contemporary twist to those stories that already existed. [...] I thought I'd like to explore those and share those with the world» (D. H. Taylor, interview, August 26, 2024).

In many non-Western cultures, origin stories and oral narratives carry immense spiritual and cultural weight, comparable to sacred texts in other religious traditions. These stories may not conform to empirical models of plausibility, yet they are perceived as deeply real within their communities – often understood as symbolic, spiritual, or cosmological truths rather than fictional inventions. Because these narratives are rooted in culturally specific systems of meaning, the central tension between realism and impossibility that characterizes fantastic fiction is not present. As such, labeling them as “fantasy” or “science fiction” imposes an external framework that can obscure their original intent and epistemological status. Doing so is not only analytically imprecise but also risks reproducing the ethnocentric logic that has long privileged Western modes of thought over others.

Again, as with other cases discussed so far, there is no clear consensus among scholars and authors of non-Western fantastic fiction regarding terminology. Various terms have been proposed and circulated, including *Postcolonial science fiction* (Hopkinson & Uppinder, 2004) *World SF* (Tidhar, 2015), *Global Speculative Fiction* or *International Speculative Fiction* (Oziewicz, 2017). In practice, individuals tend to choose the term to describe their work depending on their context or objectives – sometimes deliberately, sometimes more intuitively. Some authors show little concern for strict labels. As Jamaican-born Canadian speculative fiction author and scholar Nalo Hopkinson, whom I had the pleasure of meeting and interviewing at UBC, explains:

«I don't have terms that I insist that people use. I'll say science fiction and fantasy, I'll sometimes say speculative fiction, but I often have to qualify that by explaining what I mean or what I think other people mean. Literature of the fantastic comes close enough. I'm aware that I write with a particular, highly politicized sensibility around identity and access, but it's all going to be some form of spec fic» (N. Hopkinson, interview, August 9, 2024).

On the other hand, some scholars and writers place greater emphasis on the terminology they use, treating these definitions not just as labels, but as integral components of how non-Western works are framed, interpreted, and understood. For them, naming is a critical part of the broader discourse that reflects cultural, political, and epistemological positions.

In the introduction to *Diverse Futures* (2021), Joy Sanchez-Taylor reflects on her deliberate choice not to use the broader term *speculative fiction* despite its increasing adoption in academic discourse as a «super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating “consensus reality” of everyday experience» (Oziewicz, 2017). As Sanchez-Taylor notes, although the label has gained traction in scholarly circles, it has not been widely embraced by general readers or the publishing industry, which still favor the more familiar and marketable category of *science fiction* (Sanchez-Taylor, 2021). *Speculative fiction* itself is far from a neutral or universally understood term. Over time, it has come to serve as an umbrella label for a wide range of genres, including science fiction, fantasy, horror, alternate history, weird fiction, and dystopian/utopian narratives. However, its broad scope also poses challenges: it is often too vague, too general, and disconnected from the genre communities – particularly sci-fi and fantasy fandoms – that publishers target. As Sanchez-Taylor points out, this disconnection can result in the works of authors and artists of color¹⁵ being overlooked or miscategorized, excluded from genre recognition, and thus left out of critical conversations surrounding the fantastic. Given the long history of marginalization these creators have faced, selecting the most appropriate term to frame their work becomes a necessary act of visibility and acknowledgment. Sanchez-Taylor therefore opts to reclaim the label *science fiction* for the texts she examines, asserting that this terminology better supports the inclusion of authors of color within established genre discourse:

¹⁵ The term used here follows the terminology employed by the author herself.

«It is my hope that discussing the authors in these works as science fiction authors, rather than speculative authors, will help readers interested in science fiction discover texts and authors that do not always make it to the science fiction sections of bookstores and book-reviewing websites» (Sanchez-Taylor, 2021, p. 5).

This choice also invites a broader reflection on the meaning of “science” in *science fiction*. As previously discussed, the term has historically been tied to an exclusively Western positivist conception of science – grounded in empirical observation, logic, and measurable evidence, and often dismissive of metaphysical, intuitive, or culturally specific epistemologies. When speaking of non-Western science fiction, as Sanchez-Taylor does, it becomes necessary to question the assumed universality of this definition. American scholar Grace Dillon, whose work Sanchez-Taylor draws on, asks «whether Indigenous peoples can lay claim to the term science (and, indeed, whether they should want or need to)» (Dillon, 2012, p. 7). If science is understood as restricted to Eurocentric, Enlightenment-based methodologies, then further clarification and expansion of the term are required. As Sanchez-Taylor argues, we must work toward:

«Expanding the boundaries of what constitutes science fiction by challenging the Euro western privileging of the Western scientific method and rational thought over non-Euro western forms of science and logic [and] employ a broad definition of science fiction that allows for the scientific views of non-Euro western cultures» (Sanchez-Taylor, 2021, p. 3).

In this effort, Grace Dillon’s concept of *Indigenous scientific literacies* is particularly useful. She defines these as «practices used by Indigenous peoples over thousands of years» (Dillon, 2012, p. 7) and sees them as systems of knowledge that are equal juxtaposition to the Western scientific tradition. Furthermore, Dillon emphasizes that «Indigenous science is not just complementary to a perceived western enlightenment but is indeed integral to a refined twenty-first-century sensibility» (Dillon, 2012, p. 3). This reconceptualization is crucial to move beyond «the binary of primitive versus advanced cultures» (Sanchez-Taylor, 2021, p. 3) and to affirm the equal value of diverse epistemologies in shaping what science – and by consequence science fiction – can be.

The strict, ethnocentric contextualization of the categories of the fantastic mode, has significant practical implications, particularly in the realm of publishing and market visibility:

«The stereotype that science fiction is a “white” genre leads people of color either to refuse to engage with the genre or, like me, to see themselves as oddities or outsiders. Science fiction stereotypes also lead to science fiction authors of color facing difficulties getting their works published or promoted» (Sanchez-Taylor, 2021, p. 2).

Being so deeply rooted in specific Western epistemologies, the most commonly used definitions often fail to accommodate the forms and expressions of fantastic fiction created by Black, Indigenous, and other authors of color. As a result, works that do not conform to the dominant tropes, structures, or stylistic expectations are frequently marginalized or excluded from the broader discourse on the fantastic. This exclusion is particularly visible in the publishing industry, where marketing decisions are heavily influenced by rigid genre classifications. Books that challenge or defy these established categories are often considered “unmarketable” or difficult to place, leading to reduced visibility, fewer publishing opportunities, and limited shelf space. Cherokee author and scholar at UBC Daniel Heath Justice shared his experience with this issue during our interview:

«I'd finished the book¹⁶ and I started trying to get agents and no agent wanted it. And it wasn't that they thought it was bad, what I kept hearing was: “We don't know how we would market this. We don't know how we would sell this”. And it became increasingly clear to me that I was not going to find a mainstream publisher for this» (D. H. Justice, interview, August 27, 2024).

One of science fiction's most lauded authors, Samuel R. Delany¹⁷, addresses these same challenges in his essay *Racism and Science Fiction* (2018), where he draws on his experience as a Black writer to analyze systemic prejudice within the field. Delany recounts the stark rejection he received when submitting his novel *Nova* (1968) to *Analog* magazine. The editor, John W. Campbell, dismissed the submission on the grounds that «he didn't feel his readership would be able to relate to a black main character» (Delany, 2018, para. 8). In Delany's words, apparently Campbell feared that the protagonist, being the son of a

¹⁶ Justice, D. H. (2011). *The Way of Thorn and Thunder: The Kynship Chronicles*. University of New Mexico Press.

¹⁷ In his endorsement to Delany's book *The Atheist in the Attic* (2018b) Umberto Eco praises the author stating: «I consider Delany not only one of the most important science-fiction writers of the present generation, but a fascinating writer in general who has invented a new style» (Umberto Eco as cited in Delany, 2018b).

Senegalese mother and a Norwegian father, would have upset «the poor benighted readers, out there in America’s heartland, who, in 1967» (Delany, 2018, para. 8).

Both Delany’s and Justice’s experiences underscore the practical consequences of exclusionary genre definitions – not just ideologically, but in terms of representation, readership, and access to publishing platforms. The publishing system favors predictability over innovation, reinforcing narrow, racialized boundaries around the fantastic and marginalizing stories that emerge from diverse epistemologies and narrative traditions. This marginalization contributes to sustaining racist power dynamics (Haslam, 2015).

Delany also critiques the tendency to oversimplify and generalize works by authors of color, limiting their recognition by placing them under reductive categories. Reflecting on how Octavia Butler’s acclaim after her 1995 MacArthur “genius” grant was often framed within «this in-many-ways-artificial interest in African-American science fiction» (Delany, 2018, para. 34), and additionally as part of the specific category of women science fiction writers, Delany points out that this characterization is both racially and sexually reductive: it positions her work in a constrained segment of the genre, detached from its broader literary and thematic richness (Delany, 2018a).

The effects of these kinds of labels were discussed by Joy Sanchez-Taylor (2021) as well. Terms like Afrofuturism, Indigenous Futurism, and Asian Futurism can definitely be useful, especially when authors choose them to highlight their own cultural background and perspectives. But she also points out a downside: when these labels are used to create entirely separate categories, they can limit conversations, hide the common themes and storytelling techniques that connect works across different cultures and exclude non-Western experiences from the discourses and debates on the fantastic. Framing these stories as something outside or “other than” the science fiction – meaning western sci-fi, or *Fantastika* (Clute, 2017) – only reinforces the latter ethnocentric tendencies (Sanchez-Taylor, 2021). This way, the fantastic remains constrained by its own limiting definition and the characteristics traditionally attributed to it: anything that differs from Euro-American experiences of the mode is seen as outside the category – except, perhaps, as an exception.

For my research, I chose to focus primarily – though not exclusively – on literary and artistic productions within non-Western and postcolonial fantastic fiction (see section 1.5.). This choice reflects not only a personal interest informed, among other things, by my previous research experiences with Indigenous art, but also a broader intent to include these

perspectives in a general discourse on the fantastic and its intersections with anthropology. While I do not aim to analyze these traditions in isolation, nor to limit the scope to a specific cultural background, I believe that fiction emerging from postcolonial contexts offers valuable contributions to ongoing discussions about the fantastic. These works bring innovative, inclusive, and culturally grounded perspectives that expand our understanding of narrative traditions and worldviews. Accordingly, most of the informants in my research self-identify as belonging to cultural backgrounds other than white Euro-American ones. Rather than categorizing their experiences in restrictive terms, my aim is to highlight fantastic narratives that align with the objectives of this study – based on their thematic and aesthetic relevance, not on the origin of their creators. At the same time, I remain attentive to the culturally specific elements these authors choose to emphasize in their work and the ethno-historical frameworks they refer to when describing their creative processes and inspirations. At the same time, I remain attentive to the culturally specific elements these authors choose to emphasize in their work and the ethno-historical frameworks they refer to when describing their creative processes and inspirations. When discussing postcolonial fantastic fiction, it is always important to clarify that the intent is not to homogenize a wide range of diverse experiences, but rather to address their specificities and recognize the fundamental role of non-Western individuals in the field.

1.5. Working definitions

In a context where categories and definitions are anything but clear-cut, choosing one term over another is not merely a matter of literary precision or clarity. It also carries significant social and political weight. Issues of inclusivity, representation, and critical reflection on dominant narratives are inevitably involved, as the use of certain definitions influences which works are included in academic and literary discussions, and which are excluded. That said, definitions remain essential tools for analysis, even if they are never entirely neutral or uncontested. With this awareness, I approach the terminology used throughout this dissertation critically, without assuming that any of the labels commonly employed – whether in scholarship or publishing – are universally valid or complete. I do not aim to resolve the terminological confusion that scholars such as Allan Weiss have highlighted. Rather, I take that ambiguity as part of the broader context within which

fantastic fiction – especially that which emerges within postcolonial traditions – is produced, discussed, and often miscategorized.

To conclude this chapter, I clarify several key and ambiguous terms, outlining the meanings I attribute to them and how they will inform the analysis in the chapters that follow.

The fantastic

Given the complexity of the current discourse and my intention to adopt a flexible, inclusive framework, I have chosen to use the term the fantastic as a general, overarching category describing all products of human imagination that explore, represent, or evoke realities diverging from what is empirically possible, by introducing elements that are imaginary, anachronistic, or otherwise beyond the limits of known reality. It engages with the “otherwise” and the “what-ifs,” conjuring alternative worlds, fantastical beings, and phenomena that challenge our understanding of what is real or possible. This category encompasses a broad range of genres – including fantasy, science fiction, and horror – and finds expression across an ever-expanding variety of forms and media, from literature to visual and performing arts, video and board games, and music. While I remain critically aware of the cultural and political implications that each label may carry, I believe that *the fantastic*, as defined here, offers a sufficiently broad and inclusive starting point for the purposes of this dissertation.

Fantastic fiction

I will use this generic definition when referring to works of fiction related to the fantastic as a concept. Specific genres will be mentioned when relevant, or when particular authors express a clear preference, but my overall discussion remains broad in scope. Furthermore, I asked my interviewees how they prefer their work to be described and paid close attention to how they used terms like “science fiction,” “speculative fiction,” or “fantasy” in our conversations. When a clear preference was expressed, I followed their terminology in order to respect their way of framing their work.

Speculative fiction

The notion of speculative fiction as used in this dissertation aligns with Margaret Atwood’s conception, which, in turn draws on theoretical frameworks that have circulated

since the 19th century and have been revisited by various scholars and authors over time. Among these is American writer Robert A. Heinlein, who, in a 1947 essay, offered an influential distinction between conventional science fiction and what he termed the “speculative story.” He writes:

«There is another type of honest-to-goodness science fiction story that is not usually regarded as science fiction: the story of people dealing with contemporary science or technology. We do not ordinarily mean this sort of story when we say "science fiction"; what we do mean is the speculative story, the story embodying the notion "just suppose" or "What would happen if." In the speculative science fiction story accepted science and established fiefs are extrapolated to produce a new situation, a new framework for human action. As a result of this new situation, new human problems are created and our store is about how human beings cope with those new problems» (Heinlein, 1947, pp.14-15).

With its emphasis on social experience and human response to imagined – but plausible, not impossible – realities, speculative fiction offers a conceptual alternative to traditional genre categories. It provides a space for narratives that do not fully conform to the conventions of either classic science fiction or fantasy, allowing for greater thematic and formal flexibility beyond established genre expectations. For these reasons, speculative fiction is often favored by contemporary authors whose eclectic styles and thematic concerns do not align neatly with the conventions of more established fantastic genres.

Postcolonial identities (BIPOC, people of color, Indigenous people)

The understanding of postcolonial identities and contexts adopted in this work draws from Uppinder Mehan’s (2004) argument that:

«Perhaps the strictest definition of a postcolonial person is one who is a member of a nation that has recently achieved independence from its colonizers, but by shifting from the adjective “postcolonial” to the noun “postcoloniality” a more inclusive and I think truer definition comes into play. Postcoloniality includes those of us who are the survivors – or descendants of survivors – of sustained, racial colonial processes; the members of cultures of resistance to colonial oppression; the members of minority cultures which are essentially colonized nations within a larger nation; and those of us who identify ourselves as having Aboriginal, African, South Asian, Asian ancestry, wherever we make our homes» (Uppinder, 2004, para. 2).

Following this broader and more nuanced understanding of postcoloniality, in this work I avoid using homogenizing labels. Instead, I use specific identity markers when they are relevant and respect the preferences expressed by the people mentioned in the text.

Non-Western/Postcolonial fantastic fiction

Fantastic fiction produces by people with non-western cultural backgrounds and that reflects postcolonial visions, namely: «both a questioning of colonial/imperialist practices and conceptions of the native or the colonized, and an attempt to represent the complexities of identity that terms such as “native” and “colonized” tend to simplify» (Uppinder, 2004, para. 4). More specific terms such as *Afrofuturism*, *Indigenous Futurism*, *Latinx Futurism*, and *Asian Futurism* will be employed not to isolate these particular experiences from the broader discourse on the fantastic, but to emphasize their unique contributions and specificities within the larger framework.

Chapter 2. The ethnographic contexts

This chapter aims to present the ethnographic contexts in which I conducted my fieldwork.

The PhD program in *Intangible Heritage in Socio-Cultural Innovation*, funded by the *Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan* (PNRR), required a minimum of nine months of research at an Italian host institution, to be combined with a six-month period abroad at a foreign institution. Accordingly, the entire project was structured around this dual fieldwork. The Italian portion of the research was conducted at the Fantasy and Science Fiction Museum of Turin (MUFANT), while the international component was developed in collaboration with the University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver, Canada. The two research contexts were brought into relation both in accordance with the requirements of the PhD program, exploring potential lines of influence between them, and as a strategic choice to deepen the understanding of the research objects and aims.

The overarching aim of both fieldworks was to explore how an academic – primarily anthropological – approach, enriched by an interdisciplinary perspective, can be effectively integrated into the management, valorization, and public engagement of the cultural heritage of the fantastic. The theoretical insights were then translated into practical applications within the museum context of MUFANT, especially with regard to its relationship with the surrounding neighborhood of Borgo Vittoria. Through an anthropological lens, the project sought to provide the museum with a critical analysis of the cultural heritage it represents. The ultimate goal was to support the incorporation of this perspective into future projects and into the development of the museum's community engagement efforts.

The dual fieldwork unfolded along two main, interconnected lines of inquiry, each explored within both the Italian and Canadian research contexts. First, the analysis of the fantastic as a concept and as a practice, emphasizing its layered social and cultural meanings, in line with the thesis that significant intersections exist between anthropology and the fantastic. This part of the research was conducted in parallel at MUFANT and in Canada. It originated at the museum and initially developed through a predominantly theoretical approach, guided in part by the insights and suggestions of MUFANT's collaborators. Over time, this theoretical dimension became transversal, accompanying the entire three-year research process. Compared to the subsequent, more application-oriented

phase, this stage was less explicitly ethnographic, except in its modes of data collection. These combined literature-based research with qualitative field materials gathered in both Canada and at MUFANT. This included conversations, participant observation, exchanges of ideas, and ethnographic interviews with professionals, scholars, authors, and artists working on the fantastic, encountered throughout the course of the research. While it was agreed upon with the museum and structured so that the information and relationships developed throughout the research may prove valuable for the museum's future projects, this part was not intended to focus on either of the two field sites in particular, nor to have a direct practical impact on them, at least at this stage. Rather, it constituted a necessary conceptual analysis underpinning both the ethnographic research and the practice-based components in Italy and abroad. The result was a theoretical framework that, although not primarily site-specific, nonetheless both informed and was reciprocally shaped by the two field sites. Indeed, the wide range of relational opportunities, exchanges, and connections offered by both the heritage community of MUFANT and the academic community of the University of British Columbia has been fundamental.

The second research trajectory was in the field of museology and museum practices, an area I was already familiar with and had explored in the past. Within this disciplinary framework, I developed the more practice-based component of the research, which focused on participatory museum practices, community engagement and on the relationship between the museum and its territorial context, taking the Canadian experience as a reference model. The decision to pursue these objectives was made in agreement with the museum and based on the dynamics observed during the first months of fieldwork, as well as on the needs that emerged. My initial presence at MUFANT was oriented toward understanding the museum's functioning and organizational logic, in order to identify how my perspective could contribute to its activities – not as an imposition of an external viewpoint, but as an integration into the museum's existing strategies and practices. Fieldwork was therefore essential in determining the areas in which I could most effectively provide my contribution. Once this focus had been established, and in line with the course objectives, which emphasized the importance of shifting attention toward the territorial context in which the museum operates and its relationship with the socio-cultural fabric of Borgo Vittoria, the second phase of the Italian fieldwork consisted in gaining a deeper understanding of the neighborhood itself.

This second inquiry pathway was more site-centered: directly in Italy, where I actively engaged in the local dynamics between MUFANT and the neighbourhood; in a parallel way in Canada where I continuously kept in mind the specificities and needs of the context of Turin, in order to identify comparable institutions and relevant experiences that could serve as models or useful references. This part of the research therefore required both an in-depth engagement with the two field sites and a constant back-and-forth between them. It was first necessary to develop a solid understanding of each context in its own complexity, and only subsequently to identify possible points of connection. Working in the Italian context required a gradual and situated learning process, aimed at understanding its multiple layers in order to define the most appropriate areas of intervention. The Canadian field site, by contrast, functioned as a more targeted exploratory space, where I searched for practices and experiences that could offer insights into how participatory approaches might be developed at MUFANT. At the same time, this comparative perspective was essential to avoid the risk of uncritically transferring strategies that were effective in Canada but not necessarily compatible with the Italian context. In this sense, the work in Vancouver was less about exhaustive analysis and more about selective observation and targeted learning.

The process involved attention to experiences that, while sometimes too distant from the MUFANT context to be directly applicable, still proved valuable as analytical references for understanding participatory museum practices. If the anthropological inquiry into the fantastic was transversal to both fieldworks and overarching, with regard to museum practices and participatory approaches, the direction of knowledge transfer was conceived as a “Canada to MUFANT” flow, as the aim was to introduce new perspectives into the Italian museum context. Although this exchange was primarily unidirectional, the fact that there exists an institution in Italy specifically dedicated to the fantastic proved to be of particular interest to my Canadian interlocutors, who found this focus both stimulating and relevant. In this sense, there is potential for a more reciprocal exchange of expertise, with MUFANT offering its own knowledge and specialization on the themes of the fantastic in future collaborations. However, this was not part of the present phase of the research, as it would have been premature at this stage. Before moving on to consider possible further developments, it was essential for me to establish a solid theoretical framework at the intersection of anthropology and the fantastic, and to test the feasibility of applying these concepts within MUFANT’s community engagement strategies.

This chapter presents an account of the first year and a half of the research, during which I became familiar with the context of MUFANT and the Borgo Vittoria neighbourhood. It also details how the Canadian fieldwork was collaboratively defined and agreed upon, and how its research design and implementation were directly shaped by these initial findings and preparatory work. The data, observations, and insights collected in this initial phase and outlined here informed the subsequent stages of literature review and ethnographic research, providing the conceptual and empirical premises that underpinned the second fieldwork experience in Canada and the practice-based portion of the research project. The chapter also includes reflections on my research experience, the methodologies and ethnographic strategies I adopted, and the use of interviews, personal observations, and field notes as primary research tools, examined in dialogue with relevant theoretical literature in museology, heritage studies, and community studies.

The first paragraph provides an introduction to MUFANT, outlining its history and cultural mission, as well as its collections and activities. Particular attention is devoted to those initiatives that I was able to observe directly and in which I actively participated during my fieldwork. I then provide an account of my findings concerning the internal functioning of the museum, addressing both its administrative structure and the practical aspects involved in its daily management, as well as offering an account of the first year and a half of my collaboration with the institution.

Following this, I focus on what I argue to be one of the most significant features of MUFANT: its network of personal and institutional relationships. I examine how these connections – developed through collaborations and personal relationships with individuals, cultural organizations, and academic institutions – constitute the museum's most valuable asset and contribute to positioning MUFANT as a research hub for the discussion of themes related to the fantastic. In this section, I also present an example of an event I organized for World Anthropology Day 2024, conceived and developed on the basis of these collaborative premises.

The subsequent part of the chapter situates MUFANT's activities and relational practices within the framework of the concept of heritage community as defined by the 2005 Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Council of Europe, 2005). This is followed by a reflection on the cultural heritage of the fantastic and on the initiatives specifically designed at MUFANT around it, highlighting its distinctive characteristics in comparison with other types of cultural heritage. In relation to the role MUFANT plays

within this specific heritage context and within the territory in which it is located, I frame the museum as a contact zone, drawing on James Clifford's theorization (Clifford, 1997).

The second section of the chapter shifts the focus to the territorial context in which MUFANT operates, namely the neighborhood of Borgo Vittoria. After briefly introducing some geographical information, I provide historical background on the area, tracing its development from its early formation through its past as an industrial neighborhood. I then present the main findings emerging from interviews and informal conversations conducted with residents, focusing on their perceptions of the neighborhood, its strengths and critical issues, and the aspects they believe require intervention.

One of the most prominent themes to emerge from these accounts is the perceived lack of cultural activities and opportunities for building a shared sense of community. Given that this is an area in which MUFANT could potentially have a significant impact, I further explore the rich history of associational life in Borgo Vittoria. While this tradition has slowed compared to the past, I found that its legacy of direct citizen participation has been taken up by a group of residents who are now part of the Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria.

The third paragraph is devoted to the presentation of the Tavolo and to the portion of my fieldwork conducted within this organization. After reconstructing its origins, I analyze its aims and role within the neighborhood, focusing on its efforts to produce a positive impact on the territory through the proposal, organization, and coordination of initiatives of various kinds. I frame the Tavolo as a community of practice (Wenger, 1999), comparing its characteristics with those identified by educational theorist and Étienne Wenger, and examining how the Tavolo functions and operates in light of this conceptual framework. I then analyze the relationships the Tavolo maintains with local institutions and political actors, with neighborhood residents, and with MUFANT. I argue that the relationship between the Tavolo and MUFANT can be understood as a form of peripheral participation (Wenger, 1999).

In the final portion, after examining the reasons underlying this interpretation, I discuss the potential for collaboration that I identified during the Italian fieldwork and outline the resulting research project developed in agreement with MUFANT. My role and positionality as researcher, mediator, and broker within these collaborative projects, as well as the contributions that an anthropology of the fantastic can offer in this context, are analyzed before concluding the chapter with a discussion of how the Canadian fieldwork,

conducted in collaboration with the University of British Columbia, was conceived and structured.

2.1. The Fantasy and Science Fiction Museum of Turin

I first visited MUFANT in November 2022, on the occasion of the inauguration of the exhibition *Prossime Città*¹⁸. Although I had heard of it before, I never found the occasion to visit and kept putting it off until then. I had never been to that part of the city either, despite having lived in Turin for more than eight years. Indeed, the area where MUFANT is located is not a thoroughfare: it is not somewhere you end up by chance – you have to intentionally go there. The entrance to the museum is quite hidden, and the building itself, a former school, does not immediately suggest that it houses a museum. Nevertheless, the corten steel statues depicting Sailor Moon, Wonder Woman, Frankenstein's monster, and others, that welcome visitors in the square in front of the museum, quickly dispel any doubts about being in the right place. After all, where else could one encounter such figures if not outside the Fantasy and Science Fiction Museum of Turin?

The unique character of the Fantasy and Science Fiction Museum of Turin (MUFANT) is mirrored in its equally unconventional history. As in every good story, it all began with a group of friends united by a shared passion for the fantastic. Coming from diverse educational backgrounds, they sought to explore and discuss fantastical themes through multiple disciplinary lenses – including art, literature, education, and psychology. Silvia Casolari and Davide Monopoli – who would later become the co-founders of MUFANT – were part of this collective and, in 2003, created the cultural association *Immagina* to give structure and continuity to its projects. As Davide pointed out during our interview:

«Come dice il nome generico l'intenzione era semplicemente quella di interessarsi al concetto dell'immaginario e lavorarci da più punti di vista, in relazione a chi faceva parte dell'associazione. Ci occupiamo di letteratura, di psicologia, di arte e tra le varie anime certamente c'era quella del fantastico, inteso come fetta dell'immaginario che spesso è identificato, in termini di concetto, con l'immaginario stesso. In realtà l'associazione nasce senza nessun obiettivo pratico particolare, ma

¹⁸ Translation: Next Cities.

appunto per incontrarsi e lavorare attorno a questi temi¹⁹» (D. Monopoli, personal communication, April 1, 2023).

After about a year, they submitted a proposal to *Caleidoscopio*, a public call promoted by the City of Turin aimed at supporting cultural initiatives in the city's suburban districts through the *ITER*²⁰ centers – public spaces owned and managed by the municipality, each dedicated to a different cultural sphere such as art, media and communication, games, and interculturality. The proposal was well received, and the association began working on numerous exhibitions not only on themes related to the fantastic but also on a wide range of other subjects, including design, synesthesia, and even chocolate. In those same years, the association also developed another project: the *DocumentArt* laboratory, which over the years involved nearly every high school in Turin and thousands of students who had the opportunity to create their own documentary. All of these works were later screened in 2009 during the *Ambienti Urbani*²¹ festival, organized in collaboration with the *Ecomuseo Urbano of Turin*²². The event was a success, featuring numerous guests and the participation of around thirty high school classes. Because of the city institutions' sustained interest in the association's ideas and the growing number of projects assigned to *Immagina*, it soon became clear that a more structured organizational form was needed. A more systematic approach to planning, along with additional staff to support the expanding range of cultural initiatives, became essential. In the meantime, another important element of the future museum was taking shape: those involved in the association pursued their interest in the fantastic by collecting objects and memorabilia related to science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

In 2008, the association *Immagina* organized its final exhibition within the *Caleidoscopio* project, with *Star Wars* as the theme. The great success of the exhibition,

¹⁹ «As the generic name suggests, the intention was simply to engage with the concept of the imaginary and to explore it from multiple perspectives, in relation to the members of the association. We deal with literature, psychology, and art, and among these various aspects there was certainly the fantastic, understood as a segment of the imaginary, which is often conceptually identified with the imaginary itself. In reality, the association was founded without any specific practical objective, but rather to come together and work around these themes» (D. Monopoli, personal communication, April 1, 2023, translation mine).

²⁰ *Istituzione Torinese per un'Educazione Responsabile* (translation: Turin Institution for Responsible Education).

²¹ Translation: Urban environments

²² Translation: Urban Ecomuseum of Turin

the strengthening of professional relationships with local public institutions, and the curiosity sparked by the expanding collection led the city administration to propose the creation of a dedicated space to display the artifacts and the members' work on themes of the fantastic, as well as to host cultural initiatives. In 2009, the association *Immagina* moved into a couple of rooms on the ground floor of a building on Via Luini, shared with the *ITER Center for Ludic Culture*. This marked the founding of what Silvia and Davide refer to as *Proto-MUFANT*. Despite its small size and limited opening hours – restricted to events and activities – the Proto-MUFANT hosted over the years some of the most prominent figures in Italian science fiction and fantasy, including Riccardo Valla, Giuseppe Lippi, Dario Tonani, and Franco Brambilla, and was also featured on the Rai²³ TV show *Wonderland*.

In 2013, numerous cultural projects supported by the City of Turin were discontinued due to contractual and funding issues, with the Proto-MUFANT among those not renewed. Coupled with structural issues in the building, this situation prompted the co-directors to search for a new location for the museum. Eventually, they were awarded a public tender by Municipal District 5, in the same neighborhood as the former location, and in 2015 began renovating the building that now houses MUFANT²⁴, working in collaboration with a team of architects from the city of Turin. In the past, it had served as a center for people with disabilities and had been left in less-than-optimal conditions. Despite this, Davide and Silvia believed in the project.

In 2016 the Fantasy and Science Fiction Museum of Turin was officially opened in Via Reis Romoli. Silvia Casolari recalled in our interview:

²³ *Radiotelevisione Italiana* (translation: Italian Radio and Television).

²⁴ The building was originally a school. It was constructed in the 1980s, at a time when there were no other schools in the area despite a growing number of children. The history of the school, built by the Municipality of Turin, is closely intertwined with that of the *Casa della Cooperativa di Vittorio*. These buildings represent a unique social experiment in self-management that lasted for roughly fifteen years, from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. The Cooperative built the housing to address the shortage of accommodations and rising rents, offering subsidized contracts and access reserved for its members. Residents lived as a community, each contributing their skills and time to meet shared needs. Through this system of cooperation, and with the installation of solar panels for water heating – a significant innovation at the time – rents in the Cooperative's buildings were reduced to roughly half the cost of similar housing elsewhere in the city (G. Roselli, personal communication, November 9, 2023). The history of this grassroots initiative – the cooperative, the housing, and the school – creates an interesting parallel between the story of MUFANT and that of this suburban district reflecting the museum's ambition to serve as a reference point for the neighborhood.

«Abbiamo fatto una pre-inaugurazione. È andata bene, avevano fatto i video, gli articoli eccetera e poi abbiamo fatto la vera inaugurazione alla quale era arrivato un casino di gente, davvero tantissima gente, ma proprio tanta. C'era la coda fuori, giù fin dalla strada, coda, coda, coda, coda per entrare. Non so cosa avessero visto perché non era certo il MUFANT di adesso, però noi avevamo coinvolto tanti stand, tante associazioni e quindi c'era stato questo impatto. Per cui, un po' come ai Comics, trovavi tutti gli stand del fantasy, quelli che facevano i giochi, quelli che facevano calligrafia cinese, insomma, tantissimi stand e l'impatto era stato molto carino. Poi, chiusa all'inaugurazione, abbiamo cominciato a lavorare per dipingere, continuare a rigenerare. Noi non abbiamo aperto che il MUFANT era già come lo avevamo immaginato, perché non ci saremmo mai riusciti. Noi abbiamo aperto e nel corso dei primi anni abbiamo continuato a ristrutturare e allestire. È stato progressivo²⁵» (S. Casolari & D. Monopoli, personal communication, March 14, 2024).

The next major step was the renovation of the square in front of the museum, which, as part of the *Co-City* project, began to be transformed into the *Parco del Fantastico*²⁶. Silvia explained:

«Il parco del fantastico è un progetto work in progress, da intendere come progetto in divenire, perché non è oggettivamente un parco del fantastico. Però abbiamo iniziato a fare una serie di installazioni artistiche che non sono delle statue nel deserto, non abbiamo semplicemente scelto la figura, il soggetto, e lo abbiamo fatto fare ai fabbri: no, dietro ogni statua c'è un progetto di inclusione: per quello di Frankenstein abbiamo lavorato con persone con disagio psicosociale, oppure quella di Sailor Moon abbiamo lavorato con la comunità LGBTQ+. Abbiamo trovato questi fabbri, i fratelli Latini, che lavorano a laser queste lamiere in ferro corten e abbiamo messo sette statue²⁷» (S. Casolari & D. Monopoli, personal communication, March 14, 2024).

²⁵ «We held a pre-opening. It went well, they made videos, articles, and so on, and then we held the official inauguration, which drew an enormous crowd, really a huge number of people. There were lines outside, all the way down to the street, line after line to get in. I don't know what they saw, because it certainly wasn't MUFANT as it is now, but we had involved many stands and associations, so the impact was significant. It was a bit like a Comics convention with all the fantasy stands, those running games, those teaching Chinese calligraphy, so many stands, and the overall effect was really nice. After the inauguration, we began working on painting and continuing the renovation. MUFANT wasn't exactly as we had imagined it when we opened, it would have been impossible to achieve that all at once. We opened it, and over the first few years we continued restructuring and setting it up. It was a gradual process» (S. Casolari & D. Monopoli, personal communication, March 14, 2024, translation mine).

²⁶ Translation: Park of the Fantastic.

²⁷ «The *Parco del Fantastico* is a work-in-progress project, to be understood as an ongoing endeavor, because it is not objectively a "Park of the Fantastic" yet. However, we have begun creating a series of artistic installations that are not just statues in a void. We didn't simply choose a figure or subject and have the blacksmiths make it; no, behind every statue there is an inclusion project. For the Frankenstein statue, we worked with people experiencing psychosocial difficulties, and for the Sailor Moon statue, we collaborated

Later, in 2020, the square was renamed – at the initiative of MUFANT itself – in memory of Riccardo Valla, a prominent figure in Italian science fiction. Valla, who passed away unexpectedly in 2013, had collaborated enthusiastically with the museum from its earliest days. In recognition of his valuable research and guidance, Davide and Silvia thought it was only fitting to name the square in his honor. Since then, the Fantasy and Science Fiction Museum of Turin is located in Piazza Riccardo Valla 5.

On the day of the inauguration of *Prossime Città*, I met Davide and had my first glimpse of the museum and the world it opens up, both in terms of its collection and the kinds of events it hosts. With regard to its cultural offerings, MUFANT engages in a diverse set of activities, many of which are articulated around its permanent collection. This collection comprises items from private collectors (including Davide and Silvia themselves), collections donated to the museum, works by contemporary artists, as well as bibliographic holdings, posters, magazines, comic books, and memorabilia. The themes addressed span the history, motifs, and tropes of the fantastic, from proto-science fiction to contemporary productions, encompassing key cult phenomena of the twentieth century. These range from *Frankenstein* to *Doctor Who*, from *Star Trek* to Japanese anime and manga, and from aliens to robots. The exhibition design is organized into thematic sections and follows a roughly chronological trajectory. Building on its ever-growing collection, MUFANT offers a variety of programs, including guided tours, workshops for schools, and exhibitions focused on specific themes.

At the beginning of 2023, I started going to MUFANT more often and learn more about the activities it offers. The museum currently hosts, or has in the past hosted, several laboratories developed in collaboration with local institutions and associations in Turin. Among these, the Videogame Lab remains active, offering multiple gaming stations and consoles for visitor use. This laboratory underscores the museum's commitment to this expressive medium, where the fantastic genre finds significant representation. In recent years, MUFANT has organized a dedicated series of events centered on video games, led by video game journalists Giacomo Conti and Lorenzo Plini from www.mmo.it.

with the LGBTQ+ community. We found these blacksmiths, the Latini brothers, who laser-cut these corten steel sheets, and we installed seven statues» (S. Casolari & D. Monopoli, personal communication, March 14, 2024, translation mine).

In 2019, as part of the *Loving the Alien*²⁸ project carried out in collaboration with the social cooperative AltraMente, MUFANT hosted a social tailoring workshop and a scenography lab. These workshops involved individuals participating in vocational rehabilitation programs within psychiatric services. The initiative aimed to explore the therapeutic potential of artisanal production while also providing participants with meaningful job opportunities in a safe, supportive environment where they could feel welcomed and have their needs met. Significant work and investment went into the realization of these two laboratories. Unfortunately, though, the projects had to be suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Antonello Raciti, psychologist and psychotherapist, and Vice President of AltraMente, spoke to me about these experiences:

«C'era un laboratorio di sartoria che avrebbe dovuto occuparsi di confezionare abiti per i cosplayers e per un po' l'ha fatto, e un altro laboratorio di scenografie, falegnameria che avrebbe dovuto occuparsi di allestimenti scenografici museali o anche di prompt e attrezzature per il cosplay. La particolarità è che c'erano certamente una vera sarta e un vero scenografo, Franco Nicolosi, che si occupava della parte più manuale della scenografia, ai quali abbiamo affiancato con dei contratti veri dei ragazzi che erano seguiti dal Dipartimento di salute mentale, quindi che erano in comunità o in appartamento. Con loro abbiamo fatto un bel percorso, molto basico, nel senso che molti di loro non erano in grado di fare nulla. Abbiamo comprato le attrezzature, macchine da cucire, tutti i macchinari necessari per tagliare, eccetera. Ma questo percorso è stato funestato dall'avvento del Covid, che in realtà ha fatto molti danni. [...] Però secondo me anche per quello lo spirito di questa cosa è

²⁸ *Loving the Alien* is a project of urban regeneration and social inclusion developed starting in 2019 by MUFANT in partnership with the social cooperative AltraMente, and supported by the Torino Social Factory initiative and the PON Metro programme. The project's title references David Bowie's 1984 song *Loving the Alien* and draws on "the alien" as a symbolic figure of otherness and diversity. Through this cultural lens, the project sought to promote social innovation and cultural participation within a peripheral urban context. *Loving the Alien* was structured around four main initiatives: the *Parco del Fantastico*; two social workshops – a scenography laboratory and a tailoring workshop – which provided employment opportunities for people with mental health challenges, integrating them into meaningful creative processes and fostering professional inclusion; and the *Loving the Alien Festival*, a cross-media cultural event held twice, in 2019 and 2020. The festival celebrated the genres and expressive forms of the fantastic, placing them in dialogue with social themes such as non-binary gender identities, inclusion, and community engagement. Its programming included exhibitions, workshops, participatory activities, and community-designed events that brought together visitors, cultural associations, and schools. *Loving the Alien* was one of the most successful projects carried out at MUFANT. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the significant amount of work and resources required for its realization – which ultimately made it unsustainable for the museum – the project was interrupted. Nevertheless, it remains an open and flexible framework that may be reactivated in the future and potentially serve as a model for similar initiatives (S. Casolari & D. Monopoli, personal communication, March 14, 2024; D. Monopoli, personal communication, May 3, 2023; A. Raciti, personal communication, October 19, 2023).

fortissimo, nel senso che effettivamente è una cosa aperta: noi ogni tanto riproponiamo progetti più o meno di questo tipo, molto simili, anche attraverso varie opportunità di finanziamento che ci sono in giro, perché per noi sarebbe importante essere sostenuti in queste attività²⁹» (A. Raciti, personal communication, May 12, 2023).

Despite the unfortunate circumstances, the workshop continued to operate with the aim of producing museum display elements, such as display cases and props, as well as various components needed to keep the museum in a state of continual renewal. Marco Tursi, who initially joined the workshop as a trainee, later took over its leadership. Marco was the first person I interviewed in this research. I joined him in the workshop while he was building a showcase for the permanent exhibition upstairs. During our interview, he shared:

«Pian pianino andiamo avanti a rinnovare e mettere un po' a posto il museo. Ecco, quello è l'obiettivo. Facciamo costruzione di teche espositive, però cerchiamo di fare anche un po' di manutenzione, perché comunque il museo ha più di sei anni ormai, quindi qualche cosa magari va messa a posto³⁰» (M. Tursi, personal communication, March 1, 2023).

The scenography lab is currently on hold, but Marco Tursi continues to work at MUFANT as Head of General Services, in addition to having contributed to the museum's collection with his digital art works³¹.

²⁹ «There was a tailoring workshop that was meant to produce costumes for cosplayers and for a while it actually did, and another workshop dedicated to scenography and carpentry, which was intended to work on museum exhibition design as well as props and equipment for cosplay. What made these workshops distinctive was the presence of both a professional tailor and a professional set designer, Franco Nicolosi, who was responsible for the more hands-on aspects of the scenography. Alongside them, we employed through proper contracts young people who were being supported by the Department of Mental Health, meaning they were living either in residential communities or in supported apartments. We developed a meaningful, though very basic, training path with them, in the sense that many of them initially had no practical skills at all. We purchased the necessary equipment, sewing machines and all the machinery required for cutting and so on. However, this process was severely disrupted by the arrival of COVID, which caused a great deal of damage. [...] Even so, I believe the spirit of the project remains very strong, precisely because it is an open initiative: from time to time, we continue to propose projects of this kind, or very similar ones, often through various funding opportunities that are available, because for us it is essential to receive support for these activities» (A. Raciti, personal communication, May 12, 2023, translation mine).

³⁰ «Little by little, we keep moving forward with renewing and tidying up the museum. That's the goal. We build display cases, but we also try to take care of maintenance, because the museum is now more than six years old, so some things inevitably need to be fixed» (M. Tursi, personal communication, March 1, 2023, translation mine).

³¹ <https://www.marcotursi000.com/home>

In the first few months of my fieldwork at MUFANT, I had the opportunity take part in the organization and realization of two additional temporary initiatives connected to the *Tecno Profezie*³² project and developed in collaboration with the ASL (Azienda Sanitaria Locale)³³ and the University of Turin: *First Life* and *CommonsHood*. These activities engaged two groups of people participating in psychiatric care programs and featured a series of cultural, educational, and social activities conducted at the museum by educators and specialists. The goal was not only to reinforce MUFANT's role as a socio-cultural hub but also to provide opportunities for socialization and reintegration for both adults and adolescents involved in psychiatric services offered by the ASL. Projects of this kind fall within a broader set of activities in which MUFANT serves as a key point of reference for engaging individuals facing social difficulties and involved in care pathways in education and vocational rehabilitation initiatives. The museum offers a safe space to acquire new skills and competencies as well as a relatively protected work environment that is less constrained by the rigid conditions of standard employment, allowing for greater attention to participants' needs while still enabling them to pursue a sufficiently autonomous working life and assume meaningful responsibilities within the museum's organizational structure. At the same time, their presence is vital to MUFANT itself. Lacking a large or stable paid staff, the museum relies heavily on the valuable contributions of individuals involved in these projects. Overall, these arrangements represent mutually beneficial collaborations, grounded in systems of reciprocal support and active, equitable

³² *Tecno Profezie* is a project funded by the City of Turin through PON Metro React-EU, aimed at addressing social challenges worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic – such as digital illiteracy, the rise of socially isolated and unemployed youth (NEETs), and persistent socio-economic and cultural inequalities in urban outskirts. The initiatives carried out within MUFANT as part of this project were developed in collaboration with the University of Turin, the ASL (Local Health Authority), the social cooperatives *AltraMente* and *Stranaidea*, and the NGO *CIFA*. The project's goal was to use the language of science fiction and the fantastic to engage both audiences and participants with themes of science and technology.

³³ Translation: Local Public Health Authority.

cooperation among organizations operating within the local urban context. As Davide explained:

«Le persone che anche ora collaborano al museo che arrivano dai circuiti della psichiatria effettivamente fanno attività di collaborazione lavorativa e direi che per noi è importante. Hanno un assegno piccolo per questo tipo di attività, poche centinaia di euro al mese, che però entra in un panorama più ampio di loro sostegno, quindi hanno già la casa e tutta una serie di robe di servizi sociali, quindi è sostenibile anche per loro. E il vantaggio in tutto questo è che c'è comunque un contesto che ha una sua dimensione familiare e di conoscenza della questione psichiatrica. In altri contesti più standard spesso queste persone non si trovano bene o non vengono accolte bene³⁴» (S. Casolari & D. Monopoli, personal communication, March 14, 2024).

First Life was designed for teenagers and centered on the acquisition of digital skills and the use of the homonymous georeferenced social network³⁵ developed by the Department of Computer Science at the University of Turin. Guided by a team of educators, participants created fantastic narratives set in various locations around Turin. These stories were then published on the social network, creating a virtual map showcasing their creative works. *CommonsHood* was based on the experimentation of an app developed by the same department and was aimed at a group of adults, given the complexity of the technological topic. As explained by Cristina Viano – one of the developers who also supervised the project in collaboration with MUFANT – *CommonsHood* is a wallet app that facilitates the exchange of value among members of a community. The app is built on blockchain technology, which – together with the creation of NFTs (non-fungible tokens) – became the focus of the sessions with participants, in collaboration with the museum and the other organizations involved (C. Viano, personal communication, September 19, 2023). The experimental nature of the projects, combined with the fact that the participants were vulnerable individuals with specific needs already engaged in preexisting programs,

³⁴ «The people who are still collaborating with the museum and who come from psychiatric care pathways are genuinely engaged in work-related activities, and this is very important for us. They receive a small allowance for this kind of work, just a few hundred euros per month, but this fits into a broader support framework, as they already have housing and access to various social services, making the arrangement sustainable for them as well. The advantage of this system is that it operates within a context that has a familiar, close-knit dimension and a strong awareness of psychiatric issues. In more standard work environments, these individuals often struggle to feel comfortable or are not properly welcomed» (S. Casolari & D. Monopoli, personal communication, March 14, 2024, translation mine).

³⁵ <https://www.firstlife.org/>

required continuous adjustments in content, methods, and expectations. Despite these challenges, participants generally reported satisfaction, and the projects successfully introduced them to the intended themes. Moreover, these two initiatives proved extremely valuable for me for understanding the complex organizational dynamics behind such projects, which involve multiple stakeholders and must reconcile both ideological and practical considerations, including aligning participants' schedules and commitments.

This first experience was also demanding on a personal level. The *Tecno Profezie* project – and the development of the two workshops – had already started before I arrived at MUFANT. This was quite a challenge for me, as joining a project midway meant that everyone else already had a deeper understanding of its ideas, references, and direction. I had to put in some effort to catch up, both practically and conceptually. Even after learning more about the project, I sometimes felt that I had missed important background elements that had shaped it from the beginning, and I wasn't fully able to grasp all the layers and meanings of what was happening or the conflicts that had to be resolved. For all these reasons, I felt that my contribution was not particularly significant.

When I began my engagement with MUFANT, my knowledge of the fantastic was largely grounded in a personal passion for genre storytelling: mainly books, films, and fantasy series, a long-standing fascination with superhero universes – more Marvel than DC – and a past love for anime and manga – which, although it hasn't disappeared, has faded somewhat in recent years – along with the occasional, almost obligatory, iconic science fiction reference here and there. On the other hand, I had a solid background in anthropology, particularly in the anthropology of art – understood broadly as encompassing a wide range of creative forms of expression beyond the narrower notion of fine art – as well as in museum anthropology, areas I had explored in depth during my previous years of study and research. This positionality has had a strong influence on my approach to the field as has the way my project was designed: on the one hand, I joined a study that was already partially outlined, with specific objectives aligned with those of the broader Ph.D. course, which included both the development of a theory of the anthropology of the fantastic and its practical application to the museum and the local territory. On the other hand, I was given considerable freedom to define the methods, specific objectives, and research focus. Although this was undoubtedly a positive aspect, it also proved challenging, as it was the one that prompted the most reflection and questioning. It required me to understand my role in the museum, the purpose of my research, and the nature of my

contribution, as well as how to navigate the various requirements, including the need to conduct research that was both useful and interesting to me, as well as meaningful and satisfactory. It also involved considering how to present and communicate my work, which opportunities to pursue, and which limits to set for myself and for the people I engaged with, in relation to what I was able and willing to do. At MUFANT I inserted myself into the museum's ongoing dynamics as an external voice, without the intention of passing judgment, giving instructions, or reshaping things according to my own perspective. However, I am aware that my presence may at times have been perceived as intrusive, which is a common experience for practitioners who work within institutional settings, even when they have been invited by those same institutions (Simon, 2010). I had to repeatedly recalibrate and renegotiate this position, particularly in relation to how I positioned myself with respect to the project, its aims, and the different expectations involved – those of the course, the museum, and the local territory, as well as my own.

The first few months at MUFANT were marked by these dynamics. At first, I tried approaching the staff and directors to arrange interviews and start learning more about the museum. Indeed, I managed to conduct some interviews and gain meaningful insights, particularly through conversations with Davide Monopoli, but I still felt that my understanding was only superficial. I also often offered to contribute to ongoing projects, asking to be included wherever I could help. However, I quickly realized that this method was not ideal at MUFANT, where everything moves very fast and everyone is constantly busy. When I began working with the *civiliste*³⁶ on *GuidAbità*, a new project involving young adults with psychological difficulties and various disabilities in maintenance roles around the museum, I had the opportunity to change my strategy. I started going to the museum almost every day, regardless of whether I had specific tasks to work on, and observed the activities everyone was carrying out, looking for opportunities to help or contribute. Through this approach, I began to understand the inner workings of the museum beyond the surface level – those processes that involve negotiating problems and opportunities, forming new relationships, and managing previous commitments. By observing and participating, rather than only asking questions, I was able to learn more

³⁶ The *civiliste* are volunteers participating in Italy's Civil Service program. They engage in social, cultural, or community projects for a set period of time, contributing to public initiatives while gaining experience and skills in their field of work. I would like to express my gratitude to the 2023–2024 *civiliste* – Mara, Bianca, Alessandra, and Arianna – who have been invaluable and irreplaceable.

about what is actually happening in the back office, and how it compares to the way the individuals involved perceive it.

From an administrative standpoint, MUFANT remained the main project of *Immagina* until 2023, when it became a foundation. This new structure preserves the spirit of the association's original efforts while better meeting the needs of a growing institution with expanding connections at the local, national, and international levels. This structural shift was particularly significant given that the museum sustains itself by participating in public calls, and maintaining long-standing partnerships with cultural associations and foundations, including the *Compagnia di San Paolo* and the *Fondazione CRT*. While this system enables the museum to keep itself going, it also imposes significant budget constraints, with all the practical difficulties that follow. This challenge must be understood within a broader national context marked by chronic neglect and persistent underfunding of cultural activities by public institutions – a dynamic that, although common in many countries (Morse, 2020; Simon, 2010), is particularly pronounced in Italy. In recent years, Italy has consistently recorded levels of public spending on culture below the European average in proportion to its GDP, with particularly evident consequences for autonomous cultural organizations and non-institutional initiatives (Eurostat, 2025). This situation directly affects the long-term sustainability of museum projects and cultural associations, which must compete for scarce, fragmented, and often discontinuous resources. In addition to the scarcity of available funds, the structure of financing and the obstacles to accessing it represent another critical issue. The confusing and sometimes inconsistent legislation regarding the management and funding of cultural enterprises – mainly due to the sector's heterogeneity and the difficulty in finding clear definitions for the many different entities involved – creates further barriers when trying to access both public and private funding. This situation generates an economic dependence on public calls and fixed-term projects, increasing organizational uncertainty for small and medium-sized cultural actors (Cavaliere, 2025; Coco et al., 2021):

«Di fatto è difficile descrivere il lavoro che facciamo. Intanto c'è un grosso limite organizzativo: noi non abbiamo soldi pubblici, se non in una misura minima in quanto facciamo parte del circuito Tessera Musei come piccolo museo. I piccoli musei ricevono una specie di rimborso annuale di 1.200 €. Le persone entrano gratis, ovviamente, con la tessera. Poi per tutto il resto viaggiamo a braccio, facciamo i bandi e se lo vinci bene, se non lo vinci nulla. Oppure facciamo mostre in giro e quindi anche lì raccogliamo denaro, però lo strutturarsi è difficilissimo, per cui si entra nel grande

dramma dei pochi soldi nel sociale e nella cultura e di tutto il meccanismo che ne consegue³⁷» (D. Monopoli, personal communication, April 1, 2023).

Furthermore, access procedures involve stringent requirements and lengthy decision-making, limiting planning and innovation. This bureaucratic rigidity often causes delays, slowing project implementation. The complexity and sometimes inadequacy of regulations, along with the absence of stable funding mechanisms, contribute to many initiatives struggling to establish themselves and secure long-term programming (Cavaliere, 2025; Hopkins Brocq et al., 2021). In the case of non-traditional entities – especially those situated on the margins of the conventional cultural offer – there is also the issue of a limited vision regarding what constitutes art and cultural heritage worthy of institutional attention and valorization:

«Da una parte c'è la tradizione, la dimensione culturale che comunque rimane molto orientata alla tradizione. Per carità, più che legittimo, però... C'è una seduzione che va incontro anche alla dimensione politica e culturale italiana, che è la stessa che ha detto a Primo Levi di cambiarsi nome se scriveva di fantascienza. Oppure l'interesse per l'arte. È sempre un'attenzione quella istituzionale ad un'arte che comunque è consolidata: sia il Museo Reale, sia il Museo di Arte Contemporanea, però devono rappresentare uno status. La dimensione tradizionale si intende poi da Pompei a Van Gogh, purché esprima uno status. Poi certe cose, certi simboli di status, con il tempo vengono depotenziati. Noi ci troviamo un po' in questa condizione ambigua, però fino a un certo punto nel nostro caso, per fortuna. La fantascienza attualmente può diventare trendy e quindi sei più ascoltato, c'è una prospettiva di interesse maggiore e c'è la famosa questione che il futuro è diventato presente. Quindi si può lavorare, raccogliere più interesse³⁸» (D. Monopoli, personal communication, April 1, 2023).

³⁷ «In fact, it's difficult to describe the work we do. First of all, there's a major organizational limitation: we don't have public funding, except for a minimal amount, since we are part of the Tessera Musei [Museum Card] network as a small museum. Small museums receive a kind of annual reimbursement of €1,200. People enter for free, of course, with the membership card. For everything else, we operate on the fly: we apply for grants, and if we win, great, if not, nothing. Alternatively, we organize traveling exhibitions, and there we also raise funds, but structuring it is extremely difficult. This leads to the larger problem of limited funding in the social and cultural sectors, and all the mechanisms that follow from that» (D. Monopoli, personal communication, April 1, 2023, translation mine).

³⁸ «On the one hand, there is tradition, the cultural dimension that in any case remains very much oriented toward tradition. Fair enough, more than legitimate, but... There is a kind of seduction that also intersects with the Italian political and cultural dimension, the same one that told Primo Levi to change his name if he wrote science fiction. Or take the interest in art: institutional attention is always directed toward an art that is already consolidated: whether it's the Royal Museum or the Museum of Contemporary Art, they still have to

In one sense, focusing the fantastic certainly puts MUFANT at a disadvantage compared to more traditional institutions, whose cultural offerings align more closely with the concept of “high culture”. However, on the other hand, it also provides a certain freedom and flexibility in addressing themes that might be considered controversial or uncomfortable, which could otherwise provoke opposition from politically opposed institutions and hinder access to funding or support. In this respect, the languages of the fantastic allow for the exploration of important topics and socially significant, even politically charged, themes in a subtle way, offering a degree of protection (see section 4.2.1). In this intricate system, institutional relationships intertwine with structural processes, forming a complex and ever-evolving landscape that MUFANT must navigate – one that can be both advantageous and constraining. When I asked about the influence that public institutions have on the museum’s activities and cultural offerings, Davide Monopoli confirmed that:

«La partecipazione della Città di Torino è limitata al finanziamento dei bandi quindi non ha altro tipo di ingerenza sulle attività del MUFANT, né in bene né in male. Per carità, c’è una buona accoglienza, ma anche quando c’è volontà il meccanismo istituzionale è quello un po’ sgangherato di cui parlavamo prima. Per il progetto del Rooftop abbiamo fatto molte riunioni e ha avuto i suoi vantaggi, ma in questa facilità che sembrava un attimo che accadesse, è passato appunto un anno e mezzo. Poi quando ti danno i permessi iniziano i casini, non è che sei felice. Ci sono tanti lavori da fare e tutto con zero soldi. Eh, questa è proprio la materialità delle robe³⁹» (D. Monopoli, personal communication, April 1, 2023).

represent a status. The traditional dimension then ranges from Pompeii to Van Gogh, as long as it expresses a status. Then, certain things, certain symbols of status, over time become weakened. We find ourselves somewhat in this ambiguous condition, though only up to a point in our case, fortunately. Science fiction can currently become trendy, and therefore you are listened to more; there is a prospect of greater interest, and there is the thing that the future has become the present. So, it becomes possible to work and to attract more interest» (D. Monopoli, personal communication, April 1, 2023, translation mine).

³⁹ «The involvement of the City of Turin is limited to funding the calls for proposals, so it has no other kind of interference in MUFANT’s activities, neither for better nor for worse. To be fair, there is a good reception, but even when there is willingness, the institutional mechanism is still the somewhat ramshackle one we were talking about earlier. For the Rooftop project we held many meetings, and it had its advantages, but in what seemed like something that would happen very quickly, a year and a half actually went by. Then, when they finally give you the permits, the trouble starts, you’re not exactly happy. There’s a lot of work to be done, all with zero money. Well, that’s really the material reality of things» (D. Monopoli, personal communication, April 1, 2023, translation mine).

Besides the practical aspects of managing a museum and the projects it is involved in, I had the opportunity to observe the dynamics underlying MUFANT's most valuable resource: its extensive network of relationships. It was particularly interesting to see how different relationships require different strategies to be maintained and nurtured, and what can be built upon them. MUFANT offers a range of initiatives specifically designed to foster discussion around themes of the fantastic, both from a theoretical perspective and through the analysis of specific works of fantastic fiction. These include temporary exhibitions on diverse topics – such as, in recent years, cities of the future, Chinese science fiction, and the cinematic and cultural universes of Godzilla, Gundam, and Yambo – as well as book presentations, meetings with authors, creative workshops, lectures, and hands-on activities led by experts in their respective fields. A considerable number of scholars gravitate around MUFANT and contribute to these activities. Foremost among them is the Scientific Director, Paolo Bertetti, a researcher in Semiotics and Symbolic Communication Psychology and a Professor at the University of Siena. Throughout the years I spent doing research at MUFANT, I had numerous conversations with him, which greatly informed the foundation of the theoretical framework presented in the following chapters. The active presence of experts who contribute their knowledge and facilitate discussions on themes of the fantastic, together with the initiatives promoted by the museum and the institutional relationships it maintains with cultural organizations and academic institutions, help to establish MUFANT as an important research hub (Strukov, 2021).

Another relevant element of this system is the newly inaugurated *Riccardo Valla Library*. This is the city's first library specializing in themes of the fantastic, comprising approximately 20,000 items, including books, magazines, and comics. The collection was assembled over time through private donations and was significantly enriched by a substantial bequest from the Valla family. The library is open to researchers, specialists, and interested visitors, and has recently been integrated into the Bi.To – Turin Integrated Library Network. It represents an expansion of MUFANT's cultural offerings to the city and an additional component in the museum's role as a key reference point for the study and enjoyment of the fantastic.

Indeed, MUFANT is also deeply involved in the cultural life of the city of Turin and frequently participates in its most important cultural events, such as the *Salone del*

*Libro*⁴⁰, *Paratissima*, *Torino Comics*, and others. Through these occasions, the museum extends its experience and expertise beyond its walls, reaching audiences not only locally but also at the national and international levels. During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to participate in many of these initiatives, which not only greatly enriched my theoretical understanding of the fantastic but also allowed me to gain first-hand insight into the operational mechanisms of the museum, including its strategies for organizing events.

In autumn 2023, I offered to manage the organization of an event at MUFANT as part of the *World Anthropology Day*, an annual manifestation held every February to showcase the public significance of anthropology. Introduced in Italy by a team of scholars associated with the University of Milano-Bicocca, it features a range of public activities designed to make the work of anthropologists visible and recognizable, while promoting dialogue with institutions, the third sector, and businesses. Since 2019, the event has been organized in Milan, and in 2024 it expanded to Turin for the first time.

MUFANT had already participated in the *World Anthropology Day* in previous years, when it was exclusively in Milan, but since it was coming to Turin that year, I saw it as a valuable opportunity to put into practice what I had learned so far. I also wanted to contribute to the development of the relationship between anthropology and fantastic narratives within the museum's spaces – a relationship that had begun some years earlier through Professor Francesco Vietti's collaboration with the museum. After consulting with Davide and Silvia, I was given the opportunity to take on the responsibility for the entire project. Our proposal was developed in collaboration with Ksenja Laginja, a friend of Davide and Silvia's with whom they had previously worked, and who, together with Stefano Bertoli, curates *Poème électronique*, a festival of poetry and electronic music that combines spoken word with musical experimentation. Together, we discussed the themes for that year's *AnthroDay* and decided to explore the city through its complex and fascinating relationships between past, present, and future; utopia and dystopia; the human and the non-human; and technology, innovation, and progress – expressed through the languages of poetry and music. The result was *Poème électronique at MUFANT: Cosmologie Urbane*, an evocative event in which forms of expression such as music, poetry, gesture, and fantastic storytelling, combined with lighting effects and graphic design, were used to explore key anthropological themes.

⁴⁰ Translation: Turin International Book Fair

The event reflected on the city as a space of relationships and coexistence, encounters with others, technological and social experimentation, as well as conflict and inequality, while highlighting the evocative power of artistic and creative means of communication. Overall, this experience reinforced what I had already noticed in my first year at MUFANT: the museum's greatest strength lies in its rich network of personal and institutional relationships. Indeed, as Strukov (2021) argues:

«The idea of a network is extremely important, and it also enables the use of context as method through a relationship among different elements of the network. Thinking about the museum as a research hub allows for a conceptualization of the museum as a fluid system with a set of values which are constantly evolving, not as a place with pre-determined structures and boundaries. This type of museum advances horizontal connections leading to the democratization of knowledge» (Strukov, 2021, p. xix).

2.1.1. MUFANT's heritage community

Over the years, a community of experts, collectors, authors, artists, academics, and enthusiasts has grown and taken shape around MUFANT. These individuals collaborate with the museum in both formal and informal ways, forming a dynamic, diverse, and constantly expanding network. Within this community, members can exchange ideas, knowledge, and specialized skills, build professional relationships, develop collaborations, and design projects together.

Given its structure and the activities connected to it, the community of people who recognize MUFANT as a point of reference for the study and exploration of fantastic themes can be understood as a *heritage community*, as defined in the 2005 Faro *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*:

«A heritage community consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations» (Council of Europe, 2005, Article 2b).

The element that brings together these individuals – who come from diverse contexts and represent a wide range of educational and professional backgrounds – is the cultural heritage of the fantastic, namely the body of practices, narratives, symbols, artistic and literary productions, and artifacts to which members of the community refer, and

around which they gather to reflect and work together for its advancement and enhancement. More specifically, the elements of heritage around which MUFANT's heritage community has formed include not only the objects in the collection and the museum as a physical place, but – more importantly – the meanings, uses, and values that the members themselves attribute to these objects and to the museum as a whole (MINORE, 2025).

While tangible heritage undoubtedly serves as a catalyst and as the starting point for inspiration and the development of the museum's various activities, it is the intangible heritage associated with it that represents the most dynamic component – one in which members of the heritage community have the greatest opportunity to contribute actively and from which they can draw for both individual and collective purposes. Naturally, the heritage of knowledge, symbols, relationships, stories, and connections related to the fantastic is not subject to the same constraints as physical objects, such as conservation requirements, ownership restrictions, or more straightforward logistical needs – for example, those associated with moving items from one location to another. While digital tools can certainly facilitate the virtual circulation of objects as well, it is the intangible aspects of heritage that enjoy a greater freedom of circulation, growth, evolution, and sharing. Consequently:

«This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity» (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2(1)).

The intangible heritage of the fantastic is not a conventional form of cultural heritage – as further demonstrated by the fact that MUFANT is currently the only museum in Europe entirely dedicated to the themes of the fantastic as its primary focus. Compared to more traditional forms of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, around which discourses of identity, nationalism, and community tend to coalesce – such as monuments, art, symbols, folk traditions, customary practices, foodways, and many others – the fantastic is undoubtedly less immediate to frame. In this sense, it can be considered a form of *minor cultural heritage*. This term refers to cultural assets that receive less attention than others, are less institutionalized, and are not directly recognized or regulated by formal cultural heritage protection codes, yet remain significant for the communities that form around them (MINORE, 2025). As an indirect consequence of the Faro Convention, public interest in

this type of heritage has grown – both conceptually and in practical or legislative terms. This has led to the recognition of new ways of building communities and of types of heritage around which they gather – extending beyond traditional, territorially bound or nationalist forms – and to the emergence of contemporary, often spontaneous communities that exist independently of formal institutional recognition, reflecting their presence in global spaces of ongoing and wide-ranging interaction. Vincenzo Padiglione and Alessandra Broccolini (2017) call these new groupings *neo-heritage communities*, which arise and develop around a wide variety of heritage forms, more or less clearly defined, functioning as hubs that bring together diverse creative expressions.

The heritage community of MUFANT can be understood in these terms – as a network of formal and informal, institutional and personal relationships that organically interact to constitute the community itself, without necessarily acknowledging or defining it as such. Such recognition is neither required nor inherently beneficial to the community or its activities, unless a deliberate process of institutionalization is undertaken. While this can offer certain advantages – such as facilitating communication with institutions and peer organizations, enabling access to public funding, and granting legitimacy as a distinct entity with specific goals and extensive expertise – there are also benefits to retaining a more flexible, unrecognized, or at least hybrid structure.

A frequent critique in anthropological debates on heritage is that tools such as international conventions and policies for the recognition, promotion, and safeguarding of heritage can function as «strumenti egemonici di mercificazione delle espressioni culturali e di essenzializzazione delle identità⁴¹» (Padiglione & Broccolini, 2017, p. 5). This entails a high risk of politicization, bureaucratization, and the consequent fossilization of practices and knowledge that have emerged and developed spontaneously and organically, and which are therefore meant to be subject only to changes initiated and implemented by those who originally created and actively practice them.

Another significant risk lies in an excessive focus on concepts of locality, which in a globalized world are at best questionable – particularly when they function not as opportunities to explore local cultural richness, but as assertions of identity-based distinction that reinforce inclusion and exclusion. At best, such dynamics are sterile; at

⁴¹ «Hegemonic instruments for the commodification of cultural expressions and the essentialization of identities» (Padiglione & Broccolini, 2017, p. 5, translation mine).

worst, they are harmful, fostering conflicts between “us” and “the other”. This is closely tied to the notion of authenticity, which often serves to claim a distinction between what is considered sufficiently authentic to be recognized as part of heritage – and thus worthy of attention by the heritage community – and what falls short of these criteria: too hybrid, insufficiently defined, or not encompassed by established standards, and therefore deemed unworthy of recognition. These standards are often set by authoritative experts responsible for overseeing the processes of institutionalization and heritage recognition – and, in turn, determining what is included and what is excluded. This at least partially diminishes the decision-making power of the communities that have developed and engage with the heritage (Padiglione & Broccolini, 2017).

As noted earlier, the case of MUFANT is relatively “shielded” from such dynamics for several reasons. First, the themes around which the heritage community has formed are far less institutionalized than others that are more academically established or traditionally recognized. This makes the boundaries of what is included and what is not more porous and flexible, allowing greater freedom of interpretation for those who interact with it. Secondly, the fantastic is a field perceived as relatively young, modern, and fully contemporary, continually enriched by new experiences that redefine its boundaries and definitions. More than other fields, it is in constant flux, difficult to encapsulate, and influenced both locally – for example, by narratives tied to specific territories – and globally – within the context of pop culture production and consumption disseminated worldwide through various channels. Attempting to define its authenticity would be futile, and any assessment would inevitably be partial and open to debate. Furthermore, in the specific case of MUFANT, the authoritative experts are themselves integral members of the heritage community, which, in this sense, also encompasses an epistemic community, namely «a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area» (Haas, 1992, p. 3). This “community within the community”, composed of those who engage with the fantastic as institutionally recognized experts in academic, museum, artistic, literary, or related contexts, interacts with other members of the heritage community. These other members, though lacking formal external recognition, find within the community a space that validates their activities, expertise, and knowledge – and, in effect, confers legitimacy. For example, cosplayers, who would not otherwise have an

institutional framework to be acknowledged as experts in their field, are recognized at MUFANT for their contributions. In neo-heritage communities:

«Ad un patrimonio riconosciuto da esperti e attestato nella sua autenticità originaria, si viene a sostituire un processo supposto condiviso, guidato direttamente dai protagonisti, portatori e animatori dell'eredità. Ciò apre inevitabilmente, oltre a molte attese di sperimentazione, un contenzioso inedito⁴²» (Padiglione & Broccolini, 2017, p. 6).

In the case of MUFANT, the heritage community is inherently hybrid, combining these two dimensions and thus avoiding disputes over the validity and authenticity of the heritage around which it has formed and the practices that derive from it. In this mixed composition, researchers – ethnographers and others – can also find a place. My presence at MUFANT had to be constantly mediated and renegotiated. I had to find the best way to approach the staff and find a place for myself in the already established, fast-paced everyday activity at the museum, but i never felt alien (no pun intended) there, which is something that occurs quite frequently in other study contexts or research fields with a completely different structure, especially at the beginning. I did participate not only as observer but also by contributing to the activities organized and designed by the museum, proposing alternative approaches that could be integrated into the museum's work. Ultimately, my approach to the fieldwork combined active involvement with a deliberate effort to observe and understand the dynamics that drive MUFANT's activities

The presence of MUFANT's heritage community, the interactions among the many, heterogeneous actors who constitute it, and its role as a space where people interested in the fantastic can meet to exchange ideas and discuss shared passions all contribute to defining the museum as an environment structured around relationships. The connections MUFANT maintains with local institutions and organizations, together with its function as a space of mutual learning, further reinforce this dimension. Taken together, these elements configure MUFANT as a *contact zone* in the sense articulated by James Clifford (1997). MUFANT can thus be understood as a space in which diverse actors come into contact through multiple and overlapping dynamics. These connections are not fixed or stable;

⁴² «A heritage recognized by experts and affirmed in its original authenticity is replaced by a supposedly shared process, directly guided by the protagonists, bearers, and facilitators of the legacy. This inevitably opens up, alongside many opportunities for experimentation, a new and unprecedented field of contention» (Padiglione & Broccolini, 2017, p. 6, translation mine).

rather, they are continuously produced, negotiated, and redefined through ongoing interaction among the parties involved.

Given these characteristics – particularly the vitality of its community of practice and the institution’s capacity to initiate and sustain connections – MUFANT represents a fertile context for observing how cultural heritage can contribute to processes of socio-cultural innovation. Drawing on the principle that meaningful participation is fostered, and that engagement and collaboration are facilitated by geographical closeness (Simon, 2010; Wenger, 1999), it was appropriate to focus my research on the museum’s relationships within its territorial context.

2.2. The neighborhood of Borgo Vittoria

MUFANT is situated within the neighborhood of Borgo Vittoria, close to its northern border, in Municipal District 5 on the northern outskirts of the city. The site is notably isolated from both the rest of the city and the central part of the neighborhood, to the extent that Davide Monopoli and Silvia Casolari often humorously describe it as “Ai confini della realtà”, a reference to the Italian title of *The Twilight Zone* (Serling, 1959). The museum’s location significantly influences its activities and connections with the city of Turin – affecting both administrative and bureaucratic matters, as it reports to district authorities in certain areas – and practical aspects, such as its public visibility, visitors’ affluence, and its potential as a tourist attraction. All of these factors are significantly constrained by MUFANT’s inconvenient location, which is relatively poorly served by public transport and seldom attracts visitors from beyond the immediate area. Furthermore, Borgo Vittoria is a neighborhood that is far from homogeneous in terms of service distribution and livability. The southern part, which forms the historic core, is where most services are concentrated and where the majority of social life takes place. To the north, beyond Corso Grosseto, lies a much more recently developed area. This was formerly an industrial zone with workers’ homes, later transformed into public housing. Demographically, this area also differs from the rest of the neighborhood due to a high presence of immigrants, mainly from Eastern Europe and North Africa. Altogether, these factors do not facilitate the integration of this area into the broader life of the district.

My positionality as someone who lives in Turin but is not originally from the city significantly influenced the way I approached the area of Borgo Vittoria and the northern outskirts during my research. I lived in Turin for eleven years, where I studied and built most of my adult life and relationships. As a result, I developed a certain familiarity with the city. At the same time, however, I come from a very different background: a small mountain village in the province of Bergamo, Casnigo, with a population of just over 3,000 inhabitants, where everyone knows each other, where streets are not referred to by their names but by the people who live in the houses, and where no spaces were truly unknown or unexplored to me. Turin, of course, operates very differently. The Metropolitan City covers an area of 6,827 km² and has a population of approximately 2,200,000 inhabitants, making it far more complex and dynamic than Casnigo. Even after many years, I can say that my knowledge of the city remains partial, largely limited to my neighborhood, Cit Turin, and the other areas where I have lived, studied, worked, and built relationships. There are still many parts of the city I have never visited, streets I have never even heard of, and I do not always know precisely where some of my friends live. This partial familiarity is reflected in the fact that before the beginning on my research I had no knowledge of the northern periphery of the city, nor of Borgo Vittoria.

I first encountered the neighborhood through MUFANT, particularly once I began attending the museum on a regular basis. During my first months, however, I spent most of my time within the museum walls, focusing on becoming familiar with the institution and its everyday functioning, with little direct contact with the surrounding area beyond the bus ride from the city center where I lived and the short walk from the stop to the museum. As my research project increasingly shifted toward an interest in MUFANT's relationship with its territory, I soon had the need to engage more directly with a context of which I had no previous knowledge. A key moment in this process was the first summer school organized by SIAA in Turin in September 2023, *Esplorare i confini: antropologia, welfare, città*⁴³. This experiential learning program focused on applied anthropology across educational, social, health, and urban contexts. Through site visits across the city, particularly in peripheral neighborhoods, we engaged directly with intervention practices, observing how anthropological perspectives are applied alongside other professional fields in real-world

⁴³ Exploring Boundaries: Anthropology, Welfare, and the City.
<http://www.antropologiaapplicata.com/2023/09/07/summer-school-siaa-torino-2023/>

settings. The summer school was a great starting point for this phase of my research, and I distinctly remember the feeling, at the end of the experience, that the city – or rather my perception of it – had expanded far beyond the boundaries of the areas I was previously familiar with.

Prior to attending the summer school, despite their relative physical proximity to where I lived, the peripheral neighborhoods were just not part of my experiences, places I didn't go. Not because I considered them unsafe or inhospitable – common assumption underpinning the Italian narrative of urban peripheries – but simply because I had no reason to. Whatever I needed was always closer to the city center, so, before starting to collaborate with MUFANT, the periphery had remained invisible to me. When I began this project, however, I had to develop a completely new perspective. I first had to take in the peculiarities of Cit Turin and Borgo Vittoria, adapting the way I moved around. I learned to stop moving automatically and sometimes hastily, as I used to in my own neighborhood, and instead to observe the houses and shops, taking the time to pause and listen to the sounds of the streets and the market squares. I paid attention to people's behavior, to the way they lived and moved within the neighborhoods, getting used to both the differences and similarities in the dynamics that shape collective life in Borgo Vittoria and Cit Turin, while also finding myself surprised by the parallels that emerged when comparing life in the city with that in Casnigo. For the first time I had to reflect on the dynamic relationship between city center and periphery, something that given my personal experience with the contexts I had lived in, I had simply never really thought about it. This was an unconscious attitude, that I now recognize reflected a broader societal pattern in which the outskirts are largely overlooked – an attitude that has very direct and tangible consequences for the territory.

The issue of urban peripheries is a prominent concern in Italy, and cities are often characterized by a marked, at least perceived, divide between the center and the outskirts. These areas are not only geographically distant from the city center, but perhaps more importantly, they are socially and economically marginalized, affected by socio-economic vulnerability and unemployment, limited or lower-quality public services, degraded spaces and buildings, a lack of cultural and recreational opportunities, and social tensions arising from the coexistence of diverse ethnic groups. All of this, resulting from a mix of historical, administrative, and policy-related factors, as well as weak welfare provisions and scarce funding, contributes to their widespread perception as degraded and unsafe spaces. The

situation in Turin clearly reflects these dynamics. However, even more impactful than the actual challenges is the public perception of the peripheries, which tends to flatten the description of these highly diverse realities through generalized narratives. These narratives, often reinforced by media, reduce the complexity and multivocality of the real situations to portray these areas as merely difficult or disadvantaged, overlooking factors such as social and community vitality and the numerous grassroots initiatives and acts of solidarity that emerge in these neighborhoods. Ethnographers, experts, activists, and local residents often provide accounts that challenge these overly pessimistic portrayals, highlighting how general perception and media representation are frequently more negative than the reality on the ground (Capello & Semi, 2018; Cingolani, 2016; Pastore & Ponzio, 2012). Without a doubt, my own experience aligns with this observation.

My first approach to understanding the neighborhood and its characteristics – beside strolling through its streets – was to research its history, which of course has greatly influenced its present form. To do so, following Davide's suggestion, I reached out to Roberto Orlandini, a native of Borgo Vittoria and a founding member of the *Centro di Documentazione Storica* (CDS), the district's historical documentation center, which conducts research on the history of neighborhoods within District 5. As Orlandini explained, Borgo Vittoria was among the last areas of the city to be affected by urbanization. Born in 1959, he recalls that as a child, setting out from his home on Via Francesco Baracca, now part of the neighborhood's more central area, he could easily reach the farmers' *cascine*⁴⁴ scattered across the northern zone, which at the time was occupied by cultivated fields and crossed by the railway bypass:

«Era abbastanza normale sentire il canto del gallo e la locomotiva a vapore, perché la ferrovia passava in superficie. [...] Avevo il mio compagno di banco delle elementari e le medie che abitava verso Stura, vicino a una cascina che si chiama Cascina Russia, è ancora esistente. Quando andavo a trovarlo, quelle due o tre volte l'anno, non di più, era un'avventura vera e propria, perché erano tutte stradicciole di campagna⁴⁵» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

⁴⁴ A *cascina* is a traditional farmstead common in Northern Italy, typically consisting of a main farmhouse surrounded by agricultural buildings, stables, and courtyards, where crops were grown and livestock raised.

⁴⁵ «It was quite normal to hear the crowing of a rooster and the steam locomotive, because the railway ran above ground. [...] I had my desk mate from elementary and middle school who lived toward Stura, near a farmhouse called Cascina Russia, which still exists. When I went to visit him, those two or three times a year,

The image Orlandini conveys through his recollections stands in stark contrast to the impression encountered by those who pass through this area today. Over time, between the 1960s and 1970s, the *cascine* in the area were gradually demolished, and the neighborhood boundary shifted increasingly northward, beginning with the opening of Corso Grosseto in the mid-1960s and continuing with the opening of Via Reiss Romoli – where MUFANT now faces – at the beginning of the 1980s (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023). Today, Borgo Vittoria extends across the territory between the two rivers that run through the area: the *Dora* to the south and the *Stura* to the north. The southern area was urbanized first, and by the end of the nineteenth century there was already a significant historical core⁴⁶ built around the *Chiesa di Nostra Signora della Salute*⁴⁷. The northward development progressed alongside the industrial history of Turin and received a significant boost with the arrival of FIAT⁴⁸, which in 1930 inaugurated the public housing built for workers on Via Sospello. Orlandini recounts:

«Sembravano proprio un villaggio nel deserto quando sono state costruite. Sono state inaugurate nel 1930 e avevano cercato di dotarle di servizi per renderle autonome, spaccio dell'Alleanza Cooperativa Torinese, che era quella grande organizzazione legata alle prime forme associazionistiche operaie a Torino per calmierare i prezzi. Poi c'era un asilo interno, c'era pure la cappelletta interna⁴⁹» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

The presence of the FIAT plant and the facilities the company built for its employees – from housing to sports and leisure spaces – profoundly altered the structure of the neighborhood, where other industrial plants gradually became established as well. From this initial nucleus, additional residential complexes were developed over the years, including, among others, the *Casa della Cooperativa di Vittorio* mentioned earlier (see

no more than that, it was a real adventure, because it was all little country roads» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023, translation mine).

⁴⁶ The historical legacy of this development is still evident today in the architecture of the neighborhood's historic center, as Orlandini often explains during the guided tours he organizes and leads with the CDS.

⁴⁷ Translation: The Church of Our Lady of Good Health, built starting in 1895, together with the neighborhood market, which takes place nearby, represents the heart of Borgo Vittoria.

⁴⁸ *Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino* (translation: Italian Automobile Factory of Turin).

⁴⁹ «They really did look like a village in the desert when they were built. They were inaugurated in 1930, and an effort was made to equip them with services so as to make them self-sufficient: a shop run by the *Alleanza Cooperativa Torinese*, the large organization linked to the earliest forms of workers' associations in Turin, aimed at keeping prices down. There was also an internal nursery school, and even a small internal chapel» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023, translation mine).

footnote 24). Around the same time and for a couple of decades thereafter, Borgo Vittoria, in the memories of its inhabitants, experienced years of prosperity. During this period, it appeared as a true *borgo* within the city of Turin – a distinctive place with its own particular character. Numerous small shops enlivened the streets, attracting people from outside the area who came to stroll along them and browse the shop windows.

During my fieldwork in Borgo Vittoria, I had the opportunity to meet and talk with local people, asking about their perceptions of the neighborhood and comparing their views with my own observations and the statistical data I was able to consult. This theme emerged repeatedly in the interviews I conducted and the in informal conversations with the residents. Most of the interactions took place at MUFANT, both because of the convenience of the space and because, for those who had already visited, it was a welcome opportunity to return. At the same time, it allowed me to introduce the museum to people who were not familiar with it. Paola Ravizzotti and Silvio Di Nunzio, a couple in their 60s, belonged to this second group and live in the center of Borgo Vittoria near the church. I contacted them through their daughter in law, another interviewee, and she immediately showed interest in visiting a cultural space in their neighborhood that was previously unknown to them. During our interview they told me:

«Quando siamo arrivati qui trent'anni fa, dava proprio l'idea del borgo vecchio, poi c'era una specie di piazzettina dietro la chiesa dove si trovano le persone, sembrava un po' la piazza del paese replicata in città. In via Chiesa, c'era passaggio, insomma, tantissima gente, perché c'erano negozi molto belli, di un certo tipo. Il sabato c'era un passeggio tipo le vie del centro proprio, era proprio tanto frequentato⁵⁰» (P. Ravizzotti & S. di Nunzio, personal communication, March 20, 2024).

This perception – likely somewhat romanticized and nostalgic, as is often the case when reflecting on the past – remains a point of reference, at least for residents of a certain generation, who tend to view the transformation of the neighborhood, particularly over the past few decades, as a process of deterioration. Many complain about the closure of numerous historic shops, replaced by large supermarket chains, alongside a heightened

⁵⁰ «When we arrived here thirty years ago, it really gave the impression of an old village. Then there was a kind of little square behind the church where people would gather; it felt a bit like the town square reproduced in the city. Along Via Chiesa there was a lot of foot traffic—so many people—because there were very nice shops, of a certain kind. On Saturdays there was a sort of promenade, just like in the main streets of the city center; it was really very well frequented» (P. Ravizzotti & S. di Nunzio, personal communication, March 20, 2024, translation mine).

sense of insecurity. Whether or not this perception is supported by statistics, it frequently comes up in conversations with neighborhood residents and in public discussions, and it is often mentioned as an aspect that needs to be addressed. As Valentina Poli, a young local citizen and acquaintance of mine, suggested:

«Io punterei anche di più a migliorare un po' la sicurezza nel quartiere. Perché non solo io, ma anche altri che sono cresciuti nel quartiere, a volte non ci sentiamo sicure, soprattutto noi ragazze, ad uscire. Quindi dato che è un tema molto sentito ultimamente, no, cioè, in teoria dovrebbe esserlo sempre, però questo dovrebbe essere migliorato, in più alla luce degli ultimi eventi che sono successi⁵¹» (V. Poli, personal communication, February 1, 2024)

Other aspects frequently mentioned as problematic in Borgo Vittoria by the residents I interviewed include:

- The long-standing and extensive presence of construction sites in the area, a concern highlighted by Martina Galasso, who no longer lives in the neighborhood but grew up there and still visits frequently. She shared:

«In questo periodo credo che sia in corso veramente un processo di urbanizzazione, di miglioramento della rete stradale, che però causa davvero tantissimi problemi: intanto la gente è molto più scontenta e molto più sclerata e quindi non ti porta a vivere bene. È un intervento che è stato fatto per migliorare la situazione, ma in questo momento chiaramente non è proprio super confortevole per chi ci abita e per chi lo frequenta come quartiere⁵²» (M. Galasso, personal communication, April 5, 2024).

- Connected to this is the busy traffic, which leads to major congestions and greatly impacts air quality. Kyle Poli, Valentina's brother who I met through her, mentioned this issue when asked about the downsides of Borgo Vittoria:

⁵¹ «I would also focus more on improving safety in the neighborhood. Because not only I, but others who grew up in the neighborhood too, sometimes don't feel safe—especially us girls—when going out. So, given that it's an issue that has been strongly felt lately—well, in theory it should always be—but this really should be improved, especially in light of the most recent events that have occurred» (V. Poli, personal communication, February 1, 2024, translation mine).

⁵² «I think that at the moment there really is an urbanization process underway, a process of improvement of the road network, which, however, is causing a great many problems. First of all, people are much more short-tempered and much more on edge, and that really doesn't make for a pleasant way of living. It's an intervention that was carried out to improve the situation, but at this moment it's clearly not at all comfortable for those who live there and for those who frequent it as a neighborhood» (M. Galasso, personal communication, April 5, 2024, translation mine).

«Sicuramente mi viene in mente il traffico perché è pieno di ingorghi e poi c'è quella fantastica rotonda di Piazza Baldissera⁵³ che è un casino⁵⁴» (K. Poli, personal communication, March 21, 2024).

- The perceived tendency of residents to engage in disrespectful behavior – read as a sign of a weak sense of civic responsibility – was also often pointed out as a problem. Paola Concadora, a young mother who recently returned to live in the neighborhood, said:

«Sui punti negativi devo dire che c'è, ho notato, purtroppo tanta inciviltà, nel senso che non ci si cura troppo degli spazi comuni. Per farti un esempio scemo: la sporcizia, la carta buttata per terra senza curarsi che magari lì non è solo tuo, è di tutti⁵⁵» (P. Concadoro, personal communication, April 9, 2024).

All these factors contribute to portraying the image of a neighborhood facing complex challenges. Despite being relatively close to the city center and fairly well connected by public transport – an aspect that is nonetheless frequently identified as needing improvement – the area, especially in the northern part, is often overlooked by city institutions, which tend to prioritize central districts, focusing their efforts on promoting cultural activities and tourism there rather than elsewhere in the city. Paola Berzano, former Coordinator for Urban Planning, Public Green Spaces, and the Environment for District 5, and actively involved in various civic and associative organizations explained:

«Nelle periferie mancano tanti di quegli aspetti che sono più tipici del centro città. Un'attività che va al di là dell'alzarsi al mattino, andare a lavorare e poi tornare a dormire. Ma è un'attività che riguarda anche il tempo libero, che riguarda l'acquisire conoscenze, lo stare insieme con gli altri, eccetera. Quindi tutto quello che può aiutare a sviluppare questa parte rende una periferia una parte di città

⁵³ The roundabout at Piazza Baldissera is among the busiest traffic hubs in Turin, which leads to notable problems with air quality and noise levels.

⁵⁴ «The first thing that definitely comes to mind is traffic, because it's full of traffic jams, and then there's that fantastic roundabout at Piazza Baldissera, which is a complete mess» (K. Poli, personal communication, March 21, 2024, translation mine).

⁵⁵ «As for the negative points, I have to say that there is, unfortunately, I've noticed, a lot of incivility, in the sense that people don't take much care of shared spaces. To give you a silly example: litter, paper thrown on the ground without caring that maybe that space isn't just yours, it belongs to everyone» (P. Concadoro, personal communication, April 9, 2024, translation mine).

viva, non solo per lamentarsi, ma anche per le cose belle da fare, le cose divertenti⁵⁶» (P. Berzano, personal communication, January 23, 2024).

On the other hand, residents generally report high levels of satisfaction with the services provided by the neighborhood, noting that it offers everything one needs, particularly in terms of commercial activities. In addition to the many shops and supermarkets distributed throughout Borgo Vittoria, the *SNOS Shopping Gallery*⁵⁷ functions not only as a key commercial hub but also as an important gathering place for leisure, serving families and young people alike. In addition, the neighborhood benefits from its proximity to the Parco Dora complex and the adjacent shopping center, which together provide access to a wide range of services, leisure and entertainment opportunities, as well as extensive green spaces. Kyle Poli commented on this aspect:

«Ho già tutto in zona quindi non mi sento di andare in centro. Diciamo che è una zona ben fornita. Ci sono un sacco di supermercati, tanti punti per rifornirsi anche del poco necessario che serve per sopravvivere. Ci sono un sacco di negozi di alimentari, negozi di tutti i tipi di vestiti. Ecco, magari molti non sono economici, ma sono perlopiù alla galleria SNOS, oppure anche all'Ipercoop. E poi c'è il Parco Dora e il fatto di aver messo verde, molto verde, in una zona altamente popolata, con tanti bambini, è un punto molto positivo per la socialità⁵⁸» (K. Poli, personal communication, March 21, 2024).

Overall, Borgo Vittoria is perceived as a neighborhood in which it is possible to lead a peaceful life, characterized by a strong sense of familiarity with both the place and

⁵⁶ «In the outskirts, many of those aspects that are more typical of the city center are lacking. Activities that go beyond getting up in the morning, going to work, and then coming back to sleep. Activities that also involve leisure time, acquiring knowledge, being together with others, and so on. So, everything that can help develop this side makes a peripheral area a living part of the city, not just a place to complain about, but also one with good things to do, fun things to enjoy» (P. Berzano, personal communication, January 23, 2024, translation mine).

⁵⁷ The building originally housed a division of the *Società Nazionale Officine di Savigliano* (SNOS), a key metalworking and railway company in Turin's industrial landscape. In the early 2000s, it was redeveloped as part of the *Parco Dora* urban regeneration project and reopened in 2009 as a shopping gallery, hosting shops, services, and dining options, while retaining elements of its industrial character.

⁵⁸ «I already have everything I need in the area, so I don't really feel the need to go into the city center. Let's say it's a well-supplied area. There are lots of supermarkets, plenty of places to stock up even on the basic necessities you need to get by. There are many grocery stores, shops selling all kinds of clothing. Of course, maybe many of them aren't cheap, but they're mostly in the SNOS gallery, or also at the Ipercoop. And then there's Parco Dora, and the fact that they've added green spaces in a highly populated area with many children is a very positive point for social life» (K. Poli, personal communication, March 21, 2024, translation mine).

its people. This is a reason that Paola Concadoro cites as decisive in her decision to return to live in Borgo Vittoria:

«Poi comunque è una zona anche abbastanza tranquilla magari rispetto ad altre, ci si conosce un po' tutti, ci si può dare una mano, naturalmente con chi conosci, perché non è poi così scontato. Sono tornata a vivere inizialmente a casa dei miei, che hanno sempre vissuto qua in Borgo Vittoria, poi ho trovato anch'io casa, dopo un anno circa, sempre nella stessa via e continuo a vivere qua. Sostanzialmente è stata una scelta un po' scontata perché i miei erano qua. Però probabilmente se avessi dovuto cercare casa, l'avrei comunque cercata in zona perché conosco la zona, ho i miei punti di riferimento, comunque i miei vecchi amici sono ancora qua tanti, mentre tanti sono andati via. [...] E quindi forse è proprio il fatto che tu qualcosa la conosci già e ti fa stare magari un po' più tranquillo. Quindi sostanzialmente sì, continuo a vederla qua la mia vita⁵⁹» (P. Concadoro, personal communication, April 9, 2024).

Whether they are lifelong residents who feel they can continue to live there, former residents who have moved away but return frequently, or individuals who chose to settle in the area after living elsewhere, a shared sense of satisfaction emerges across all the accounts collected. At the same time, reflections on the neighborhood's negative aspects are relatively consistent.

In general, despite this positive feedback, there is limited optimism regarding the future, particularly with respect to job opportunities for young people and prospects for personal and educational development. Schooling options are already constrained at the high school level: while Borgo Vittoria hosts a small number of technical institutes, the city's most prestigious high schools and specialized institutions are located in the central districts. As a result, the most common experience among the interviewees was having to leave the neighborhood during their secondary education years, like Valentina Poli did:

⁵⁹ «In any case, it's also a fairly quiet area, maybe compared to others, you more or less know everyone, you can help each other out, naturally with people you know, because it's not that automatic. I initially moved back to live at my parent's place, who have always lived here in Borgo Vittoria, and then I found a place of my own too, after about a year, still on the same street, and I continue to live here. Basically, it was a somewhat obvious choice because my parents were here. But probably, even if I had had to look for a place, I would have looked in this area anyway, because I know the area, I have my reference points, many of my old friends are still here, even though many others have moved away. [...] And so maybe it's precisely the fact that you already know something that makes you feel a bit more at ease. So basically, yes, I still see my life here» (P. Concadoro, personal communication, April 9, 2024, translation mine).

«Allora, io volevo fare il liceo classico, e sostanzialmente nella zona non c'era una vasta scelta. Diciamo che tutti i licei, quelli che erano considerati rinomati, erano tutti in altre zone. Quindi sostanzialmente mi sono spostata per questo: perché non c'è un liceo classico in Borgo Vittoria, sennò l'avrei fatto in zona da me. Sarebbe stato più semplice⁶⁰» (V. Poli, personal communication, February 1, 2024)

Valentina also commented that the neighborhood is not particularly youth-friendly, despite the presence of many young residents. She shares the general perception of a need for dedicated gathering spaces and activities for young people, both to foster engagement and to reduce the risk of exposure to unsafe situations:

«Diciamo che forse manca qualcosa per i ragazzi; per i ragazzi secondo me non c'è mai stato molto. Aggregazione giovanile, diciamo che o erano cose organizzate dalle scuole elementari o medie, se no si disperdevano un po' i ragazzi. C'è sempre stato l'oratorio, e so che faceva molte attività. Però, a parte questo, è mancato molto⁶¹» (V. Poli, personal communication, February 1, 2024).

Even when it comes to leisure, residents tend to move toward the city center for specific activities or special events, while remaining in the neighborhood for simpler, everyday pursuits. When asked about the activities that she enjoys in her free time Martina Galasso, told me:

«Allora, attività culturali direi che non ce ne sono molte, nel senso che nel momento in cui ho incominciato ad avere un po' una coscienza intellettuale e politica mi sono sempre esposta e spostata verso altre zone di Torino. Mi sento di dire che quando ho cercato determinate occasioni mi sono sempre spostata altrove, mentre sulle cose più materiali, più quotidiane sapevo di poter rimanere all'interno del quartiere⁶²» (M. Galasso, personal communication, April 5, 2024).

⁶⁰ «So, I wanted to attend a humanities high school, and basically there wasn't a wide choice in the area. Let's say that all the high schools, the ones that were considered well-known or prestigious, were all in other areas. So basically, I commuted for this reason: because there isn't a humanities high school in Borgo Vittoria; otherwise, I would have attended it in my own area. It would have been simpler» (V. Poli, personal communication, February 1, 2024, translation mine).

⁶¹ «Let's say that maybe something is missing for young people; for teenagers, in my opinion, there has never really been much. Youth aggregation, either it was things organized by primary or middle schools, otherwise the kids would sort of scatter. There has always been the parish youth center, and I know it ran many activities. But aside from that, a lot has been missing» (V. Poli, personal communication, February 1, 2024, translation mine).

⁶² «Well, cultural activities, I would say no, in the sense that when I started developing a bit of intellectual and political awareness, I always exposed myself and moved toward other areas of Turin. I feel I can say that when I looked for certain opportunities, I always went elsewhere, whereas for more material, everyday things,

The availability of cultural activities is perceived as limited, especially those that might appeal to young people. In fact, besides the MUFANT, there are no other active museums in the neighborhood. The *Centro di Documentazione Storica* is one of the few purely cultural institutions in the area, although it serves a broader community and is not exclusive to Borgo Vittoria. As is often the case, people notice the lack of cultural activities, yet when events are offered, participation is frequently low or very limited. This reflects a broader trend: attracting public interest and encouraging engagement with cultural initiatives remains a significant challenge. In the words of Giorgio Faccenda, coordinator of the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria* (see section 2.3):

«C'è questa indifferenza, questa assuefazione a qualsiasi cosa che alleggi in quartiere, per cui lo vediamo anche con le iniziative del Tavolo e fai fatica a coinvolgere le persone, a interessarle a qualche cosa. Bisognerebbe trovare la chiave, ci sarà una chiave per coinvolgere queste persone⁶³» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024).

Borgo Vittoria has a rich and dynamic history of associational life, reflecting a broader trend that shaped the entire city of Turin. This phenomenon emerged in response to the massive internal migration from southern Italy, which brought over a million people to Turin, drawn by employment opportunities at FIAT. The arrival of an increasing number of people with customs different from those of the locals, and the challenges this brought, required an adaptation of social interaction mechanisms and the creation of spaces for gathering. In Borgo Vittoria, as in other parts of Turin, citizens mobilized to achieve these goals and were supported by institutional efforts to provide spaces and opportunities for social cohesion. This was made possible, among other things, by a reform of the city administration that granted greater autonomy to the neighborhoods. In 1977, a process of sub-municipal administrative decentralization was introduced to bring health and social services closer to citizens and better address the needs arising from growing social and urban complexity caused by immigration and changes in the labor market. This reform also impacted local policies and the management of the 23 neighborhoods into which the city

I knew I could stay within the neighborhood» (M. Galasso, personal communication, April 5, 2024, translation mine).

⁶³ «There's this indifference, this numbness to anything happening in the neighborhood. You can see it even with the initiatives from the *Tavolo*, and it's hard to get people involved or interested in anything. We need to find the key, there must be a way to engage these people» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024, translation mine).

had been divided. However, this administrative structure was short-lived, and in 1985, they were merged into 10 districts. Roberto Orlandini explained that period in the following terms:

«Tutte queste trasformazioni nel corso del tempo, tornando al discorso della socializzazione, hanno avuto un'incidenza non secondaria, perché andavi a inserire sempre qualche elemento nuovo, con tradizioni e culture che avevano bisogno di diffondersi. Un lavoro sul piano socio-culturale era necessario e poi se lo gestiva la gente. Nella breve stagione del decentramento, in risposta al bisogno di partecipazione che era stato manifestato a partire almeno dalla metà degli anni Sessanta in tutta Torino, si erano creati dei comitati di quartiere spontanei e la richiesta era appunto quella di poter incidere sullo sviluppo della città. Con la richiesta poi di servizi dove mancavano, perché l'estensione urbanistica non sempre, o meglio, quasi mai era accompagnata dal sussidio di servizi che andassero incontro alle esigenze primarie. Nella fase del decentramento che è stato realizzato nel '77 l'ente pubblico provvedeva alla presenza e al funzionamento dei centri di incontro, che erano degli spazi aperti, che potevano essere utilizzati indifferentemente da anziani e giovani, congiuntamente da anziani e giovani, dove c'erano delle figure professionali, gli animatori socio-culturali, che erano dei dipendenti comunali che avevano il compito di organizzare, gestire. E devo dire che l'inizio della mia fase giovanile di attività nel quartiere è coincidente con quella fase⁶⁴» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

In response to these historical changes, Borgo Vittoria experienced a period of significant socio-cultural vitality in the early 1980s. This was driven by the organization of recreational activities focused on the expressive arts – especially theater and music – coordinated and supported by local citizen groups, community centers and their staff, and the municipal council. In 1981, the first National Festival of *RANA GRESBA* (*Rassegna*

⁶⁴ «All these transformations over time, returning to the topic of socialization, had a significant impact, because each time a new element was introduced, with traditions and cultures that needed to spread. Work on the socio-cultural level was necessary, and then the people managed it themselves. During the brief period of decentralization, in response to the demand for participation that had been expressed at least since the mid-1960s throughout Turin, spontaneous neighborhood committees had been created, and the demand was precisely to be able to influence the development of the city. With the request also for services where they were lacking, because urban expansion was not always—or rather, almost never—accompanied by the provision of services that met basic needs. In the decentralization phase implemented in '77, the public authorities ensured the presence and functioning of meeting centers, which were open spaces that could be used interchangeably by the elderly and young people, jointly by the elderly and young, where there were professional figures, the socio-cultural animators, who were municipal employees responsible for organizing and managing activities. And I must say that the beginning of my own youth-phase activities in the neighborhood coincided with that phase» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023, translation mine).

*Nazionale dei Gruppi Espressivi di Base*⁶⁵) was held, bringing together similar groups from across Italy:

«Tutto questo per riuscire a diffondere più in generale un modo di fare che fosse quello di non andare solo a vedere gli spettacoli fatti dagli altri, ma che se c'era la volontà, l'interesse, la curiosità, la voglia di fare delle cose, che si facessero. L'intento era quello che ognuno nel proprio territorio di appartenenza svolgesse delle attività. Poi c'erano dei momenti di condivisione che erano appunto queste rassegne che si svolgevano durante l'anno. E anche l'organizzazione stessa della rassegna finale, perché anche tenere tutti i rapporti con questi gruppi che arrivavano da varie parti era impegnativo⁶⁶» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

Starting in the mid-1980s, a combination of factors gradually led to the decline of this atmosphere of cultural dynamism and creative expression. First, the merging of neighborhoods into larger districts significantly increased the distance between citizens and institutions, which consequently became less present in the communities and less responsive to their specific needs. In addition, many community centers were closed for safety reasons, particularly following the tragic fire at the *Cinema Statuto* in 1983⁶⁷, which raised concerns about the use of certain spaces across the city. Orlandini describes the subsequent phase as follows:

«Il Comune prese la scelta, a mio modo di vedere scellerata, di affidare i centri di incontro ad associazioni sostanzialmente private. Hanno sollecitato gli anziani, perché i giovani non erano interessati a fare delle associazioni. Alcuni ragazzi interessati alle attività espressive c'erano, e hanno anche trasformato le loro capacità in attività lavorative. Però nel nostro ambito e per come era maturata l'idea, sarebbe stato svilente o pericoloso il fatto di tramutare le attività in modo professionale, perché la creatività comandarla a bacchetta non è semplice. Abbiamo visto molte compagnie teatrali in l'estro e la capacità creativa sono state via via segnate da una sorta di

⁶⁵ Translation: National Showcase of Grassroots Expressive Groups.

⁶⁶ «All of this was aimed at spreading, more generally, a way of acting that wasn't just about going to watch performances put on by others, but that if there was the will, the interest, the curiosity, the desire to do things, then they should be done. The intention was that everyone would carry out activities in their own local area. Then there were moments of sharing, which were precisely these festivals held throughout the year. And even the organization of the final festival itself, because maintaining all the relationships with these groups coming from various places was demanding» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023, translation mine).

⁶⁷ On 13 February 1983, a tragic fire broke out during a film screening at the *Cinema Statuto* in Turin, causing the deaths of 64 people. The blaze spread rapidly through the auditorium, and many victims were unable to find a way out because emergency exits were locked or obstructed. The tragedy profoundly shocked the city and led to major changes in fire safety regulations for public venues across Italy.

obbligatorietà, perché se tu lo scegli per viverci sopra, devi poi farlo. Di qui poi tutto il discorso delle attività che sono state dirette verso attività con le scuole per far quadrare il bilancio, di fatto. C'è stata quindi una formalizzazione di attività che in origine erano spontanee⁶⁸» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

It is commonly held among the residents of Borgo Vittoria that this resulted in a sense of loss of those occasions in which people came together spontaneously simply for the joy of being together, with each individual almost instinctively to the successful functioning of communal, relational, and community life:

«Un problema è la scomparsa del senso di relazioni, di comunità e questo è quello che probabilmente ha disinnescato tutto, perché una volta anche soltanto il trovarsi (dico una cazzata perché manco io l'ho fatto, però) la domenica a messa e poi uscivano da messa e passavano del tempo insieme, anche solo nella piazza, comunque aiutava la costruzione di relazioni. Io adesso da quello che vedo anche da amici con figli e via di seguito, la maggior parte delle volte questa cosa si è spostata, che so io, con quei genitori della squadra di calcetto dove gioca il figlio, piuttosto che alla scuola di danza dove va la figlia. Solo che alla fine se sei lì per uno specifico argomento, alla fine parli di quello, è difficile che fai un confronto o ti metti a fare un'analisi critica di qualche cosa, una discussione di qualcos'altro. E questo ha impoverito notevolmente il discorso generale che attraversa il paese proprio, infatti la discussione pubblica è scomparsa a tutti i livelli. Lo si vede nel piccolo come noi, come lo si vede con la partecipazione alle commissioni della Circoscrizione dove praticamente si parlano tra di loro. E poi lo vedi nelle urne⁶⁹» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024).

⁶⁸ «The Municipality made what, in my view, was a reckless decision to entrust the meeting centers to essentially private associations. They encouraged the elderly, because young people were not interested in forming associations. There were some young people interested in expressive activities, and they even turned their skills into professional work. However, in our context and given how the idea had developed, turning the activities into professional work would have been degrading or even dangerous, because you can't simply command creativity at will. We saw many theater companies where spontaneity and creative ability were gradually constrained by a kind of obligation, because if you choose it as a way to make a living, you then have to do it. From this arose the whole issue of directing activities toward schools in order to balance the budget, essentially. So, there was a formalization of activities that were originally spontaneous» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023, translation mine).

⁶⁹ «One problem is the disappearance of the sense of relationships, of community, and this is probably what set everything off, because once even just meeting up – (I'm saying something silly because I didn't even do it myself, but) – on Sundays at Mass, and then after Mass people would spend time together, even just in the square, that still helped build relationships. From what I see now, even from friends with children and so on, most of the time this has shifted—say, to parents from the soccer team where their child plays, or at the dance school where their daughter goes. But in the end, if you're there for a specific topic, you end up talking about that; it's hard to have a broader discussion or engage in critical analysis about something else. And this has

Despite the validity of this sentiment – especially given that its effects are real and shape people’s lives – it seems, rather than being the final result of a process of decline from an earlier condition, to be a persistent theme in reflections on collectivity that has been present throughout at least the past century in Western societies. The need for community – understood as the need for a sense of belonging and active participation – appears to consistently evoke a desire to return to an ideal state of social cohesion that has been lost, whose restoration is hoped to counter the effects of globalization and the centralization of institutional power (Padiglione & Broccolini, 2017). This reflects a vision of *communitas* as anti-structure, as Pietro Clemente describes it (Clemente, 2017, p. 12). Regardless of whether this ideal state ever truly existed or could be fully recovered, the perception of its absence strongly shapes how people come together in any community, acting almost as a self-fulfilling prophecy: the sense of community is seen as lost, so efforts to create opportunities for social interaction are deemed less worthwhile; as a result, occasions for building community become fewer, or take on forms that feel increasingly less spontaneous and more commercial. Most cultural initiatives are now seen in this light, partly because they are structured that way, involving an entrance fee or similar requirements. As a result, such activities are more frequently perceived as commercial products to be purchased and passively experienced, with participants playing little or no active role in their creation or outcome:

«È poco costruttivo continuare a proporre alle persone delle cose che si trasformino in intrattenimento, che alla fine siano cose dove la gente viene, ma sempre come spettatori, cercando di andare a intercettare quel gusto, quella voglia per cui porti la gente a partecipare, ma mai invece riuscendo a ricostruire quello che può interessare alla gente come partecipazione. Si è passati a una situazione in cui tutto ci rende spettatori e la gente si è abituata, si è assuefatta a questa cosa e non si sente più chiamata in causa, nel senso di diventare attore per una buona causa, quindi sentirsi anche quella piccola propria parte di responsabilità nel modificare le cose che non piacciono o ingiuste, e neanche nel costruire l'offerta. La commercializzazione dell'offerta fa sì che tu abbia in questo momento più o meno la possibilità di avere uno spettacolo per ciascuno: se ti piace il calcio, ti guardi il calcio quante ore al giorno e quanti giorni alla settimana vuoi, se ti piacciono le serie hai le

greatly impoverished the general discourse that used to run through the town; in fact, public discussion has disappeared at all levels. You can see it on a small scale like with us, and also in participation in the district committees where practically they just talk among themselves. And then you see it in the ballot boxes» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024, translation mine). See Cepernich et al. (2018) for an analysis of voting trends in the peripheries of Turin.

piattaforme, tutti i vari streaming possibili e immaginabili, se ti piace l'intrattenimento hai canali dedicati a quello e così via. Anche quella è una deresponsabilizzazione dello spettatore, che diventa semplicemente un attore passivo, che consuma un prodotto, invece andrebbe ricostruita la partecipazione un po' a tutto⁷⁰» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024).

With the aim of countering this tendency, the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria* has, in some way, taken up the legacy of experiences of direct citizen participation and grassroots organization that have been part of the neighborhood's history.

2.3. The *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria*

The *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria*, as stated in the letter of intent:

«È un insieme di Associazioni, Gruppi Informali, Singoli Cittadini, Commercianti e Professionisti che a titolo personale si riuniscono per discutere, proporre, promuovere e organizzare attività, iniziative culturali, sociali, aggregative, di integrazione per contribuire alla valorizzazione e alla memoria del Borgo Vittoria. Favorisce il dialogo tra i vari soggetti per promuovere iniziative volte alla rivalutazione, promozione e sviluppo del territorio di Borgo Vittoria, da un punto di vista sociale, culturale e nei limiti delle proprie possibilità, commerciale⁷¹» (Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria, 2025, p.1).

⁷⁰ «It's not very constructive to keep offering people things that turn into mere entertainment, where in the end people come only as spectators, trying to tap into that taste, that desire that brings people to participate, but never actually managing to rebuild what might interest people as active participation. We've moved to a situation in which everything makes us spectators, and people have become accustomed, even addicted, to this, and no longer feel called upon—in the sense of becoming actors for a good cause, of feeling even that small personal responsibility in changing things that are unpleasant or unjust, and not in shaping the offer either. The commercialization of the offer means that right now you more or less have the possibility of having a show for everyone: if you like soccer, you watch soccer as many hours a day and days a week as you want; if you like series, you have the platforms, all the various streaming services imaginable; if you like entertainment, you have channels dedicated to that, and so on. That too is a form of disempowering the spectator, who becomes simply a passive actor consuming a product, whereas participation should be rebuilt across the board» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024, translation mine).

⁷¹ «Is a collective of Associations, Informal Groups, Individual Citizens, Shopkeepers, and Professionals who, in a personal capacity, come together to discuss, propose, promote, and organize activities and cultural, social, community-building, and integration initiatives, in order to contribute to the enhancement and preservation of the memory of Borgo Vittoria. It fosters dialogue among the various stakeholders to promote initiatives aimed at the revitalization, promotion, and development of the Borgo Vittoria area, from a social and cultural perspective and, within the limits of its possibilities, a commercial one» (Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria, 2025, p.1, translation mine).

I attended my first *Tavolo* meeting in December 2023, shortly after meeting Roberto Orlandini, one of the most active members of the group, who invited me to participate and present my research project with MUFANT. Davide and Silvia had also mentioned the *Tavolo*, and we had already identified it as a potential interlocutor for my research. I decided to take the opportunity and attend the meeting. After the holiday break, when the meetings resumed, I began participating fairly consistently, attending roughly once every two weeks. I also introduced, fairly early on, a friend and colleague of mine, Glauco Barboglio, who had recently moved to the neighborhood and was interested in learning about its associational life. Having another anthropologist present proved very useful, as we often discussed the topics covered in the meetings and compared our impressions.

At first, I mostly observed the dynamics within the *Tavolo* and sought to understand what kind of activities it promoted. I learned about past projects they wanted to revisit, new projects planned for the coming months, the goals they aimed to achieve, and the strategies they employed. Over time, I gained a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying the *Tavolo*'s functioning, and it quickly became clear that the group was both complex and compelling, making it an interesting case for study and a potentially ideal interlocutor.

The *Tavolo* is a secular, non-partisan, autonomous, and non-profit entity, committed to avoiding any form of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, or political or religious affiliation. It represents the result of a group of citizens' desire to maintain continuity for the neighborhood roundtables that were previously convened by the District administration, which aimed to serve as a direct channel of communication between institutions and residents. However, because these roundtables were held very sporadically – about twice a year and almost exclusively during holidays or events requiring citizen collaboration – they were, in most cases, largely ineffective:

«Li ho sempre trovati abbastanza fini a sé stessi, perché, appunto, loro ti convocavano in prossimità di determinati eventi, tipo la festa di settembre, queste cose qui, il carnevale, Pasqua, per chiedere contributi, poi le associazioni arrivavano lì a dire: “Io potrei fare quello, io potrei fare quello o quell'altro”. Poi si ritrovavano due volte l'anno, tre a esagerare, ecco. Ma non affrontavano problematiche varie⁷²» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024).

⁷² «I always found them rather an end in themselves, because they would summon you close to specific events, like the September festival, things of that sort, Carnevale, Easter, to ask for contributions. Then the associations would show up and say, “I could do this, I could do that or something else”. Then they would

About seven years ago, the District administration ceased convening the roundtables. In response, a group of citizens who had previously participated – and who wanted to preserve the roundtables as a space for community-building and dialogue among residents – began organizing them independently. Speaking about the District’s roundtables, Faccenda says:

RO: «Non dico che siamo cresciuti per via del fatto che la Circoscrizione non c'è stata...».

GF: «Beh, se guardiamo altri tavoli che invece hanno continuato a ricevere a favore della Circoscrizione si sono sedimentati su quell’approccio lì, eh. Diciamo che è stato uno stimolo quello di non avere più l'interlocuzione da parte della Circoscrizione per aumentare l'autonomia, sia nella scelta che nella tipologia di iniziative. [...] Questo completo distacco, ha fatto maturare anche altri interessi. Ci siamo messi a occuparci di urbanistica, di viabilità, di pullman, di tutto un po', di tutto quello che accade all'interno del quartiere⁷³» (R. Orlandini & G. Faccenda, personal communication, December 20, 2023).

Transitioning from a District-coordinated roundtable to an autonomous group, the *Tavolo* shifted from being directed by an external authority, serving as an institutional point of reference, to becoming a collective that proposes, identifies, discusses, plans, and implements projects that directly reflect the interests of its participants. It became a space for democratic, open, and free discussion of all matters related to neighborhood life – from practical issues to socio-cultural initiatives, entertainment, and community-building opportunities, as well as the challenges facing Borgo Vittoria. Giorgio Faccenda describes the way the *Tavolo* operates as follows:

GF: «Abbiamo messo insieme dei meccanismi democratici e delle dinamiche che rendono comunque appetibile frequentare il Tavolo. Chiunque può portare delle proposte purché se ne faccia promotore in prima persona, che sia un singolo cittadino o che sia un'associazione, può cercare collaborazioni oppure può proporre dei temi che, se condivisi, sempre in sede di riunione perché facciamo valere

meet twice a year, three times at most. But they didn’t address the various issues» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024, translation mine).

⁷³ RO: «I’m not saying that we grew because the District was no longer involved...». GF: «Well, if we look at other roundtables that continued to receive support from the District, they remained tied to that approach. Let’s say that the lack of interaction with the District acted as a stimulus to increase autonomy, both in the choice and in the type of initiatives. [...] This complete detachment also allowed other interests to develop. We started dealing with urban planning, traffic, buses, a bit of everything—everything that happens within the neighborhood» (R. Orlandini & G. Faccenda, personal communication, December 20, 2023, translation mine).

la presenza, vengono allora poi sposate da tutto il Tavolo e ciascuno con le proprie possibilità tecniche e capacità porta avanti il progetto. Rimanendo un po' tutti protagonisti alla stessa maniera. E dà anche l'opportunità a tutti, prima o poi, di trovare la propria scintilla di iniziativa⁷⁴» (R. Orlandini & G. Faccenda, personal communication, December 20, 2023).

In addition to organizing and implementing activities and initiatives, the *Tavolo* plays a crucial role in connecting individuals and groups active in the neighborhood with one another, as well as with other institutions and organizations. In the *Tavolo*'s letter of intent is stated that:

«Favorisce il dialogo tra i vari soggetti per promuovere iniziative volte alla rivalutazione, promozione e sviluppo del territorio di Borgo Vittoria, da un punto di vista sociale, culturale e nei limiti delle proprie possibilità, commerciale⁷⁵» (Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria, 2025, p. 1).

The *Tavolo* meets with the aim of coming together, negotiating, and taking collective action – not to pursue a specific goal beyond having a positive impact on the neighborhood. All initiatives are welcomed, and if the community deems the timing right and shows interest, they are implemented. The *Tavolo* does not work as a top-down imposition of tasks; it exists and functions only because people choose to come together and commit to shared projects and goals.

Because of its structure and mode of operation, the *Tavolo* can be understood as a *community of practice*. This concept, originally developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in the early 1990s, is based on the idea that a group of people brought together through shared practice forms a distinct assembly with its own characteristics and unique dynamics. If a group is driven solely by an external prompt – such as a call for participation from an institution like the District – it does not form a community of practice. Such a community arises only when the practice evolves and adapts to the needs, methods, and

⁷⁴ GF: «We have put together democratic mechanisms and dynamics that make participating in the *Tavolo* appealing. Anyone can bring forward proposals, as long as they personally take the lead, whether an individual citizen or an association. They can seek collaborations or propose topics which, if agreed upon during the meeting, where we assert the value of being present—are then adopted by the entire *Tavolo*. Each person contributes to the project according to their own skills and capacities, so that everyone remains a protagonist in the same way. It also gives everyone the opportunity, sooner or later, to find their own spark for initiative» (R. Orlandini & G. Faccenda, personal communication, December 20, 2023, translation mine).

⁷⁵ «It fosters dialogue among the various stakeholders to promote initiatives aimed at the revitalization, promotion, and development of the Borgo Vittoria area, from a social and cultural perspective and, within the limits of its possibilities, a commercial one» (Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria, 2025, p. 1, translation mine).

objectives that the group has collectively identified as a shared enterprise. Wenger (1999) states:

«I cannot emphasize enough that these interrelations arise out of engagement in practice and not out of an idealized view of what a community should be like» (Wenger, 1999, pp. 76-77).

Communities of practice are inherently social units and derive their meaning and existence solely through relationships. This applies both to internal dynamics and to relationships with the outside world. Internally, a community of practice works when multiple individuals collaborate toward a shared enterprise. This entails the definition – though often implicit and inherently flexible – of «routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence» (Wenger, 1999, p. 83). These constitute what Wenger calls *the repertoire of a community of practice*. This repertoire develops over time, continually expands, and constantly evolves as new elements are introduced and older ones are set aside. The *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria* possesses a rich repertoire composed of stories of past activities, relationships among members, neighborhood histories, political connections, languages, jokes, humor, references and opinions, sympathies and antipathies, diverse political, religious, and social orientations, and internal mechanisms for managing all of these. The only way to truly understand such a repertoire is to engage with the community of practice, even temporarily or peripherally.

The *Tavolo* does not have a fixed or official legal structure. Indeed, its statute states:

«Non trattandosi di associazione o altra struttura giuridicamente riconosciuta, i presupposti per il funzionamento del Tavolo, devono essere necessariamente basati sulla fiducia reciproca, onestà e sullo spirito di collaborazione⁷⁶» (Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria, 2025, p. 2).

Each member's role is defined by their actions and level of commitment to the *Tavolo*'s initiatives, rather than by an organizational structure or roles imposed from above. Each person assumes different responsibilities depending on the project they choose to undertake at a given time, drawing on their theoretical and practical skills, personal

⁷⁶ «As it is not an association or any other legally recognized entity, the functioning of the *Tavolo* must necessarily rely on mutual trust, honesty, and a spirit of collaboration» (*Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria*, 2025, p. 2, translation mine).

experiences, knowledge, and contacts. In this respect, the *Tavolo* fully embodies one of the key characteristics of communities of practice: they do not need to be formally determined, they only exist when people engage «in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another» (Wenger, 1999, p. 73). The community emerges from individuals coming together to pursue shared goals. Relationships among members are not dictated by formal rules or hierarchies – although these may exist in some cases – but are instead shaped by the mutual respect, accountability, and trust that develop among participants. Unlike institutionalized entities, which require a clear distinction between members and non-members, thereby establishing formal boundaries, communities of practice do not have limits defined by rules or preconceptions. They are fluid and continuously renegotiated in collaboration with all participants.

The *Tavolo* is composed of a heterogeneous and continually growing group. There are no barriers to entry, and anyone – whether a representative of an association or institution, or an individual citizen – can join, regardless of their background:

«Siamo passati da una decina di associazioni che partecipavano al Tavolo a quelli che siamo adesso: 25, 28. Tra l'altro si sono avvicinati anche molti cittadini perché adesso sono quasi più a frequentare singoli cittadini che non associazioni, che forse è il dato più positivo, anche se perde un po' di forza da una parte, perché le associazioni hanno altre prerogative rispetto al singolo cittadino, però arrivano punti di vista diversi, arrivano collaborazioni diverse, poi alla fine comunque le due cose si integrano abbastanza⁷⁷» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024).

My own experience reflected these dynamics. I was warmly welcomed even though I had no prior connection to the neighborhood, nor did I live there or nearby. I was simply invited to participate and contribute in whatever way I could at the time, whether through my time, engagement, relationships, or specific knowledge.

Communities like the *Tavolo* function based on mutual engagement and members' commitment to their success. They contribute according to their skills, available time,

⁷⁷ «We went from about ten associations participating in the *Tavolo* to what we have now: 25, 28. Moreover, many individual citizens have also joined, so now there are almost more individual citizens attending than associations, which is perhaps the most positive aspect. Although, in some ways, this reduces a bit of the strength, because associations have different prerogatives compared to individual citizens, it brings different perspectives and collaborations. In the end, however, the two tend to integrate quite well» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024, translation mine).

capabilities, and the practical and theoretical input they can provide to the specific project the community is engaged in at any given moment. Although it is not always the case with communities of practice, the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria* operates entirely on a voluntary basis. The letter of intent states:

«Non essendovi una struttura direttiva di forma associativa, l'articolazione degli incarichi necessari al suo funzionamento, assume forma volontaria e può essere concordata di volta in volta sulla base delle necessità; va da se, che si chiede espressamente ai partecipanti, una certa disponibilità nel farsi carico o nel rendersi disponibili (ovviamente compatibilmente con le proprie attività al di fuori del Tavolo), ad assolvere i compiti necessari alla realizzazione di quegli eventi o iniziative di cui il Tavolo ha deciso di farsi promotore in sede di riunione (aspetti logistici, burocratici, promozionali); in altri termini viene chiesto ai partecipanti, di concorrere in modo attivo e volontario, valutando in coscienza, se e quanto del proprio tempo, possono dedicare di volta in volta a tali compiti⁷⁸» (Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria, 2025, p. 2).

Being part of a community of practice requires work and the investment of time and resources in the form of engagement. The *Tavolo* meets on a biweekly basis, while maintaining a degree of flexibility – particularly to accommodate activities taking place in the neighborhood – to discuss proposals, engage with topics of shared interest, make decisions, and organize activities. As Roberto Orlandini remarked:

«Per andare al Tavolo devi rinunciare a qualcosa che stai facendo a casa con qualcun altro o da qualche altra parte o comunque dedicare del tempo a un'attività che non è quella di carattere individuale. Questa è la prima grande distinzione, tutto avviene in un ambito di volontarismo completo. Dopodiché, come dicevo, l'impostazione data è quella di confrontarsi tra le varie cose che ognuno, singolarmente o col proprio gruppo o associazione di appartenenza, porta avanti, ma nell'ottica di mettere insieme vari pezzi, non con l'intento di ritagliare più spazio, più considerazione, più partecipazione per la propria attività di appartenenza. È quindi un discorso di conoscenza reciproca, possibilmente anche con un approfondimento che è garantito anche con una

⁷⁸ «As there is no directive structure in the form of an association, the assignment of tasks necessary for its functioning takes a voluntary form and can be agreed upon from time to time based on needs. Naturally, participants are explicitly asked to make themselves available and take responsibility (obviously compatible with their activities outside the *Tavolo*) to carry out the tasks required for the implementation of events or initiatives that the *Tavolo* has decided to promote during meetings (logistical, bureaucratic, promotional aspects). In other words, participants are asked to contribute actively and voluntarily, evaluating in good conscience if, and how much of, their time they can dedicate to these tasks on each occasion» (*Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria*, 2025, p. 2, translation mine).

frequenzazione costante. Si può dire che a livello aggregativo sicuramente è un'esperienza che è di grande aiuto, anche per le relazioni nel quartiere⁷⁹» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

Although there are no formal obligations or constraints, meetings are the *Tavolo*'s primary relational tool. For this reason, regular and active participation is ideally one of the key elements for genuinely being part of the community of practice and for playing a role within it. Much like at MUFANT, I quickly realized that a certain level of commitment and consistency in attending the meetings was essential to stay up to date with the *Tavolo*'s initiatives and the constantly evolving relationships it maintained with local institutions and other actors. Moreover, meetings are the main site of what Wenger calls the work of *community maintenance*, one of the prerequisites for the continued functioning of a community of practice. Wenger emphasizes that, although this aspect of practice is often hidden, undervalued, or unrecognized, it is in fact essential for sustaining relationships both within the community and with the outside world. This is also mentioned in the *Tavolo*'s letter of intent:

«Partecipazione e mutualità sono elementi imprescindibili per il buon funzionamento del Tavolo, per tanto, a tutti i partecipanti è chiesto uno sforzo nel divenire attori attivi sia nelle fasi di progettazione che in quelle di realizzazione delle iniziative⁸⁰» (Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria, 2025, p. 3).

The purpose of this maintenance work is to ensure continuity. Communities of practice are not defined by a specific duration, yet building the relationships that sustain them – as well as the shared repertoire and individual initiatives – inevitably takes time.

⁷⁹ «To attend the *Tavolo* you have to give up something you are doing at home with someone else or elsewhere, or in any case dedicate time to an activity that is not of an individual nature. This is the first major distinction: everything takes place in a context of complete voluntarism. Then, as I said, the approach is to discuss the various things that each person, individually or with their group or association, is carrying forward, but with the aim of bringing different pieces together, not to carve out more space, more recognition, or more participation for one's own activity. It is therefore a matter of mutual knowledge, possibly with a deeper understanding that is also ensured through regular participation. It can be said that, at an aggregative level, it is certainly an experience of great help, also for relationships within the neighborhood» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023, translation mine).

⁸⁰ «Participation and mutuality are essential elements for the proper functioning of the *Tavolo*; therefore, all participants are asked to make an effort to become active actors both in the planning stages and in the implementation of initiatives» (*Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria*, 2025, p. 3, translation mine).

However, maintaining mutual engagement on a relatively continuous basis is essential to prevent the weakening and dispersal of relationships and practices. Only in this way can the community's commitment to continued collaboration and the construction of a shared history be sustained.

Equally important is maintaining consistent relationships with the outside world, as communities of practice are deeply embedded in geographical, historical, social, legal, political, and practical contexts. These contexts shape the goals of the community, the reasons members come together, and the way relationships function within it. In other words, communities of practice are far from isolated, self-contained, or independent; rather they derive their meaning and structure from the environments that surround them. They cannot function separately from all the other entities operating within the same context, whether physical-geographical or conceptual and purpose-based. The various enterprises coexisting are always interconnected: they influence each other, whether they have an active relationship or not, collaborating or conflicting. At the same time, a community of practice does not need to function in an idealized way, rely on friendships, or conform to theoretical or institutional notions of what a community should be. The *Tavolo* operates democratically and inclusively, grounded in mutual respect – but this does not mean that conflicts never arise. Disagreements, discussions, and challenges occur, and they are managed as constructively as possible.

The relationships among individuals within the *Tavolo*, as well as between the *Tavolo* and other individuals or collective entities with which it interacts, are guided by a set of informal rules. These rules are not formally defined, declared, or necessarily recognized as such, but can be understood through what Wenger (1999) calls a «communal regime of mutual accountability» which «plays a central role in defining the circumstances under which, as a community and as individuals, members feel concerned or unconcerned by what they are doing» (Wenger, 1999, p. 81). Each member is accountable both as an individual and as part of the collective they represent, as well as to the *Tavolo* itself.

The *Tavolo* is in a state of ongoing transformation, with people coming and going, drawing closer and moving away, leaving and returning. Some maintain stable and long-lasting relations with the community, while others are involved only for the duration of a single initiative, or engage intermittently as relationships emerge and fade over time. Participation varies from meeting to meeting, each time involving different combinations of individuals. Naturally, the patterns of continuity and discontinuity that characterize each

of the *Tavolo*'s relationships, both internal and external, shape the different roles and degrees of influence within the *Tavolo* itself:

«Nella sua formazione il Tavolo ha visto la partecipazione assidua di alcuni gruppi/associazioni/persone che hanno contribuito maggiormente a farlo crescere e quella occasionale di altri; va da sé che i partecipanti fissi, hanno nel corso del tempo assunto incarichi e valenze al suo interno che, pur se non formalizzate, sono loro riconosciute dagli altri partecipanti, questo non preclude nulla a nessuno che si voglia aggiungere ma, semplicemente spiega alcune dinamiche che si sono venute a creare al suo interno, tali ruoli sono necessari al suo funzionamento e potrebbero essere ovviamente modificati nel tempo e nel momento in cui altri con pari capacità si proponessero nel ricoprire tali incarichi in accord con l'assemblea⁸¹» (Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria, 2025, p. 2).

The motivations that lead individuals and associations to participate in the *Tavolo* can be diverse and may change over time. They depend, among other factors, on each participant's relationship with the neighborhood: for some, it is a place of residence; for others, a place of work; and for others still, a stimulating area in which they perceive transformative potential.

For me, the *Tavolo* was initially a research field that I needed to get familiar with. I approached this by conducting interviews and informal conversations with members, participating in neighborhood initiatives promoted by the group, and actively attending the *Tavolo*'s meetings fairly consistently for about a year and a half. Over time, I began proposing ideas and identifying opportunities for collaboration, both personally and on behalf of MUFANT. During the course of my fieldwork, the *Tavolo* evolved into a space where I developed personal relationships and friendships. At first, I mostly attended the meetings to take notes and conduct observations, trying to negotiate my positionality and find a conceptual and practical space where I could situate my research. Now, at the end of my PhD journey, I sometimes simply attend the meetings to say hello, catch up with people, and give them updates.

⁸¹ «In its formation, the *Tavolo* has seen the regular participation of certain groups/associations/individuals who contributed most to its growth, and the occasional participation of others; it goes without saying that the regular participants, over time, have taken on roles and significance within it that, even if not formalized, are recognized by the other participants. This does not preclude anyone who wishes to join but simply explains some of the dynamics that have developed within it. Such roles are necessary for its functioning and could, of course, be modified over time and whenever others with equal abilities propose themselves to take on these roles in agreement with the assembly» (Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria, 2025, p. 2, translation mine).

In summary, the *Tavolo* carries out a wide range of activities, but its fundamental role is that of a relational hub: it brings together projects and initiatives, intentions and commitments, and connects the *Tavolo*'s members and their respective associations with one another, with the wider neighborhood, and with institutions and external entities that, in different ways, revolve it. Giorgio Faccenda, speaking about his role as coordinator of the *Tavolo*, recounts:

«Faccio più che altro da collegamento perché molti ti raccontano la propria situazione, quello che fanno, quello che non fanno, quello che hanno in progetto e via di seguito, e tu cominci a collegare i fili⁸²» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024).

Over time, the *Tavolo* has become an important resource for the area. It communicates and collaborates with institutions and political bodies in an open, proactive and continuous manner, acting as an intermediary between the needs of the citizens of Borgo Vittoria and public administrations. The *Tavolo*'s letter of intent states, in fact, that it:

«Intrattiene relazioni collaborative con gli organi amministrativi territoriali, ai quali si rivolge in modo propositivo al fine di intraprendere e proporre azioni che seguono tali direzioni [di sviluppo socio-culturale del quartiere]; nel farlo si rende inoltre disponibile a recepire e valutare di volta in volta, proposte e collaborazioni che da questi vengano avanzate ed in cui il Tavolo ritenga possa essere parte attiva⁸³» (Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria, 2025, p. 1).

Naturally, a reality that is so active and attentive within the local area represents, for territorial institutions, both an important resource and a potential source of complication and contestation. Therefore, although the *Tavolo* has generally been received positively by institutions – regardless of the political orientation of individual administrations – and has, over time, assumed an increasingly central role in neighborhood life, the relationship

⁸² «I mostly act as a link, because many people tell you about their situation, what they do, what they don't do, what they have planned, and so on, and you start connecting the threads» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024, translation mine).

⁸³ «It maintains collaborative relationships with local administrative bodies, which it approaches in a proactive manner in order to undertake and propose actions that follow these directions [of the neighborhood's socio-cultural development]; in doing so, it also makes itself available to receive and evaluate, on a case-by-case basis, proposals and collaborations put forward by these bodies in which the Table considers it can play an active role» (Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria, 2025, p. 1, translation mine).

between the involved parties nonetheless remains ambivalent and requires continuous renegotiation:

GF: «In merito ai rapporti con Circoscrizione e Comune, diventando sempre più autonomi, ma anche avendo sempre più voce nel quartiere, perché le persone ci conoscono e ci fanno anche delle domande con cui non c'entriamo niente, direi che siamo diventati un punto di riferimento, nel bene e nel male. E quindi questo dalla politica continua di volta in volta, a seconda di chi passa, a essere un po' impugnato e quindi c'è chi ci vede come fumo negli occhi perché da una parte possiamo dar fastidio, sollevando e seguendo determinate questioni su cui magari la politica preferirebbe meno attenzione, oppure dall'altra parte c'è chi opportunisticamente si dice: “Abbiamo un soggetto sul territorio che ha comunque una credibilità e delle competenze”, o quantomeno capisce che passare attraverso un gruppo di cittadini e associazioni del territorio per portare delle modifiche, portare dei progetti, delle iniziative sul territorio in maniera che non sembrino calate dall'alto senza nessun riscontro dalla base, gli torna anche comodo, no?⁸⁴» (R. Orlandini & G. Faccenda, personal communication, December 20, 2023).

The increasingly prominent role of the *Tavolo* in neighborhood life also generates a degree of ambiguity in residents' perceptions. At times, residents regard the *Tavolo* as the closest institutional interlocutor, effectively attributing to it responsibilities that do not formally belong to it. In this sense, the *Tavolo* risks being perceived as a substitute for local institutions rather than as a voluntary collective whose existence depends entirely on the active participation of its members. Consequently, even individuals who do not contribute to its work may advance demands and criticisms without engaging in the *Tavolo*'s activities. At the same time, institutions may capitalize on its presence by informally delegating certain functions of public engagement, thereby partially absolving themselves of responsibility:

⁸⁴ GF: «With regard to relations with the District and the Municipality, as we have become increasingly autonomous but also increasingly visible in the neighborhood, because people know us and even ask us questions that have nothing to do with us, I would say that we have become a point of reference, for better or for worse. And so, from the political side, this continues from time to time, depending on who is in office, to be somewhat contested. There are those who see us as a thorn in their side, because on the one hand we can be a nuisance by raising and following certain issues that politics might prefer to receive less attention; on the other hand, there are those who opportunistically say, “We have an actor in the area who has credibility and expertise,” or at least understand that going through a group of citizens and local associations to introduce changes, projects, and initiatives in the area, so that they do not appear to be imposed from above without any grassroots feedback, can also be convenient for them, right?» (R. Orlandini & G. Faccenda, personal communication, December 20, 2023, translation mine).

«Da una parte noi ci assumiamo anche del rischio, nel senso che, metti che qualcosa va storto, come è capitato all'inizio con Via Vibò dove ci sono state reazioni contrastanti sulla pedonalizzazione, ti dicono: “Ah, avete deciso voi per tutti. Avete fatto sta cazzata”. Poi per carità, io queste cose qua penso che lascino sempre il tempo che trovano, nel senso che sì, ho deciso io per te e tu dov'eri? Cioè, la domanda è molto semplice. Noi abbiamo fatto decine di incontri aperti per la pedonalizzazione, per il murale e via di seguito e non partecipava mai nessuno. Certo se la cosa può andare a danno, quello è un altro discorso. Poi, per carità, dobbiamo sempre sentire tutte le ragioni⁸⁵» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024).

Finally, this complex relational system also includes associations that, although they do not participate consistently in The *Tavolo*'s activities, nevertheless maintain relationships with it in various ways:

«Bene o male anche le associazioni che non partecipano sempre, quando le cerchi, in un modo o nell'altro trovano la maniera di collaborare⁸⁶» (R. Orlandini & G. Faccenda, personal communication, December 20, 2023).

These kinds of relationships are situated in what Wenger (1999) defines as the *periphery of practice*. Based on my observations of both the community of practice of the *Tavolo* and the heritage community of MUFANT, as well as the relationships between them, I argue that they are located in each other's peripheral regions.

2.4. The research project and the Canadian fieldwork

The *periphery of practice* is a region that is neither fully within nor fully without the borders of the community of practice, and that surrounds it with a certain degree of permeability. Within this space, different communities can interact in mutually beneficial

⁸⁵ «On the one hand, we also take on some risk, in the sense that if something goes wrong, as happened at the beginning with Via Vibò, where there were mixed reactions to the pedestrianization, they tell you: ‘Oh, you decided for everyone. You screwed this up.’ Then, of course, I think these things always amount to very little, in the sense that yes, I decided for you, and where were you? I mean, the question is very simple. We held dozens of open meetings about pedestrianization, about the mural, and so on, and no one ever showed up. Of course, if something ends up causing harm, that’s a different matter. But still, we always have to listen to all sides» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024, translation mine).

⁸⁶ «More or less, even the associations that do not always participate, when you reach out to them, somehow find a way to collaborate» (R. Orlandini & G. Faccenda, personal communication, December 20, 2023, translation mine).

ways by contributing knowledge, experiential, and relational resources to pursue shared endeavors, thereby giving rise to a new, third community of practice. Here as well, membership is determined not by reification or formal declaration, but by mutual engagement. Unlike full membership, a peripheral relationship allows for legitimate collaborative interactions without subjecting those who participate sporadically to the same obligations as stable members. This does not mean, however, that no effort is required. On the contrary, the lack of continuity constitutes a disadvantage in relation to the rest of the community, where, as discussed earlier, more active and consistent members occupy more central positions and consequently wield greater decision-making power. Peripheral relationships, therefore, represent both a resource and a constraint for the communities involved. On the one hand, a rich network of peripheral relationships enables the management of multiple levels of involvement, allowing communities to capitalize on a wide range of opportunities for mutual support and learning. On the other hand, sustaining such relationships can be more challenging and may place peripheral actors in a position of relative subordination with respect to other entities within the community (Wenger, 1999).

There are several factors that led me to conclude that MUFANT and the *Tavolo* maintain peripheral relationships. During my first year of fieldwork at the museum, as I began to focus my research on the institution's relationship with its surrounding neighborhood, I started observing the visitors. Noticing that MUFANT's audience appeared to include few local residents, I collected basic data on where the visitors came from. With the help of the museum's volunteer and trainee staff, who were responsible for checking tickets at the entrance, I collected some simple information on the origins of a sample of visitors over the course of approximately one month – from November 16 to December 17, 2023 – covering the four days per week that the museum was open. The collected data confirmed that, out of the sample of 134 registered visitors, 93 came from Turin and its province. Among them, only one was from Borgo Vittoria (Figure 1; data collected personally, 2025). Most visitors learn about MUFANT through promotional channels such as the *Abbonamento Musei Piemonte*⁸⁷ or social media posts. Word of mouth is also a frequent method, especially for attracting people interested in a specific exhibition

⁸⁷ The *Abbonamento Musei Piemonte* (Piedmont Museums Pass) is a regional museum membership program that allows holders to access a wide network of museums, exhibitions, and cultural sites across Piedmont.

(such as the *Gundam: tecnologia ed evoluzione di un'icona giapponese*⁸⁸ exhibition during the data collection period) or particular activities.

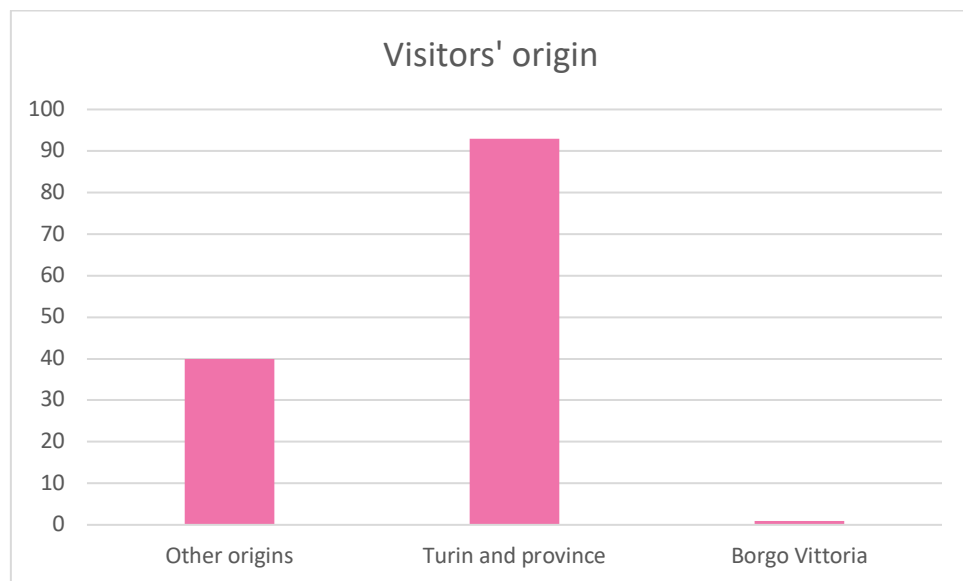


Figure 1. Distribution of visitors by origin.

While the pattern regarding the origin of visitors is also reflected in participation in events organized by MUFANT, both inside and outside the museum, the data show some differences in visitor demographics. Regarding regular visits to the collection, the average age of guests is relatively low due to the considerable number of children and teenagers who attend accompanied by parents, grandparents, or other adults. The data indicate that for approximately 94 adults, there were 39 children present (data collected personally, 2025). However, for events organized by MUFANT – such as exhibit inaugurations, book presentations, lectures, expert meetings, and discussions – the average age of attendees is higher, and the audience is much less heterogeneous. The majority of participants come from the museum's heritage community, are connected to it, or are guests specifically attracted by the specialized themes of the events. These visitors tend to be experts in the field or at least familiar with the subject matter⁸⁹.

⁸⁸ Translation: *Gundam: Technology and Evolution of a Japanese Icon* (<https://www.mufant.it/2023/09/06/gundam-tecnologia-ed-evoluzione-di-unicona-giapponese/>).

⁸⁹ Information based on participant observation collected during attendance at these events.

Conversely, the limited attendance of visitors from Borgo Vittoria at MUFANT is mirrored in the museum's presence in the neighborhood. From interviews with Borgo Vittoria residents unaffiliated with any association or institution, it emerges that the museum is relatively unknown. Most people are unaware of its existence, while others have heard of it but have never engaged with or visited MUFANT. Below are some examples of comments collected when interviewees were asked whether they knew the museum:

«Io ad esempio non sapevo neanche dell'esistenza del MUFANT, non lo sapevo proprio, infatti quando me l'ha detto un mio amico, ho detto: "Mamma mia, ma davvero?". Non sapevo⁹⁰» (P. Concadoro, personal communication, April 9, 2024)

«No, quando me ne hai parlato sono andata a cercarlo, ma non lo conoscevo⁹¹» (M. Galasso, personal communication, April 5, 2024).

«Conoscevo il MUFANT solo di nome perché avevo visto a volte dei volantini, o comunque andando magari al Salone del Libro o andando anche al Comics Torino ne avevo sentito parlare. Io onestamente non sapevo dove fosse, quindi quando ho visto che il MUFANT era nel mio quartiere ero tipo: "Ah ok, o sono tonta io che non lo sapevo o erano loro nascosti, che avevano deciso: "Hey, tu sei del quartiere, non devi sapere che ci sono". Grazie, in famiglia siamo tutti appassionati di fantascienza, bene o male potevi farci sapere che c'eri⁹²» (V. Poli, personal communication, February 1, 2024).

When people learn about MUFANT, they often express curiosity and interest, although this does not always lead to visits or consistent attendance. Nevertheless, such awareness represents an important first step in fostering engagement with the local community. The main challenge lies in increasing the museum's visibility and effectively communicating the variety of cultural offerings it provides. As discussed before, its

⁹⁰ «For example, I didn't even know that MUFANT existed, I really didn't. In fact, when a friend told me about it, I said, 'Oh my, really?' I didn't know» (P. Concadoro, personal communication, April 9, 2024, translation mine).

⁹¹ «No, when you told me about it I went to look it up, but I didn't know it» (M. Galasso, personal communication, April 5, 2024, translation mine).

⁹² «I only knew MUFANT by name because I had sometimes seen flyers, or I had heard about it maybe at the *Salone del Libro* or at *Comics Torino*. Honestly, I didn't know where it was, so when I saw that MUFANT was in my neighborhood, I was like, 'Ah, okay, either I'm just stupid for not knowing, or they were hiding it, like they had decided: "Hey, you're from the neighborhood, you don't need to know we're here."' Thanks, in my family we're all sci-fi fans, more or less you could have let us know you existed» (V. Poli, personal communication, February 1, 2024, translation mine).

peripheral location poses a difficulty, as the museum is not situated in a high-traffic area. However, most interviewees agree that a more prominent presence of advertisements and signage throughout the neighborhood could significantly support these efforts. Kyle Poli and Giuseppe Cicogna, active member of the *Tavolo* and a volunteer with *Procivicos*⁹³, shared their ideas on the matter during our interviews at MUFANT:

«Per essere più presente nel quartiere il MUFANT sicuramente deve farsi fare più pubblicità perché secondo me ce n'è veramente poca. Poi io da persone esterne non ne sento quasi mai parlare, ma anche persone di zona. Mettere cartelli pubblicitari, volantini. Anche a pochi metri da qua, perché una volta mi è capitato di parlare con una signora qua fuori che stava camminando e fa: “Ah ma qua c'era un museo, ma non l'ho mai visto. Non si vede nemmeno”, ha detto questo. Quindi dico, magari mettere dei cartelli un po' più avanti⁹⁴» (K. Poli, personal communication, March 21, 2024).

«Qui al MUFANT ci sono delle cose molto belle, questa è un'eccellenza, però non si sa tanto che c'è. Cioè, sto pensando anche ad altre città del mondo dove cose come questa sarebbero casomai indicate con cartelli enormi sin da molto lontano. E non so quale sia il problema di questa cosa specifica, però ecco la valorizzazione di quello che c'è non è mai sufficiente e sicuramente per quel che riguarda quest'area particolare della città. Non è mai sufficiente in assoluto a Torino e in Italia, e poi se andiamo nel microcosmo del quartiere, beh a maggior ragione⁹⁵» (G. Cicogna, personal communication, February 1, 2024).

While residents of Borgo Vittoria recognize the potentially positive impact of MUFANT on the neighborhood and generally see it as something worth valuing, there remains a distance between them and the institution, as highlighted by the data collected at the museum, the observations conducted, and the interviews carried out. The lack of pre-existing shared knowledge or personal interest in the themes of the fantastic, reported by

⁹³ *Protezione Civile della Comunità di Scientology* (translation: Civil Protection unit of the Scientology Community).

⁹⁴ «To be more present in the neighborhood, MUFANT definitely needs more advertising, because in my opinion, there's very little. Even people from outside hardly ever hear about it, and sometimes even locals don't. Putting up posters or flyers, just a few meters from here, would help. I once spoke with a lady walking by who said, “Oh, there's a museum here? I never knew. You can't even see it”. So I'd suggest putting up signs a bit further ahead» (K. Poli, personal communication, March 21, 2024, translation mine).

⁹⁵ «There are really beautiful things here at MUFANT; it's an excellence. But not many people know it exists. I'm thinking of other cities in the world where places like this would be indicated by huge signs from far away. I don't know what the specific issue is here, but the promotion of what exists is never enough, certainly not in this part of the city. It's never enough in general in Turin or Italy, and if we look at the neighborhood microcosm, even more so» (G. Cicogna, personal communication, February 1, 2024, translation mine).

most interviewees with few exceptions, combined with the museum's challenges in communicating its cultural offerings and attracting attention – a difficulty common to many museums – means that the citizens of Borgo Vittoria are, at present, not part of MUFANT's heritage community. Nevertheless, I believe that this has the potential to change through the mediation of the *Tavolo*.

Indeed, the situation is different regarding MUFANT's relationship with the associations operating in the neighborhood. The museum has pre-existing connections with some associations, such as the *Centro di Documentazione Storica* and the *Tavolo* in general. Since relocating to its current premises, opportunities have arisen for collaboration, resource sharing, and the creation of conceptual links between the interests of individual associations and the cultural heritage of the fantastic. For a period, Davide and Silvia also participated in the *Tavolo*'s meetings. However, the museum's increasing workload, not matched by a corresponding growth in stable staff, has made it increasingly difficult for them to maintain a consistent presence and actively participate in the *Tavolo*'s activities – and, consequently, in the life of the neighborhood. As discussed earlier, mutual engagement and continuity are fundamental elements that sustain the functioning of the *Tavolo*'s community of practice. Without these, MUFANT inevitably remains outside full membership. Yet it continues to maintain a peripheral relationship that can still prove fertile. The *Tavolo* members recognize and understand these circumstances and indicate that they are ready to resume collaboration when mutual synergies align and when interesting proposals emerge for both parties:

«Le relazioni con il MUFANT noi sappiamo benissimo che sono il massimo che ci possiamo aspettare per motivi contingenti, però sappiamo che ci sono. Loro, a differenza di altri soggetti, non rientrano in quella categoria che dicevo di quelli che ti cercano soltanto per i bandi e poi scompaiono. Sappiamo che loro la volontà ce l'avrebbero perché l'han sempre dimostrato, abbiamo provato anche a partecipare a dei bandi insieme in passato e non sono andati in porto, ma questo è secondario. Quindi sappiamo che la volontà c'è e questo è importante, questa è la parte più importante. Poi, come con tutti, le cose si fanno quando è il momento in cui maturano e si riesce a farle. Messa alla base della piramide la volontà di realizzare soprattutto quell'interazione tra il MUFANT e il territorio, come Tavolo possiamo metterci a disposizione, essere utili con degli stimoli, con delle idee che

potrebbero essere la modalità pratica con cui il MUFANT potrebbe interagire col territorio⁹⁶» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024).

Taking these premises into account – together with the characteristics and respective missions of MUFANT and the *Tavolo*, the gaps identified, and the potential emerging from the first phase of fieldwork summarized above – it was agreed with the museum, in line with the objectives of the doctoral program, to focus my collaboration on understanding how MUFANT might strengthen its relationship with the neighborhood and enhance its socio-cultural impact on the territory. This work was grounded in the anthropology of the fantastic, understood both as an analytical framework and as the substantive basis for practice-based interventions and cultural initiatives, thereby highlighting the potential of anthropology in applied and public contexts.

Within this project, my role as a researcher fell within what Wenger (1999) describes as *brokering* – that is, a set of activities aimed at connecting different communities with external actors and coordinating their relationships. In my case, the realities to be connected were MUFANT's heritage community and the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria*'s community of practice. The goal was to foster collaboration that helps create shared meanings, thereby enhancing MUFANT's presence in the neighborhood and establishing a place within the museum's heritage community for local actors. Ultimately, the aim was to cultivate a relationship of heritage practice centered on the cultural heritage of the fantastic, contributing to the «social landscape of shared practices, boundaries, peripheries, overlaps, connections, and encounters» (Wenger, 1999, p. 118) in Borgo Vittoria. This approach went beyond formal institutional affiliations and sought to foster new forms of socio-cultural innovation within the neighborhood by increasing MUFANT's impact on the territory. As Wenger (1999) explains:

⁹⁶ «We know very well that our relationship with MUFANT is the best we can expect given the circumstances, but we also know that it exists. Unlike other organizations, they don't belong to that category of those who only approach you for funding opportunities and then disappear. We know that they have the willingness, because they have always demonstrated it. We even tried to apply for some grants together in the past, which didn't go through, but that's secondary. The important thing is that the willingness is there, that's the most important part. Then, as with everyone, things happen when the time is right and it is possible to do them. If we put at the base of the pyramid the desire to foster interaction between MUFANT and the territory, as the *Tavolo* we can make ourselves available, be useful by providing stimuli and ideas that could be the practical way for MUFANT to engage with the neighborhood» (G. Faccenda, personal communication, February 23, 2024, translation mine).

«The job of brokering is complex. It involves processes of translation, coordination, and alignment between perspectives. It requires enough legitimacy to influence the development of a practice, mobilize attention, and address conflicting interests.⁸ It also requires the ability to link practices by facilitating transactions between them, and to cause learning by introducing into practice elements of another» (Wenger, 1999, p. 109).

Understanding the anthropology of the fantastic contributed to facilitating all these processes in the specific case of MUFANT. It served as a valuable analytical tool for exploring how themes of the fantastic can be brought into dialogue with real-world socio-cultural contexts, how this relationship functions, and what potentials and challenges it presents. Moreover, the language of the fantastic can be employed as a means of socio-cultural critique and analysis: to represent social realities, deconstruct them, examine them critically, imagine alternatives, envision change, and ultimately begin to work toward forms of socio-cultural innovation.

Furthermore, Wenger argues that one of the characteristics of an effective broker is the ability to sustain multiple memberships while remaining at the periphery of several practices, positioned neither fully outside nor completely inside them (Wenger, 1999). This condition closely reflects the positionality assumed by anthropologists in their research, as they occupy a liminal space between external observation and full immersion in practice. Such a position enables the broker-ethnographer to negotiate multiple perspectives, mediating between different realities by facilitating reciprocal communication of viewpoints. At the same time, it allows the broker-ethnographer to offer an authoritative perspective, legitimized by their expertise in the themes that connect the two communities (Björkman, 2021).

Both the theoretical and the applicative dimensions of the research carried out at MUFANT and in Borgo Vittoria were complemented by fieldwork in Canada, primarily based in Vancouver at the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, where most contacts were established and interviews conducted. However, the research also included a series of online meetings and interviews with interlocutors based in both other Canadian cities and the United States. The lines of inquiry pursued, distinct in scope yet linked by their potential application at MUFANT, began with a theoretical exploration of the intersections between anthropology and the fantastic. This investigation focused on the conceptual, ontological, and epistemological mechanisms shared by the two fields, the ways in which they influence one another, and the role of anthropology within

the fantastic – particularly in the construction of fantastic worlds and narratives, as well as in the analysis of fantastic fiction beyond the original meanings of its productions. It also explored how the fantastic can support the communication and public mission of anthropology, particularly in processes of dissemination, while considering which anthropological and broader academic themes can be conveyed through fantastic genres. I conducted interviews with numerous experts in the field of the fantastic, drawn from a variety of contexts and possessing diverse areas of specialization. While these meetings were highly informative and significantly enhanced my understanding of the subject – enabling me to develop the theoretical considerations on the anthropology of the fantastic presented in the following chapter – I encountered greater difficulty in identifying opportunities for ethnographic observation at events specifically centered on the fantastic. Although my research generally elicited interest and curiosity from my interlocutors, and despite my continuous efforts to identify opportunities while in the field, it became apparent that relatively few events were explicitly designed around the fantastic. While this limited my ability to observe the direct use of the fantastic in socio-cultural initiatives, it also provided a valuable insight: despite its potential, the use of the fantastic remains relatively novel, representing an area that could be further explored and experimented with, and potentially applied in contexts where it might serve as an innovative means of communication.

In connection with this exploration, the research also sought to understand the community engagement strategies employed by various Canadian cultural organizations, with the aim of adapting and applying them to the specific context of Borgo Vittoria and MUFANT. More specifically, the research focused on how cultural institutions comparable to MUFANT managed their relationships with the communities in which they operate; how they design programs in response to the interests and needs of their audiences; how they actively involve participants; which themes they address through their activities; how they draw on the intangible heritage of imagination and creativity; and the motivations underlying their public mission. In addition to visiting these institutions, the research involved direct exchanges with staff members specifically responsible for community engagement. Once again, based on a preliminary mapping of potential interlocutors, it emerged that no institution shared MUFANT's specific focus on the fantastic and could therefore provide an analogous case. The closest comparison was the Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP) in Seattle, which, despite having several sections dedicated to genres of

the fantastic, covers a broader range of themes, including music, design, and celebrity culture, as it is focused on pop culture as a whole. Furthermore, MoPOP is a much larger institution than MUFANT and is located adjacent to the *Space Needle*, Seattle's most famous landmark. While visiting the museum offered valuable insights, its community engagement strategies and the role it plays within the city differ significantly from those of MUFANT. Thus, although it provided an interesting point of comparison and discussions with the staff were informative, it could not be considered a direct counterpart. In order to identify institutions and contexts that could be meaningfully compared to MUFANT in terms of size, scope, and operational practices, and following discussions with my co-supervisor at UBC, we decided to focus this phase of the Canadian fieldwork on cultural organizations that foster social cohesion through art, imagination, and creativity, even if they do not engage directly with the fantastic. Therefore, the institutions considered and contacted included art galleries (Vancouver Art Gallery; Surrey Art Gallery; Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery), cultural centers and organizations (Vancouver Arts Colloquium Society; Vancouver Moving Theatre; Hart House in Toronto), libraries (within the Vancouver Public Library system) and museums (Museum of Anthropology at UBC; Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle).

The fieldwork was conceived and structured on the premise that the two contexts under study are markedly different, and therefore the institutions operating within them must address distinct issues and navigate diverse socio-cultural situations. While MUFANT, located on the outskirts of Turin, engages with a peripheral reality shaped by the challenges discussed above, institutions in Vancouver operate within a social setting characterized by high population diversity, with all the opportunities and tensions that multiculturalism entails; they must navigate intergenerational dynamics between a young immigrant population and the aging long-term residents, as well as complex relations with Indigenous peoples concerning reconciliation, cultural heritage, territorial sovereignty, self-determination, and the enduring legacies of colonial oppression – particularly in relation to assimilation policies and the residential school system. Within this social fabric, other issues with significant socio-cultural impacts emerge, particularly housing affordability and homelessness, gentrification, and challenges related to mental health and addiction (Fleming et al., 2019; Van Der Haegen, 2024). All these aspects were taken into account when analysing the potential of using the participatory practices and community engagement strategies observed in the Canadian museum context as a model for the

practice-based component of this research, to be carried out in Borgo Vittoria in collaboration with MUFANT. Both the differences and the possible overlaps between the two contexts, as well as those elements of the Canadian field that could be translated and transferred into the Italian one, were closely examined through sustained attention to these dynamics, actively seeking connections while identifying differences and potential challenges in dialogue with my interlocutors. This process also involved drawing on the expertise of professionals and experts, directly soliciting their advice, and sharing observations that emerged from my ethnographic work at MUFANT and in Borgo Vittoria.

Arriving in Vancouver as an Italian, I was accustomed to an urban context that is very different in terms of its spatial configuration, functioning, and demographic composition. Although in Turin – and certainly in Borgo Vittoria – the presence of immigrant communities is significant, it is not comparable to that of Vancouver. In Italy, there is often a clear distinction between “Italians” and “others”, with some exceptions. In Canada, however, the idea of the “cultural mosaic” is reflected in the fact that defining who counts as Canadian is far less straightforward – so much so that there have historically been extensive debates around Canadian identity (Dawn, 2013). As a result, social relations are not structured around a simple “us and them” dichotomy, but rather involve multiple “others” interacting with one another in ways that are at times productive and fruitful, and at times marked by tension (Kymlicka, 2007).

Another factor that has shaped both my perception and my work in Vancouver concerns differences in how communities are defined, the importance they hold in processes of identity construction, and the dynamics that characterise them. The concept of “community” in anthropology has been widely problematized and critically examined, particularly for its tendency to essentialize and romanticize complex social formations by reducing them to harmonious units, thereby obscuring the actual complexity of the social relations that constitute them (Anderson, 1983; Appadurai, 2005; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). However, while in Italy the term is relatively uncommon in everyday usage, in Canada it is widely used to refer to groups of people who share a common interest, place of residence, or background, among other factors, thus illustrating how the concept of “community” acquires different meanings and implications across the two contexts. In assessing community engagement dynamics, it was again essential to engage in a continuous back-and-forth between the two conceptualisations, translating the dynamics of one into the other while seeking not to distort or homogenise them. At the same time, I tried

to identify points of connection and possibilities for transfer, without treating them as fundamentally separate or incommensurable.

Another factor that influenced my positionality is that, in Italy, I have tended to interact with people whose experiences and backgrounds were relatively close to my own, whether in terms of geography, education, occupation, or shared perspectives on social and political life and broader international issues. In Vancouver, by contrast, I was exposed to a far more diverse range of perspectives. I engaged with institutions that address the city both conceptually, through theoretical analysis, and practically, through direct intervention in local communities. I was first immersed in the university environment and campus social life at UBC, which represents a relatively privileged and self-contained setting, partly due to its geographic location. Through research with local institutions, I also engaged with a variety of contexts across the city, from downtown to the metropolitan area, including the Downtown Eastside, and through organizations that operate both in intellectual and artistic spheres and those directly working with people in vulnerable situations, all within a framework of diverse intercultural interactions. Finally, on a more personal note, I found myself living in a house that was an incredibly vibrant social environment. It was first and foremost diverse, with roommates from Iran, Nigeria, Mexico, and Germany, but also intellectually stimulating, given their varied educational backgrounds spanning education, art, engineering, and environmental studies, at levels from BA to PhD. Even more significant was the shared interest in activism and community building, expressed especially through a mix of traditional music from around the world – from South America to India – and constant exchange of ideas and discussions on politics, society, and social justice. Beyond this household, friendships I formed with other international students, particularly from China and India, were equally enriching. This experience was immensely rewarding, both personally and intellectually, as it connected me with remarkable people and innovative ideas and, in many ways, has influenced both my perspective and my research. Overall, it allowed me to see the city through multiple lenses.

In general, in Vancouver I positioned myself not as a complete outsider, since I was already familiar with the city, its logistics and social dynamics, as well as some of the institutions I ended up engaging with. Nevertheless, I had never lived there for more than a few months, and I could not claim to know it in depth. I remained, and still consider myself, an outsider to many of the dynamics that I was not able to experience firsthand during my time there. However, particularly through the personal relationships I developed

during my fieldwork, I was able to gain a sense of the depth and vibrancy that the city offers.

The two fieldwork experiences were both shaped by, and in turn contributed to, the theoretical reflections developed in the following chapter. The encounters and observations that emerged from research conducted in Italy and Canada played a central role in formulating the guiding questions of this study, prompting a sustained engagement with scholarship on the fantastic and enabling the identification of its points of intersection with anthropology. At the same time, this theoretical inquiry provided a lens through which these empirical experiences could be interpreted and re-evaluated. This reciprocal dynamic between fieldwork and theory underpins the structure of the chapters that follow. The next chapter elaborates the conceptual framework that informs the analysis, while the subsequent sections present the findings of the Italian and Canadian fieldwork, as well as the points at which they intersect.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

Chapter 3. The anthropology of the fantastic

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the first of the two lines of inquiry that structure the research, establishing the theoretical framework through which the concepts and practices of the anthropology of the fantastic are analysed, discussed, and translated into museum practices. This conceptual basis provides the foundation for exploring how anthropological tools and methods can illuminate the workings of the fantastic – and, conversely, how the fantastic can offer insights into anthropological thinking and practice.

The theoretical reflections presented here are grounded in the knowledge acquired at MUFANT, through participation in events and debates, and through engagement with the work and contributions of Paolo Bertetti, Davide Monopoli, Silvia Casolari, and other experts with whom I had the opportunity to interact at the museum. These insights are further situated within a broader trans-local dialogue between the Italian and Canadian field sites, in which literature-based research, ethnographic materials, and scholarly exchanges mutually informed one another. This process was sustained through interviews, informal conversations with scholars and experts, and the sharing of course materials during the fieldwork conducted at the University of British Columbia, as well as through ongoing engagement with interlocutors in both contexts. The discussion is complemented by fragments from relevant studies and interviews with the interlocutors met in Turin and Vancouver.

The central thesis of this chapter is that anthropology and the fantastic share profound epistemological, ontological and thematic affinities. As James Clifford suggests, the intersection between cultural critique and speculative imagination is strategic and meaningful; mentioning the work of French structuralist literary critic Tzvetan Todorov, Clifford includes the «semiotics of exotic worlds and fantastic spaces» in the category of «practice[s] of writing about, against, and among cultures» (Clifford, 1992, p. 3). This notion points to a shared concern with alterity, narrative construction, and the representation of difference – core concerns in both fields. By exploring the convergences between anthropology and the fantastic, this chapter aims to facilitate a productive interdisciplinary dialogue. Drawing on the suggestion of Dei, Dimpfelmeier, and Vietti (2023), it argues that examining the narrative mechanisms that generate the effects characteristic of the fantastic can also provide anthropology with a means of reflecting on

its own narrative strategies, constructedness, and literary qualities. In doing so, the chapter contributes to a broader effort to reimagine anthropological knowledge as inherently reflexive and imaginative.

The first section of the chapter introduces one of the foundational intersections between the two fields: the tension between estrangement and familiarity. This dynamic, essential to both the worldbuilding of fantastic narratives and the ethnographic encounter, will be analyzed as a shared methodological and experiential core. The second section explores how both anthropology and the fantastic operate through a continuous shifting of perspectives. Emphasis will be placed on the role of immersion, and imaginative recentering (Ryan, 2007) – qualities that are vital for understanding both fictional worlds and different cultural realities. The third section investigates the role of culture – and by extension, anthropology – in the construction of fantastic worlds. Particular attention will be paid to the subgenre of *anthropological science fiction*, with a focus on the work of American author Ursula K. Le Guin as a key case study.

The choice to examine Le Guin's experience stems from her unique personal and intellectual background: as the daughter of anthropologists Alfred Kroeber and Theodora Kracow, she witnessed ethnographic interactions personally through her family and frequently engaged in debates and conversations about anthropological issues. This direct engagement allowed her to form a relationship with anthropology that went beyond formal theoretical education. Her personal connection to the discipline significantly shaped her understanding of human relationships and her vision of both the real world and the fictional worlds she created, making her work a particularly meaningful case study within the scope of this thesis. At the same time, many other women have made important contributions to the development of fantastic fiction, challenging ethnocentric and masculinist gender norms. Notable examples include Mary Shelley, Octavia E. Butler, Margaret Atwood, Nora Keita Jemisin, Nnedi Okorafor, Nalo Hopkinson, Chérie Dimaline, and Eden Robinson.

The chapter concludes with reflections on the implications of these parallels, emphasizing the potential for reciprocal reflexivity between the disciplines. The comparison draws attention to the ways in which anthropology and fantastic fiction align in their approaches to representation, knowledge production, and negotiating the boundaries of the real.

The reflections developed in this chapter will constitute the theoretical basis for the analyses and applications presented in the following sections. By outlining the conceptual

terrain shared by anthropology and the fantastic, this chapter aims to set the stage for a deeper exploration of how the two can inform and enrich one another.

3.1. Between estrangement and familiarity

Being conceptualized and understood as the realm of impossibility, fantastic fiction inherently embraces a certain degree of detachment from empirical reality. This distancing is not only accepted – both within the narrative and by the audience – but actively expected. Supernatural elements, imaginary settings, and impossibly advanced technologies contribute to this radical separation from the primary world, fostering the defamiliarization of ordinary experience that is widely recognized as a defining feature of the mode. The importance of this detachment from reality is so central to fantastic fiction that its mechanisms and effects have been the focus of extensive scholarly analysis. Many of these studies explore the unique emotional and cognitive responses the mode elicits in its audience (Freud, 1919; Spiegel, 2008; Todorov, 1975). Despite having been defined in different ways throughout the years, the feeling in question became encapsulated in the concept of *estrangement* when Darko Suvin used it in his book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979) to define the «underlying attitude and dominant formal device [of science fiction]» (Suvin, 1979, p. 7)⁹⁷.

Suvin defines estrangement as the effect produced by «confronting a set normative system [...] with a point of view or look implying a new set of norms» (Suvin, 1979, p. 6). In fantastic fiction, this effect arises when readers encounter an alternative reality governed by norms that radically diverge from their empirical experience. This distancing is made possible by the presence of a *novum* – an innovation or transformative element (technological, social, or ontological) whose emergence is rationally and scientifically⁹⁸ plausible within the narrative framework. Even when science fiction introduces elements that are not feasible in the author's present, they are still portrayed as plausibly achievable

⁹⁷ Allan Weiss argues that Darko Suvin's theoretical considerations on science fiction can be applied in a broader sense to fantastic fiction as a whole (Weiss, 2021).

⁹⁸ Suvin explicitly states that he intends rationality and scientificity as «validated by the post-Cartesian and post-Baconian scientific method» (Suvin, 1979, p. 64) reflecting a eurocentric, positivistic conception of knowledge.

in the future, thereby constituting what Suvin calls a «realistic irreality» (Suvin, 1979, p. viii). Because of this plausible dimension, Suvin characterizes science fiction as the «literature of *cognitive* estrangement» (Suvin, 1979, p. 4, emphasis mine). This sets it apart from other fantastic genres – such as fantasy and the weird tale, for example – which depict scenarios that are not, and are not meant to be, explained through any rational or scientifically possible means.

The notion of estrangement, conceptualized by Darko Suvin, has been largely built upon by numerous scholars and still represents a canonical concept in the study of the fantastic. Before entering this field, however, the idea of estrangement was discussed and revised at length, especially within various twentieth-century's theories of aesthetics, like Modernism and Formalism. Suvin himself drew from the works of intellectuals like German philosophers and critics Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch, Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, and German playwright Bertolt Brecht. The latter's theorization of the *Verfremdungseffekt* – effect of alienation, detachment, distancing – was particularly influential in Suvin's theory (Spiegel, 2008; Suvin, 1979). Brecht conceived the *Verfremdungseffekt* as a stylistic device that could be integrated into realistic theatrical representations to produce a sense of estrangement, disrupting the audience's familiarity with what they saw on stage. His aim was to break the illusion of passive viewing and instead foster critical distance, prompting spectators to actively reflect on the social and political conditions being portrayed. By generating this detachment, the *Verfremdungseffekt* encouraged audiences to question accepted norms and recognize “normality” not as natural or inevitable, but as historically constructed and therefore open to change. Viktor Shklovsky pursued a similar aim: to confront the problem of superficial perception and habitual blindness. He argues that people often fail to truly see the reality of their everyday lives, moving through the world with little conscious awareness. To counter this, he advocates for *making things strange* as a way to disrupt normative perception and render the ordinary newly visible (Spiegel, 2008). Brecht employed analogous strategies in the theater, using techniques designed to make scenes appear unfamiliar while still remaining within the realm of possibility. These included setting the action in realistic but historically or temporally distant contexts, directing actors to use exaggerated gestures that foreground social behaviors, and exposing stage mechanics to break the illusion of narrative continuity. Importantly, neither Brecht nor Shklovsky relied on fantastical or supernatural elements to produce this defamiliarization.

It was Sigmund Freud who proposed that fantastical imaginaries provide a uniquely powerful setting for producing and examining the effects of estrangement and detachment from reality. He explored this idea in his essay *Das Unheimliche* (Freud, 1919). This concept was used by Davide Monopoli, notably a psychologist by formation, during one of our first formal interviews to explain how the concept of the fantastic was understood and employed at MUFANT. On that occasion, he explained the connection in these terms:

«Il rapporto tra fantascienza e psichiatria converge verso simboli noti che richiamano l'esperienza di trovare dentro il noto, il quotidiano, l'inatteso, un imprevisto, un qualcosa che non si riconosce, che quindi lo sguardo non è abituato a vedere e che viene esperito come una frattura. Che poi è un concetto già definito in senso clinico. Mi riferisco all'idea del perturbante, dell'Unheimliche freudiano, un'idea di non familiare che consiste nel trovare, in modo improvviso e imprevisto, nel familiare quello che non lo è» (D. Monopoli, personal communication, May 3, 2023).

Das Unheimliche – *uncanny* in the English translation – is the opposite of what is *heimlich*: native, belonging to home. It is the sensation of intellectual uncertainty that people experience when they find themselves in unknown places and new, confusing situations: the more disorienting the environment, the stronger the sensation. In Freud's conception, this experience of alienation is specifically related to negative emotions like fear, horror and paranoia. It represents the return of repressed feelings, emotions that were «long known to us, once very familiar» (Freud, 1919, p. 2), but have since become estranged as a coping mechanism, to allow the person to order properly, and that reemerged due to disconcerting experiences. These circumstances may emerge in both real-life situations – for instance, when confronted with a gruesome or disturbing sight – or within fictional narratives. In the former case, *Das Unheimliche* is encountered directly; although it may be triggered by relatively simple stimuli, its occurrence is constrained by the limits of reality and is therefore less frequent. In contrast, the fantastic provides a fictional space where the constraints of reality are suspended, making it a particularly fertile ground for generating uncanny sensations. While the dread-inducing scenarios described in fiction are not experienced firsthand by the reader, the emotional responses they provoke are no less real. Unbound by the limitations of the empirical world, fantastic fictional settings can amplify feelings of strangeness to the extreme, often producing a more intense sense of unfamiliarity. Moreover, any uncanny situation that might occur in real life can be replicated in fiction – alongside countless others that exist only in the realm of imagination.

For Freud, the realm of the fantastic provides an ideal setting for the *Unheimliche* to manifest and expose its psychological effects on individuals in the real world. In fact, to illustrate his theory, he turns primarily to works of fantastic literature – most notably E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* (*Der Sandmann*), an influential short story from nineteenth-century fantastic fiction.

Freud’s focus on estrangement as a form of alienation and uncertainty is also central to Tzvetan Todorov’s 1973 study *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Although often criticized or dismissed since its publication (Golovacheva, 2018; Weiss, 2021), Todorov’s work marked a significant breakthrough in the field and remains worthy of serious consideration. According to Todorov, the “pure” fantastic exists in a state of suspension between its two neighboring genres: the *uncanny*⁹⁹ and the *marvelous*. He argues that when something strange or inexplicable occurs in fantastic fiction, the character must interpret the event and decide whether it is merely «an illusion of the senses» – something unfamiliar yet ultimately explainable within the laws of reality – or a truly supernatural phenomenon, «a product of the imagination» that defies natural explanation (Todorov, 1975, p. 25). In the former case, the narrative aligns with the uncanny; in the latter, it enters the realm of the marvelous. The fantastic itself resides in the hesitation, persisting only as long as the sense of uncertainty remains unresolved. It is a liminal mode, defined by suspended judgment and the ambiguity of perception – open to either a rational or supernatural explanation of the events portrayed.

Todorov’s theory remains widely acknowledged and frequently cited for its innovative contribution to the study of the fantastic. However, it is now often regarded as overly restrictive due to its rigid, single-dimensional framework, which excludes entire categories of works that do not fit neatly within his tripartite classification (Golovacheva, 2018; Weiss, 2021). What remains particularly compelling in Todorov’s approach – as well as in Freud’s – is the emphasis on the experience of estrangement as the defining feature of the fantastic, rather than a focus on specific structural elements of the texts. Todorov

⁹⁹ The use of the same term to describe both Freud’s and Todorov’s theories – the result of the original translations into English from German and French – can be misleading, as each theorist understands the concept in subtly different ways. In Freud’s case, the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) refers to something frightening and disturbing, often tied to repressed fears or the return of the familiar in an alien form. Todorov, on the other hand, interprets the uncanny more as something strange, disconcerting, or abnormal, with less emphasis on horror and more on cognitive uncertainty.

identifies this emphasis as a shared tendency among other theorists, including American author H.P. Lovecraft, who famously argued:

«Atmosphere is most important, for the ultimate criterion of authenticity of the fantastic is not plot structure but the creation of a specific impression.... Hence we must judge the fantastic tale not so much by the author's intentions and the mechanisms of the plot, but by the emotional intensity it provokes» (Todorov, 1975, p. 34).

The “specific impression” Lovecraft refers to is the sense of destabilization that arises when one is confronted with otherness. By introducing strange elements into otherwise familiar settings, the fabric of the alleged normality gets fractured, exposing the inherent instability of what is contextually accepted as reality. The inherent alterity, characteristic of the fantastic, intensifies this effect.

Fantastic fiction, by *making the familiar strange*, generates a sense of alienation from reality while offering the audience a privileged space in which to engage with alternative possibilities. It encourages readers to confront the illusion of their supposedly stable reality and learn to observe it from a clarifying distance (Suvin, 1979). This stance closely aligns with the positionality anthropologists take when engaging with cultural difference – the very focus of our work. After all, ethnographers aim to immerse themselves in contexts that are either unfamiliar to them or familiar yet deliberately made strange in order to observe and analyze them from a fresh, critical perspective. As Clifford Geertz (1973) explains:

«Looking at the ordinary in places where it takes unaccustomed forms brings out not, as has so often been claimed, the arbitrariness of human behavior [...], but the degree to which its meaning varies according to the pattern of life by which it is informed. Understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity» (Geertz, 1973, p. 14).

Ethnographers observe cultures from an outsider point of view, and this allows them to see things differently, compared to the insiders: by thinking-from-without¹⁰⁰ anthropologists perceive what for the members of a culture is ordinary as strange. The resulting analytical distance is crucial for creating a reflexive space that is necessary to carry out an ethnographic analysis. A social and emotional detachment from the context of

¹⁰⁰ This expression overturns the one used by Shotter (2006) to describe the opposing attitude—namely, the emic perspective—which also falls within the broader anthropological approach to fieldwork.

study helps maintain professional, scientific objectivity, to gain a fuller perspective on the studied culture and to address its hidden functioning mechanisms (N. Brown et al., 2020; Duch & Rasmussen, 2021; Eller, 2016; Pedersen & Cliggett, 2021). Detachment is both a desired outcome and a consequence of the alienation and estrangement often experienced during fieldwork. Jack David Eller uses the phrase *culture shock* – «the surprise, confusion, and actual pain that one feels in the presence of the profoundly unfamiliar and unexpected» (Eller, 2016, p. 10) – and reports it as a common sensation that often accompanies ethnographic research, especially in its initial phases. Taking up the reflections of Brecht and Shklovsky, making the familiar visible again requires defamiliarization. This becomes especially important when research is done within one's own cultural setting. A basic assumption in traditional anthropology is that studying one's own culture can be especially challenging, as researchers, like everyone else, are often too immersed in their social environment to see it clearly or objectively. As Ybema and Kamsteeg (2009) put it, «the mundane, taken-for-granted nature of everyday social life prevents culture members from seeing the emic rules and routines running the show» (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009, p. 108). For insiders, these “rules and routines” feel normal, and that very sense of normality can blind perception by making the familiar invisible. As anthropologists, we need to «develop a distanced, reflexive stance that enables us to defamiliarize ourselves from an overly familiar field, to denaturalize the field's taken-for-granted understandings» (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009, p. 108). Anthropology, in this way, aims to shed light on the ordinary – those aspects of life so embedded in daily routines that they go unnoticed and are seen as “the natural way of doing things”. Ethnographic analysis helps reveal these assumptions as culturally shaped and, therefore, open to question and change.

Ultimately, estrangement is a shared characteristic of both the fantastic and anthropological fieldwork, linking the two through their common emphasis on defamiliarizing the familiar. Yet this process of defamiliarization relies, paradoxically, on a grounding in the familiar since some degree of recognition is essential both to make sense of cultural otherness and to engage with the fantastic. In both disciplines, in fact, estrangement is central, but it is the tension between the strange and the known that enables deeper insight.

While conducting fieldwork, familiar elements are essential for understanding cultural otherness. By identifying and connecting with shared aspects between observer and observed, ethnographers can position themselves within the perspective of the other.

This process enables a genuine understanding of the emic viewpoint and fosters the ability to think *from within* the studied culture (Shotter, 2006; Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009). Understanding cultures from an internal, *emic* perspective is a key principle in modern anthropology. To do this, ethnographers need to fully immerse themselves in the settings they study. Familiarity plays an important role in this process, emerging in two distinct stages: initially, through the identification of recognizable elements that facilitate a connection with the new context; and subsequently, through the active process of «making the familiar strange, the exotic quotidian» (Clifford & Marcus, 1992, p. 2) – developing a deeper understanding of the cultural reality through sustained engagement and building relationships with people and places (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009). To make this possible, anthropologists rely on certain fundamental points of reference that help them draw meaningful comparisons between cultures. These frameworks are grounded in universal characteristics shared by all human cultures – such as basic ways of interacting with the environment and the underlying laws of physics (whether consciously understood as such or not) –which are essential for establishing a common ground for interaction and communication. Shared, familiar relational cues enable anthropologists to, in the words of Clifford Geertz (referring Ludwig Wittgenstein) «Finding our feet, [...] what ethnographic research consists of as a personal experience» (Geertz, 1973, p. 13). These common references help researchers to recognize aspects of the reality they are studying and foster mutual understanding with the people whose culture they aim to interpret (N. Brown et al., 2020; Duch & Rasmussen, 2021; Eller, 2016; Pedersen & Cliggett, 2021). In the words of Fabio Dei (2012):

«Se mancassero questi tratti comuni, «noi» e gli «altri» ci troveremmo a vivere in universi incommensurabili; ma allora non riusciremmo neppure a comunicare, a capire i rispettivi linguaggi, a condividere pratiche di vita quotidiana. Se ciò accade, dev'esserci una testa di ponte interculturale – per quanto minima – non sottoposta a variazioni locali o storiche¹⁰¹» (Dei, 2012, p. 48).

A similar cognitive mechanism is at work in the construction of fantastic fictional realities, a process often referred to as worldbuilding. Because of the conventions of the

¹⁰¹ «If these common traits were missing, 'we' and the 'others' would find ourselves living in incommensurable universes; in that case, we wouldn't even be able to communicate, understand each other's languages, or share everyday practices. If this does happen, there must be some kind of intercultural bridgehead – however minimal – not subject to local or historical variations» (Dei, 2012, p. 48; translation mine).

mode and based on the set expectations connected to it, the audience approaches fantastic fiction with the assumption that the world with which they are about to engage is different from the primary one (Weiss, 2021). Hence, as previously analyzed, a certain degree of unfamiliarity – although varying – is expected and characteristic. However, in order for the narration to be understandable, relatable and therefore engaging for the audience, a balance between estranging and familiar elements must always be maintained. The secondary world cannot be entirely detached from the primary one, as readers inevitably construct their understanding of the former through their experiences and knowledge of the latter. Some recognizable reference points must be present; without them, the story risks becoming too confusing, breaking immersion altogether. Upholding this condition is rarely difficult – indeed, it is often inevitable: just as anthropology is based on a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of structured and innovative discourses (Clifford & Marcus, 1992), the building of fantastical environments relies on the recombination of familiar features drawn from everyday reality and interwoven with imaginary elements. These ordinary components are usually introduced metaphorically, through analogy, or by being recontextualized within the fictional framework (Faber, 2018).

As Umberto Eco (1979) notes, even the most imaginative storyworlds remain tethered to the real one: they could not exist independently, as neither authors nor readers are capable of conceiving entirely original systems in every structural and functional detail. In practice, most fictional universes are incomplete in their formulation; they are partial constructs, revealed selectively through specific perspectives and shaped by the demands of the plot and narrative strategy (Bertetti, 2024, p. 332). Some aspects of the storyworld's reality are left unspoken because they fall outside the scope of the narrative. Readers instinctively fill these gaps by drawing on their own culturally shaped experiences and understanding of the real world. As stated by literary scholar and critic Marie-Laure Ryan (1991):

«We reconstrue the central world of a textual universe in the same way we reconstrue the alternate possible worlds of nonfactual statements: as conforming as far as possible to our representation of AW¹⁰². We will project upon these worlds everything we know about reality, and we will make only the adjustments dictated by the text» (Ryan, 1991, p.51).

¹⁰² Actual World.

This principle takes the name of *minimal departure* (Ryan, 1991) and it is often the result of an unconscious process: certain elements are simply taken for granted by both author and reader, as they are so deeply embedded in the human experience that imagining alternatives becomes almost impossible. Sarah Faber highlights emblematic examples such as gravity or three-dimensional spaces, which are typically assumed without question in fictional worlds (Faber, 2018).

Ethnographic accounts are also inherently partial (Clifford & Marcus, 1992; Geertz, 1973). They are shaped by processes of exclusion and omission – leaving out information deemed irrelevant (such as personal or historical context) or uncomfortable truths whose inclusion might pose a risk to either the informants or the researchers themselves. These limitations can be external, imposed by the conditions of fieldwork or disciplinary norms, or internal – self-imposed by researchers due to personal ideologies, emotions, or assumptions (Clifford & Marcus, 1992). In the case of anthropology, just as much as in fiction, at times, omissions result simply from taking certain truths for granted – assumptions so «insinuated as background knowledge» (Geertz, 1973, p. 9) that they become invisible. Even though ethnographic writing aims to reveal the constructed and contingent nature of reality, it remains shaped by underlying assumptions that even the most reflective researchers may not fully recognize – let alone critically address. As James Clifford succinctly puts it: «*One cannot tell all*» (Clifford & Marcus, 1992, p. 7).

The interplay of estrangement and familiarity is essential in both anthropology and fantastic fiction. A well-crafted imaginary world makes the strange familiar and the familiar strange – an effect that mirrors the epistemological aim of anthropology (Lai, 2023). Both fields rely on a careful balance: too much familiarity risks reinforcing what is taken for granted, while too much strangeness can alienate and disrupt understanding. In anthropology, this balance allows researchers to step back from what is normally unquestioned, seeing the ordinary with fresh, critical eyes. At the same time, it is through familiar frameworks that we make sense of cultural difference. In fantastic fiction, a degree of estrangement is expected, as it is built into the mode's conventions. However, even the most fantastical worlds must remain grounded in recognizable elements to be immersive and meaningful. Complete detachment from reality would make them unintelligible. In both cases, estrangement and familiarity are not opposing forces but mutually reinforcing tools – each only effective when held in tension with the other.

3.2. A matter of perspectives

Familiarity and estrangement are not fixed qualities, but relative concepts that derive their meaning from what is perceived as normal. There is no estrangement without a norm to disrupt, just as a sense of familiarity cannot arise without reference to what is already known or expected. Yet normality itself is not a stable or universal standard: what appears unquestioned and self-evident to someone may seem strange, dissonant, or even absurd to another – whether within the narrative world or from the reader's point of view. This variability reveals that normality, like reality, is not inherent but constructed through perspective. Perspectives – whether individual or collective – are shaped by cultural norms, personal experiences, and environmental conditions. A shift in perspective can profoundly alter how the world is perceived: a familiar setting may feel alien when seen through the eyes of a disoriented individual, just as a strange environment may come to feel familiar as the observer internalizes its logic. In this way, both estrangement and familiarity become tools for exploring the limits of perception and the instability of meaning. Fantastic worlds are privileged sites for this kind of cognitive and imaginative exercise, since their normality is explicitly constructed by the author who can invent new norms, challenge existing ones, or present multiple, conflicting realities, revealing their contingent essence.

In fiction, the author establishes the rules that govern the narrative world, exercising complete control over its internal logic and its level of resemblance to reality (Bertetti, 2024; Golovacheva, 2018; Mendlesohn, 2013; Weiss, 2021). As Freud notes:

«The story-teller has this license among many others, that he can select his world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them in what particulars he pleases. We accept his ruling in every case»¹⁰³ (Freud, 1919, p. 18).

These rules are typically introduced through descriptions and the presentation of the world's fundamental principles. The readers or observers acquire this information and adjust their judgment accordingly. As long as the events remain coherent within the logic of the subcreated world, their plausibility is not questioned. The reader temporarily accepts the fictional universe «as though it were real» (Freud, 1919, p. 7), using it as the framework

¹⁰³ The use of masculine references in the quoted passage reflects the original language used by Sigmund Freud. It does not align with my own views on gendered language and should not be interpreted as endorsing a gender-exclusive perspective when referring to individuals or authors.

for assessing the internal coherence of the narrative. The audience is generally willing to follow the author's cues on how the world operates, whether such rules are made explicit from the outset or gradually revealed as the story unfolds. The reader, author, and characters thus enter into an implicit agreement: the world being presented – no matter how strange – has its own internal consistency and ontological validity. As Weiss (2021) notes, what is considered real within fantastic fiction is sustained through this mutual assumption, allowing the narrative to construct its own logic and norms. This collaborative acceptance is what enables immersion – what Faber describes as «the state in which audiences largely forget, for a limited time, their own reality and accept a storyworld as a possible alternative» (Faber, p. 217). Immersion is central to the appeal of fantastic fiction and plays a vital role in its effectiveness (see section 3.2). It is through this immersive shift that the reader suspends their adherence to the rules of the empirical world and adopts the new, author-defined norms of the fictional one. However, the way this mechanism unfolds can vary significantly across genres, depending on their specific conventions and the expectations readers attach to them.

Realistic fiction is fundamentally mimetic – it mirrors the real world and adheres to its established rules. As a result, both the norms that must be disrupted to create a sense of estrangement and the elements that appear familiar to the audience are governed by the logic of the empirical, primary world. Even in its most extreme instances, the disruptive elements introduced in realistic fiction are still framed within the bounds of plausibility (Weiss, 2021). Take, for example, a violent crime at the center of a detective novel: while such an event is undoubtedly extraordinary within the narrative and unsettling in real life, it remains a conceivable occurrence. It does not exceed the limits of what is possible within our empirical reality. Consequently, in realistic fiction, the nature of reality is not up for debate: the same rules that govern possibility in the real world apply equally within the fictional one, for the author, the reader, and the characters alike. In our hypothetical crime story, all parties accept that there must be a culprit, a human one, and that supernatural or impossible explanations are categorically excluded from consideration. The narrative operates within the same ontological framework as the world it reflects.

In contrast, fantastic fiction requires the construction of a unique system of reference. What is considered normal is not immediately recognizable but must be invented by the author and gradually communicated. The reader must learn how to interpret the narrative world by adapting to its internal logic. Although secondary worlds retain certain

familiar elements, they often diverge significantly from the primary world in terms of time, space, physical laws, or socio-cultural norms. As Weiss (2021) points out, this very encounter with an alternative reality can generate a sense of unfamiliarity and detachment. However, the degree of estrangement depends on the genre or subgenre: some narratives maintain stronger conceptual links with reality, while others push further into the unknown. Fantasy fiction tends to create the greatest distance from the primary world, particularly in what Farah Mendlesohn (Mendlesohn, 2013) identifies as “immersive fantasy,” where the fantastic is integral to the world and fully accepted by its inhabitants from the outset¹⁰⁴. Here, both characters and readers are embedded in a coherent but entirely fictional reality. Science fiction, on the other hand often preserves a stronger connection to the empirical world through scientific speculation or technological development. These narrative environments, while different, may reflect contemporary concerns or ideas, inviting conceptual parallels with the reader's own world.

The spatial and temporal configurations of fantastic stories also influence how readers relate to them. Traditional fantasy is often set in pseudo-medieval worlds, whereas science fiction might take place in futuristic or extraterrestrial settings. Yet many contemporary subgenres blur these boundaries. For instance, urban fantasy incorporates magical elements into modern-day cities, minimizing the distance between the reader's world and the fictional one (Weiss, 2021). Regardless of setting, the success of these narratives relies on the author's ability to maintain internal consistency within the subcreated world and the reader's willingness to accept and navigate its logic. Unlike realistic fiction, where plausibility is anchored in our shared empirical world, fantastic fiction opens up a virtually unlimited range of possibilities. As Freud noted in his theorization of the uncanny, reality in literature can assume an infinite variety of forms depending on the interpretive lens applied and the narrative perspective taken (Freud,

¹⁰⁴ According to Mendlesohn's theorization, fantasy is not exclusively immersive; in fact, there are instances where a connection to the primary world is maintained and negotiated on various levels. Based on the way the fantastic interacts with reality, she identifies several categories beyond immersive fantasy. These include portal fantasy, in which characters from the primary world enter the fantastic realm through a portal, and intrusive fantasy, where the fantastic breaks into the real world, disrupting its normalcy – often seen in, though not limited to, works of horror. A fourth category Mendlesohn proposes is liminal fantasy, characterized by more subtle fantastical elements and a sustained ambiguity surrounding the nature of the strange events taking place (Mendlesohn, 2013).

1919). In this context, what appears strange, unsettling, or extraordinary in one world may be perfectly normal in another. Ultimately, it is a matter of perspective.

In narratology, perspective – or point of view – is «defined as the way the representation of the story is influenced by the position, personality and values of the narrator and the characters» (Niederhoff, 2009, p. 384). These are shaped by characters' personal sensitivities, socio-cultural backgrounds, and the narrative's contextual settings. Consequently, the sense of familiarity or estrangement experienced within a story is not fixed but relative: what provokes a feeling of disorientation in one character may appear entirely mundane to another. High fantasy offers a clear example since it features secondary worlds that often function under their own magical laws, inhabited by fantastical creatures and governed by internal rules that differ fundamentally from those of the primary world. In such settings, dragons may soar overhead, and magic is integrated into daily life. The presence of a wizard might be deeply uncanny in a Jane Austen novel, but in Tolkien's *Middle-earth*, it is a routine occurrence. The point here is not whether these elements are plausible by real-world standards, but whether they are coherent within the story's internal logic. All narratives involve a narrator – sometimes more than one – and a cast of characters, each with their own evolving perspectives (Niederhoff, 2009). Readers, by contrast, occupy an external position: even when they identify with characters, they remain dependent on their own epistemological judgments in assessing the story's realism or plausibility. From the reader's standpoint, a text is considered realistic when its events align with the natural laws of the primary world. Fantastic fiction, however, cannot be realistic in this way – at least not entirely. That said, the events may still be fully real within the fictional world, particularly from the characters' perspectives. As Carl Freedman explains:

«The crucial issue for generic discrimination is not only epistemological judgement external to the text itself on the rationality or the irrationality of the latter's imaginings, but rather [...] the attitude of the text itself to the kind of estrangements being performed» (Freedman, 2000, p.18, original emphasis).

In other words, it is not merely the reader's external viewpoint that defines what is real or strange in a text, but the internal experience of the characters who inhabit the storyworld. When we consider how characters themselves perceive their world, the analysis becomes more complex. Just as readers interpret the narrative through their own frame of reference, so too do characters interact with and make sense of their environments based on what is familiar or unfamiliar to them. The extent to which events feel strange or natural

depends not only on what happens, but also on how characters react to those events. If occurrences that defy empirical logic remain consistent within the fictional world's internal laws, they may not provoke a strong sense of estrangement for the characters.

For example, in the opening chapter of *The Hobbit* (J. R. R. Tolkien, 1937), Gandalf invites thirteen dwarves to Bilbo Baggins' home to recruit him for a quest to reclaim their treasure from the dragon Smaug. Bilbo is surprised – his reaction indicates a degree of estrangement – but he does not question the existence of wizards, dwarves, or dragons, as these are already normalized elements in Middle-earth. Here, the reader may find the scene extraordinary, but the characters do not, reducing the sense of dissonance within the narrative world. By contrast, in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), both the protagonist, Dana, and the other characters are disoriented by the sudden, unexplained time travel that transports her to a 19th-century Maryland plantation. The event is not only outside the bounds of readers' expectation, but also completely alien within the diegetic world of the characters. This dual estrangement – experienced by both readers and characters – intensifies the sense of unfamiliarity. In this case, the disorientation directly corresponds to what Todorov identifies as the essence of the fantastic: uncertainty regarding the nature of the events and their causes. Other narratives present more layered configurations. In Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (2012), the story unfolds in a dystopian version of Toronto, where new power dynamics and social structures prevail. For the protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, and the other Torontonians, this post-apocalyptic world is normal. However, as magical and folkloric elements drawn from Caribbean traditions emerge, Ti-Jeanne experiences new forms of estrangement, even while her grandmother, Gros-Jeanne, does not. In such cases, the story generates alternating moments of familiarity and unfamiliarity depending on whose perspective is foregrounded. This interplay enriches the narrative's interpretive layers and highlights how different degrees of estrangement can coexist within the same storyworld.

Ultimately, fantastic fiction constructs realities that may defy empirical logic but remain internally coherent and meaningful. In order to fully engage with and appreciate these unique realities, readers must be capable of shifting their perspective – adopting the alternative and essentially different viewpoints of the people and creatures who inhabit a secondary world. Rather than relying solely on the logic and expectations of the primary world, they must attune themselves to the narrative's internal perspective – one shaped by the worldview of the characters and the norms of the secondary world. Attempting to

interpret the story through an external, real-world lens risks reducing its elements to incoherence. Therefore, to grasp the underlying logic of the narrative and its world, the reader must temporarily inhabit the mindset of those within it, allowing their perceptions to guide meaning and coherence. In other words, to understand and evaluate fictional worlds the reader must adopt an emic perspective and immerse in the alternative reality of the story by «shifting the focal point, the center of one's experience of the world, away from one's real self for a limited time, in order to privately pretend to be somebody else and imagine how that person would think and feel» (Faber, 2018, p. 218). This effect is often obtained when the reader identifies with one of the characters through a process of projection that Marie-Laure Ryan calls *imaginative recentering* (Ryan, 2007, p. 251). Overall, fantastic fiction encourages readers to step outside their own perspective and see the world through entirely different eyes.

This notion of perspective-shifting is central not only to the reader's engagement with fantastic fiction, but also mirrors the ethnographer's task of navigating between insider and outsider viewpoints. It reflects anthropology's broader approach to understanding cultural difference and closely aligns with the principle of cultural relativism. As Jack David Eller explains it:

«Cultures are different in how they see, interpret, value, and respond to the world, including other human beings in their world. What is done in one culture may not be done in another. What is important or valuable in one culture may not be in another, and what is good or right in one culture may not be in another. [...] If anthropologists want to understand another culture, then we must understand or judge that culture in terms of its own notions of good, normal, moral, valuable, meaningful, etc. That is cultural relativism. Cultural relativism asserts that an observer cannot apply the standards of one culture to another culture, at least not in an informative way. Rather, a phenomenon in a culture must be understood and evaluated in relation to, relative to, that culture» (Eller, 2016, pp. 10-11).

Before cultural relativism became a central «guiding philosophy of modern anthropology» (Brown et al., 2020, p. 56), the dominant theoretical framework in the discipline during the 19th century and early 20th century was cultural evolutionism, a concept based on the idea that cultures evolved through a series of stages – from "savagery" to "barbarism" to "civilization" – to end up in the most advanced stage of evolution, which responded to the standards of nineteenth-century Euro-American culture. This conception justified the classification of human groups from the more primitive, which occupied the lower positions, to the most advanced. This ranking of cultures entailed a judgment of value

based on racist theories and serving the socio-economic interests of prevarication and exploitation. During the early decades of the 20th century, a major shift occurred in anthropology, led by Franz Boas and his students. They rejected the evolutionist approach in favor of historical particularism, arguing that cultures develop in unique ways shaped by «the environmental conditions which have created or modified cultural elements [...] psychological factors which are at work in shaping the culture; [...] the effects that historical connections have had upon the growth of the culture» (Boas, 1896, p. 905). This approach laid the groundwork for a more in-depth and contextualized understanding of cultural particularities – one that considers people’s relationships with both their surrounding environment and other human groups, while firmly rejecting the notion that cultures can be ranked in a hierarchical order. Each culture, while comparable, operates according to its own principles and must be understood on its own, emic terms; they all exist parallel to each other and not on an evolutionary scale (M. F. Brown, 2008; Eller, 2016).

Cultural relativism requires anthropologists to adopt an interpretative stance that closely resembles that of the reader of fantastic fiction: both are invited to leave behind the logic of their own world, immerse themselves in radically different perspectives and adopt an emic point of view, becoming participant observers. Still, ethnographers must also maintain a necessary analytical distance to ensure a certain degree of objectivity, while simultaneously remaining critically aware of their own cultural assumptions and positionality (N. Brown et al., 2020; Dei, 2012; Eller, 2016; Pedersen & Cliggett, 2021). Ultimately, ethnographic accounts – though collected from an emic point of view – are not direct representations of the cultures observed. Rather, they are always narratives shaped by the researchers’ own conceptions, the product of their interpretation (Clifford & Marcus, 1992; Geertz, 1973). As Clifford Geertz notes: «what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to» (Geertz, 1973, p. 9).

Whether navigating imagined realities or unfamiliar cultures, adopting someone else’s point of view demands an openness to difference and a commitment to seeing the world through multiple lenses. Moreover, ethnographic fieldwork requires researchers to consider and engage with a variety of different perspectives, not only across different cultural groups but also within them, recognizing that individuals from the same culture may experience and interpret the world differently based on personal experiences and social

conditions. In this sense, as Pedersen and Cliggett note, anthropologists must «attend to as much of that diversity as possible [and] present their findings in multiple forms to capture a greater diversity of voices» (Pedersen & Cliggett, 2021, p. 3). As noted by James Clifford:

«Many voices clamor for expression. Polyvocality was restrained and orchestrated in traditional ethnographies by giving to one voice a pervasive authorial function and to others the role of sources, "informants," to be quoted or paraphrased. Once dialogism and polyphony are recognized as modes of textual production, monophonic authority is questioned, revealed to be characteristic of a science that has claimed to represent cultures» (Clifford & Marcus, 1992, p. 15).

It is in response to this pretense of a “monophonic authority” – which had long characterized traditional anthropology – that the pluriversal approach emerged. Embedded in South American decolonial thought (Escobar, 2020; Reiter, 2018) and inspired by the Zapatista movement, it challenges the idea of a single, universal truth based on logics of Western modernity and coloniality and imposed by an authoritative voice. Instead, it acknowledges a multiplicity of coexisting and valid perspectives derived from a variety of cultural traditions, including those that were silenced by colonialism – «a world where many worlds fit» (Escobar, 2020, p. ix). While cultural relativism can be perceived, and has sometimes been criticized (M. F. Brown, 2008) for conceiving of cultural experiences as «independent units», pluriversality, «dwells in the interstices of the entanglement, at its borders» (Mignolo, 2020, p. xi).

Once again, these conceptions are both reflected in and shared by fantastic fiction, representing a point of intersection between the fantastic and anthropology. In fact, fantastic fiction – particularly in fantasy novels – often features a wide array of characters, each with their own distinct worldview. To fully grasp the narrative’s complexity, the reader is frequently required to shift between these varied perspectives, some of which may differ substantially from one another, and to consider all of them at the same time. This necessitates not only interpretive flexibility but also a willingness to adopt mindsets shaped by unfamiliar values, cultures, or ontologies. Such narrative structures resonate with what Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, in his study of Dostoevsky’s poetics, refers to as *polyphonic novels*: works characterized by «a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices [...] not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world» (Escobar, 2020). A popular example of this kind of work is George R.

R. Martin's series of high fantasy novels *A Song of Ice and Fire*, in which the story is narrated through the point of view of 31 characters, each reporting their own unique perspective on the events of the story. Sometimes the same event is narrated from multiple points of view. One notable instance is the account of the Battle of the Blackwater, in the second book of the series, *A Clash of Kings* (1999): the events of the battle are narrated through the point of view of three different characters: Davos Seaworth, a commander in the fleet that is conducting the attack against the city of King's Landing; Tyrion Lannister, the military leader of the defending side; and Sansa Stark who was at the time a prisoner of the Lannisters observing the battle from the Red Keep. Given the markedly different positions of the three characters – each shaped by their personal interests, backgrounds, and relationships to both the context and one another – their perspectives offer contrasting interpretations of the same event. Together, these accounts provide a multifaceted, almost 360-degree view of the battle and the surrounding political tension. While all three convey a shared sense of chaos, confusion, and emotional trauma, they do so from distinct vantage points, each with its own emotional stakes and narrative weight. None of their accounts is considered more important than the others, and there is no authoritative voice imposing their perspective and telling the truth about the events of the battle: all multiple perspectives coexist and contribute to the understanding the reader is building. At the same time, the reader engages with the story from their own external, real-world viewpoint, adding yet another interpretive layer to the text.

What is considered real or plausible in fantastic fiction can vary widely – not only across genres and subgenres, but also within the narrative itself, as different narrators, characters, and readers bring their own interpretive lenses. This multiplicity of viewpoints, mirrored in anthropology, allows fantastic literature to accommodate a rich diversity of perceptions, experiences, and truths. It is through this layered interplay of perspectives that fantastic fiction opens up complex and immersive worlds shaped by the subjective realities of the characters.

3.3. The role of culture in worldbuilding

American scholar Mark J. P. Wolf, in one of his works on worldbuilding (2012), mentions culture as one of the structures¹⁰⁵ that, combined with each other, constitute the infrastructure in which the events, information and details of the story are placed. In other words, culture is one of the foundational elements that allow both the author and the audience to organize the secondary world and the events that take place in it in an orderly, coherent and understandable way. «Without these structures, worlds would fall apart and become little more than a collection of data and information, and they would cease to be worlds» (Wolf, 2012, p. 154). Culture, in particular, acts like a binding force holding together other structuring systems like history, geography, use of natural resources, customs, traditions, languages, and more. These are combined and interact according to the specific worldview that shapes the entire experience of the characters and through which they perceive the reality of the secondary world. Culture informs the context where the story unfolds and provides the framework in which the functioning rules of the diegetic world, as established by the author and accepted by the audience, are applied. While some works only provide the essential information about the secondary world that are needed for the story to unfold – fairy tales are an example of this simpler structure – other, more complex ones feature world structures that can be extremely developed and sophisticated, to the point where they extend way beyond the borders of the story. Tolkien's Arda and George R. R. Martin's nameless world, which includes Westeros and Essos, are established examples of these trans-narrative worlds (Wolf, 2012). Because of their structural complexity, authors can keep adding material and information even after the conclusion of the narration, keeping open the possibility of expanding the world in other works, leaving space for the audience to speculate about details and even allowing them to create their own stories within the same world – an activity that the increasing number of fanfiction blogs and platforms prove is of great interest for the audience of fantastic fiction fans. The more intricate and multifaceted an imaginary reality is, the more likely it is to «spark the kind of speculation and conjecture that brings a secondary world alive in the imagination» (Wolf, 2012, p. 183).

¹⁰⁵ The other structures identified by Wolf are: space, time, characters, nature, mythology and philosophy (Wolf, 2012).

Creating complex cultural contexts in which to set the narration – or narrations – indeed adds to the sophistication and consequent success of the work. On the other hand, it can be challenging to manage the great wealth of details and moving parts that constitute such elaborate secondary realities. To function, every single one of the structures that determine the context of the story must be internally coherent and fit together reasonably with the others that form the infrastructure. Every detail must be curated in the best way possible to avoid incongruences that would go to the detriment of the quality of the work. In turn, this would compromise the immersion and engagement of the audience. Indeed, some of the best, most appreciated works of fantastic fiction are praised, among other things, for the realism, richness of details and intricacy of the settings, and their internal consistency throughout the story. To achieve this level of refinement, fictional realities cannot be constructed as assemblages of single traits and separated structural instances but must be treated as integrated systems in which every single element influences and is influenced by the others to form a whole.

This approach is reflected in one of the core principles of anthropology, holism, which also holds that cultures, real or fictional, while being synchronous unities, are not homogeneous: «a culture has parts, and anthropologists discover these parts and the different forms they can take» (Eller, 2016, p. 10). Every element that is part of a cultural structure can assume different characteristics based on the influence it receives from the surrounding environments, other cultures and relationships in general. All cultural components are interrelated, so, to understand the specific subject of their research, anthropologists must study the entire context in which they are immersed and with which they share connections. To explain this concept, Eller uses the example of kinship, stating that despite being a kind of societal organization shared by most cultures, it can take many different forms within every single culture, depending on a variety of factors – including individual experiences and choices, social norms, historical and legislative developments. If these were not considered, the resulting understanding of the phenomenon would be incomplete (Eller, 2016; Wolf, 2012).

Ultimately, «the development of fictional cultures, both in their depth as well as the quality and plausibility of the cultures generated, depends greatly on the ability and background of the author» (Wolf, 2012, p. 180). Writers who invest considerable effort in studying all aspects of their secondary worlds, including a variety of different perspectives and disciplines in their research, are more likely to develop consistent and articulate

fictional realities that the audience will appreciate. Nalo Hopkinson shared her process during our interview:

«Everything plays a role in my researches at some level, many cultural studies, sort of anthropology. So, yes. The religious system, the Yoruba religious system that I draw on in the book¹⁰⁶, was not something I knew about, even though it's from my part of the world, so I had to research that. I had to research probably history, Caribbean folkways, biology and medicine» (N. Hopkinson, personal communication, August 9, 2024).

Contemporary socio-cultural contexts frequently inform fictional works. By drawing on general discourse and scientific debates around current issues, authors can enhance the credibility and depth of their imagined worlds. While this is perhaps most apparent in relation to the hard sciences, it is important to note that, as Kennedy (2021) argues, «a variety of sciences can be blended to become the bedrock for an interesting and believable world» (Kennedy, 2021, p. 2). Disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, linguistics, sociology, and history also provide a rich foundation from which to build complex and convincing secondary realities¹⁰⁷.

In fact, developments in anthropology during the 20th century had a rather direct influence on fantastic fiction and the building of fictional worlds. Euro-American audiences came into contact with an increasing number of texts and materials regarding foreign cultures, with direct accounts of ethnographers describing forms of alterity. At the same time, people became increasingly accustomed to encountering otherness, due to the rise of mass tourism, the expansion of mass media, and large waves of immigration – particularly toward the Americas. As audiences grew increasingly familiar with alterity, they began to engage with it in more nuanced ways, gaining deeper insight into cultures that had previously been understood primarily through stereotypes and generalizations. As a result, simplistic, one-dimensional portrayals of fictional cultures no longer satisfied readers who now sought immersion in rich, complex, and fully realized alternative realities. Authors were increasingly required to make their secondary worlds solid, coherent, and as complete as possible, meticulously curating every element of the fictional culture and its internal dynamics, as well as its relationship to the narrative itself (Wolf, 2012). To achieve this, it

¹⁰⁶ Hopkinson, N. (2012). *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Grand Central Publishing.(Hopkinson, 2012)

¹⁰⁷ See Kennedy (2021) for an analysis of the influence of social sciences in Frank Herbert's novel *Dune*.

became essential for writers to understand how real-world cultures function and are structured. In this endeavor, anthropology – alongside other disciplines – proved especially valuable.

As the analysis of the relationship between anthropology and the fantastic has shown so far, the two systems of knowledge are epistemologically and conceptually compatible in several fundamental ways. Because of this compatibility, anthropology – both in its content and methodologies – offers effective tools for authors seeking to construct coherent and immersive imaginary worlds. In fact, anthropological texts, interpreted as accounts of alterity, have enough in common with fantastic fiction to provide inspiration as well as direct information that might be used to imagine fictional cultures. Moreover, the anthropological approach to otherness may serve as a guideline to build interesting and complex relational realities. Numerous authors of fantastic fiction draw on anthropological knowledge or implicitly engage with anthropological epistemology in their worldbuilding practices. Some explicitly acknowledge anthropology as a direct influence on their work:

«I wouldn't be able to write it [fantastic fiction] without anthropology, without some sense of how communities function or don't function over time and how the environmental and social forces change communities, how they adapt[...]. It's part of the challenge and the joy of writing in this mode, that research foregrounds what you do. I think it's involved in any kind of art making, but specifically, I think, in spec fic it's always in your mind that you're looking at how stories are made and how worlds and realities are made. So, you have to do research, I mean, I'm not going to know everything about everything I want to write about. So definitely studies of how societies work have been really valuable to me» (N. Hopkinson, personal communication, August 9, 2024).

Other authors incorporate anthropological perspectives without necessarily recognizing the connection between their research and the discipline, or they include it among the various sources that inform their work without giving it particular emphasis.

Even when anthropology is not consciously employed or is used without deliberate intent, fiction can still be examined from an anthropological perspective. In many cases, this reveals clear parallels that support the idea that anthropology and fantastic literature share key conceptual and methodological features and can therefore be placed in meaningful dialogue.

3.3.1. Anthropological science-fiction: the case of Ursula K. Le Guin

Anthropology and the fantastic «have intersected at different times in different ways, that is in «those «cross-hatch» moments when there is a flash of recognition that finds one reflected in the other across disciplinary and genre boundaries» (Collins, 2023, p. 189). A significant manifestation of this convergence is found in anthropological science fiction, a specific form of fantastic narrative that employs and reflects anthropological conceptions and perspectives. While an anthropological influence on fantastic imaginaries is already detectable in some 19th-century works, anthropological science fiction solidified as a recognizable subgenre during the Golden Age and New Wave of science fiction, between the 1950s and 1960s (Boulding et al., 2011; Clute & Nicholls, 1995; Collins, 2023). Authors in this period used «ideas derived from the scientific study of mankind» (Clute & Nicholls, 1995, p. 42) to inform their works, especially in the designing of fictional cultures and societies – human and non-human – enhancing the believability and immersiveness of their secondary worlds and, therefore, their narratives. The research revolution in hard sciences brought forth new technologies and the material progress that appeared like «the soul of 20th-century progress,» (Stover, 1973, p. 471). Science fiction writers were immensely fascinated by this novelty and in their works praised technological growth, often without considering its social side effects and costs. A similar phenomenon occurred in the social sciences: innovations in social thought and the growing interest in social engineering that characterized the first half of the 20th century, began to shape narratives much like technological breakthroughs and the hard sciences drove the themes of sci-fi. Authors realized that integrating the social sciences into the creation of science fiction worlds allowed technological innovations to be placed within a coherent socio-cultural context that explained their development, existence, and use. Introducing the same innovations into an unrelated setting would have undermined the sophistication and credibility of the world, reducing its immersive power and the effectiveness of the secondary reality. So, in the mid- twentieth century a new literary genre emerged called social-science fiction (Sills, 1968) that was as much a product of the research revolution as hard science fiction and other forms of fiction inspired by science. Anthropological science fiction can be considered part of this broader category (Stover, 1973).

While the discipline contributed to the structure and plausibility of the genre, anthropological science fiction simultaneously provided a space for imaginative

anthropological inquiry. In fact, fantastic fictional cultures may serve as virtual workshops to think about and experiment with human differences. This idea draws from the Boasian concept of cultures as laboratories of human diversity, where different «solutions to the problems of being human» (Collins, 2023, p. 193) can be observed and studied. However, imagined cultures enjoy the added privilege of not being limited by the physical and biological constraints of life on earth. Furthermore, they can differ radically from empirical social structures, while also not being required to be as complex: in many cases, although developed in detail, fictional cultures tend to be self-contained, more homogeneous, characterized by a limited number of traits compared to real ones. Even the most detailed cultures, Tolkien's for example, are much simpler than real cultural systems. The hobbits, for example, are described as small, peace-loving, rural people with a fondness for comfort, food, and tradition. While every hobbit we see in the story has their own personal characteristics, as a group, they are fundamentally defined by a limited number of features. The immense complexity and mutability of human cultures make them difficult – if not impossible – to fully define and conceptualize. This very quality constitutes a fundamental limitation of anthropology, which, even at its most comprehensive, can never exhaustively capture the full scope of human cultural diversity. By contrast, the relative simplicity and controlled construction of fictional cultures render them more accessible: their traits are easier to identify, isolate, and conceptualize. As such, they provide ideal contexts for socio-cultural observation and experimentation, while also reflecting their own specific worldviews. In this sense, «Anthropological science fiction enjoys the philosophical luxury of providing answers to the question "What is man?" while anthropology the science is still learning how to frame it» (Stover, 1973, p. 472).

The most renowned author of anthropological science fiction is indeed Ursula K. Le Guin (Clute & Nicholls, 1995; Collins, 2023; Natali, 2023; Stover, 1973). Born in California in 1929, Le Guin has been a prolific, multi-award-winning author whose work spans science fiction, fantasy, poetry, children's literature, and critical writing. She was a master in cultural experimentation, and the fictional cultures she created are perfect examples of speculative laboratories.

One of the most emblematic examples among her works is *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1960), in which she describes a society whose members are ambisexual and assume male or female connotations only during a period called *kemmer*, over the course of which they are sexually active and can procreate. The planet where they live is called

Gethen – also known as *Winter* – and due to the physiological characteristics of its inhabitants, Gethenian society lacks fixed gender roles and gender-based hierarchical structures. The peculiar biology of the Gethenians serves as a pretext for reflecting on gender roles and their social impact on society and to tackle one of the fundamental principles of gender studies – the distinction between sex and gender. *Sex* refers to biological characteristics, while *gender* is understood as a cultural and social construct (Beauvoir, 1949/2009). However, especially in public discourse, this distinction is often blurred. Common biases – particularly those rooted in traditional notions of "natural" roles for men and women – continue to influence how gender is perceived, discussed, and enforced in everyday life. By constructing a reality in which the limits of human biology are transcended, Le Guin presents a context where physiological distinctions between male and female become irrelevant – thus they do not constitute a limit for reflecting on the social and cultural impact of gender in our society.

Although the inhabitants of Gethen are free from the social conflicts typically associated with sex and gender, interpretations of the novel are inevitably shaped by them. Both the author and readers approach Gethenian society through the lens of their own gendered experiences and cultural assumptions. Le Guin acknowledges this in her essay *Is Gender Necessary?* (1989), where she responds to criticism that, despite her intentions and though described as *menwomen*, the Gethenians often appear predominantly male. Le Guin initially attributed the issue to her use of the pronoun "he" as an overextended appellative, arguing that it was, after all, «the generic pronoun, damn it, in English» (U. K. Le Guin, 2018, para. 23), and refused to invent a neutral alternative. However, in the later revision of the essay, she acknowledged that «pronouns shaped, directed, controlled my own thinking» (U. K. Le Guin, 1989) and admitted that, had she realized this earlier, she might have made a different choice. She went on to advocate for the reintroduction of *they/them/their* as singular, gender-neutral pronouns in written English – usage that, she noted, was common until the 16th century (U. K. Le Guin, 1989). Another factor that shaped readers' perception of the Gethenians is that many of the characters who interact with Genly, the protagonist and interplanetary envoy, occupy roles traditionally associated with masculinity – such as prime minister, politician, or bureaucrat – especially within the norms of Euro-American society at the time of the novel's publication. Although Le Guin maintained that she always imagined Gethenians as *menwomen* and deliberately placed them in such roles instead of men, she later acknowledged that she should have been better

at «showing the “female” component of the Gethenian characters in action» (U. K. Le Guin, 1989). She recognized that her portrayal may not have provided readers with enough cues to fully share her intended vision. While Le Guin is open about the work’s limitations, *The Left Hand of Darkness* nevertheless provokes a profound re-examination of gender and its socio-cultural construction (Natali, 2023).

She imagines a world where gender-based divisions are absent altogether, allowing readers to explore the cultural construction of gender without the distortions imposed by binary thinking or conventional stereotypes. However, this narrative strategy was critiqued by literary critic Fredric Jameson, who, in an essay first published in 1975, raised a compelling concern about what he termed “world reduction” in Le Guin’s work: He argued that:

«Le Guin's experiment, which is based on a principle of systematic exclusion, a kind of surgical excision of empirical reality, something like a process of ontological attenuation in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists, of what we call reality, is deliberately thinned and weeded out through an operation of radical abstraction and simplification» (Jameson, 2005, p. 271).

In fact, the environment Le Guin constructs functions as both a cultural laboratory and a thought experiment – one where reflection on gender becomes more accessible. This is made possible through her creation of a simplified version of humanity, in which the problem of gender has been removed. Such a conceptual move is only achievable within the realm of discursive speculation, as it requires suspending the complex historical, cultural, and political forces that shape gender in real-world contexts. Anthropological accounts, in their own way, engage in a similar process. Although they emphasize the importance of context and strive to account for it, they are nonetheless the result of an inevitable simplification of human complexity. This simplification occurs in the effort to impose order, render human behavior visible and manageable, and ultimately make it understandable. As Clifford Geertz explains, the interpretation of social discourse – the fundamental task of anthropology – «consists in trying to rescue the "said" of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms» (Geertz, 1973, p. 20).

If Le Guin’s novel is read, as Davidson-Vecchione and Seeger suggest, as aiming «to resolve social antagonisms in the form of fantasy, thereby proffering imaginary solutions to real problems» (Davison-Vecchione & Seeger, 2023, p. 122), then detaching this discussion from the socio-cultural contexts in which such issues are produced and reproduced would be a serious misstep. In that case, Jameson’s critique would become

more difficult to dismiss. However, this reading seems to impose an intention on Le Guin's work that she never claimed: her stated objective was not to provide factual insight into real-life issues. She was an author of fantastic fiction and, as she explains in the introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*¹⁰⁸:

«I'm merely observing, in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are. I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing. I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality in the novelist's way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies. In reading a novel, any novel, we have to know perfectly well that the whole thing is nonsense, and then, while reading, believe every word of it. Finally, when we're done with it, we may find-if it's a good novel-that we're a bit different from what we were before we read it, that we have been changed a little, as if by having met a new face, crossed a street we never crossed before. But it's very hard to say just what we learned, how we were changed» (U. Le Guin, 1960, para. 21-22).

Ultimately, «Le Guin inhabits language in such a way as to be able to initiate the reader, both cognitively and affectively, into alternate ways of being» (Davison-Vecchione & Seeger, 2023, p. 135). Le Guin's work opens a space for the imaginative exploration of otherness, while simultaneously acknowledging the constructed nature of its fictional framework and making purposeful use of the unique capacities afforded by speculative fiction. *The Left Hand of Darkness* also offers another insight into one of the peculiar characteristics of Ursula Le Guin's work in relation to anthropology: the presence of characters who, despite not always being explicitly defined as ethnographers, manifest an evident affinity with the anthropological work and a clear anthropological sensitivity. They are often scholars of humanistic disciplines, such as language and history, or diplomats sent on different planets to establish a relationship with the locals. Indeed, diplomats and anthropologists position themselves differently within the contexts they engage with, their methods and ethical frameworks being shaped by distinct goals. Diplomats are guided by the interests of the entity they represent – whether a country, a planet, or an organization – and prioritize negotiation and understanding of socio-cultural contexts to advance these objectives. Anthropologists, by contrast, observe and interpret cultures with reflexivity, seeking insight into cultural realities as complex systems of meanings, beliefs, and

¹⁰⁸ This introduction was added in the 1976 edition of the novel.

practices. Despite these differences, they also share commonalities as both must navigate intercultural relationships and cultivate connections across diverse contexts, often showing a marked anthropological sensibility. The protagonist and narrator of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, for instance, is Genly Ai, an envoy of the interplanetary alliance known as the *Ekumen* sent to Gethen to convince the planet to join the alliance. Genly, who comes from a culture with fixed genders, struggles to understand the Gethenians and to be understood by them, especially regarding gender roles. His frustration is exemplified in the following extract, in which Genly is reflecting on the way he perceives the inhabitants of Gethen:

«Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own» (U. Le Guin, 1960, chapter 1).

In this other instance, Genly is confronted by Pemmer Harge rem ir Tibe, a member of the upper chamber of parliament, who comments on the sexual physiology of different human species in these terms:

«“So all of them, out on these other planets, are in permanent kemmer? A society of perverts?” So Lord Tibe put it; I thought he was joking. “Well, it may be the fact, but it’s a disgusting idea, Mr. Ai, and I don’t see why human beings here on earth should want or tolerate any dealings with creatures so monstrously different. But then, perhaps you’re here to tell me I have no choice in the matter”» (U. Le Guin, 1960, chapter 3).

Within the structure of the story, he provides an outsider perspective, allowing Le Guin to explore the profound ways in which gender and culture shape perception and human relationships, and to reflect on the challenges of taking on the “cultural skin” of radically different beings (Natali, 2023).

Another compelling pseudo-ethnographic figure from Le Guin’s imagination is Sutti, the protagonist of *The Telling* (U. K. Le Guin, 2000). A human woman from Earth, she serves as an observer for the *Ekumen*, tasked with studying the society of the planet Aka to determine its eligibility for joining the interplanetary alliance. She is a scholar of Akan language and tradition, which, she discovers upon arriving on the planet, was suppressed decades earlier by an authoritarian regime. The new government imposed a corporate, technocratic ideology and implemented strict policies to erase historical memory, oral tradition, and spiritual practices. Coming from a future Earth ravaged by religious fundamentalism, war, and violence, Sutti struggles to adapt to the reality of Aka.

When she discovers that some communities still secretly preserve the traditional culture – known as "the Telling" – and is assigned to study it, she is confronted with many of the dilemmas and uncertainties that typically characterize ethnographic fieldwork. She continually questions her role as an observer and the validity of her methods; she struggles to grasp the fundamental concepts of the Telling – so unfamiliar and alien to her experience; lastly, she is haunted by fear of the regime's authorities, who would undoubtedly disapprove of her work. Ethical concerns weigh heavily on her, as she worries her emotions could compromise the value of her work:

«Judgmentalism. Wrong to let frustration cloud her thinking and perceptions. Wrong to admit prejudice. Look, listen, notice: observe. That was her job. This wasn't her world. But she was on it, in it, how could she observe it when there was no way to back off from it?» (U. K. Le Guin, 2000, chapter 1).

And later that her research may endanger her informants. At the same time, she wrestles with her place within the community she is studying, asking herself what it truly means to help, and whether she has the right – or the ability – to do so. However, she also experiences the reassuring and satisfying sense of finally becoming familiar with the culture she is studying:

«She had come to Aka to learn how to sing this world's tune, to dance its dance; and at last, she thought, away from the city's endless noise, she was beginning to hear the music and to learn how to move to it» (U. K. Le Guin, 2000, chapter 4).

All these sensations will resonate with anyone who has experienced real-life fieldwork. Although the situation described is fictional and cannot be considered a scientifically valid report, it faithfully captures the structure and emotional depth of an authentic field diary. Satty frequently reflects on the relationships she builds with her informants and her efforts to grasp their worldview, which is embodied and distilled in the mysterious and often ambiguous tradition of the Telling. In contemplating these attempts, she critically examines her methods, repeatedly emphasizing the importance of listening carefully and the ability to shift her perspective – from her own to that of the people of Aka. The empathetic stance she adopts while still not sharing their beliefs is essential to the practice of anthropology.

«One was not asked to believe, only to listen» (U. K. Le Guin, 2000, chapter 4).

Le Guin's works offer a rich array of entry points for reflecting on the intersection between anthropology and science fiction. The way Le Guin constructs her fictional cultures and societies closely mirrors both the style and substance of anthropological writing. Her meticulous attention to detail and her emphasis on social relations, historicity, and power dynamics enrich the complexity of her worldbuilding. Rather than merely presenting surface-level observations, she offers, through the inquisitive gaze of her protagonists, a deeper insight into the socio-cultural mechanisms that structure and sustain her imagined worlds. Davison-Vecchione and Seeger (2023) draw a direct parallel between Le Guin's narrative style and the anthropological methods of writing introduced with the "literary turn" of the 1980s-90s sustaining that: «Like Geertz, Le Guin uses thick description for the purpose of making sense of the practices of societies which differ radically from the observer's (author's or reader's) own» (Davison-Vecchione & Seeger, 2023, p. 125).

Furthermore, in her novels, Le Guin masterfully captures the experiential journey central to ethnographic inquiry – namely, the process of encountering, engaging with, and making sense of unfamiliar worldviews and ways of life. By transmitting the emotional sensations that fieldwork research involves, rather than its technical procedures, Le Guin's work offers the general public a glimpse into what it means to experience the often enigmatic world of anthropological research.

However, as compelling as the parallels between Ursula Le Guin's literature and anthropology may be, one crucial consideration must not be overlooked in this discussion: she is not an anthropologist, nor did she ever claim to be. On the contrary, she often reiterated that: «My father did the real thing; I make it up» (Broughton, 2008, p. 55; Mellor, 2008, p. 6). Indeed, she had personal ties to the discipline through her parents, Alfred Kroeber and Theodora Kracow, both anthropologists, and, as she said herself in many different occasions, she grew up surrounded by anthropological knowledge: «[We had] many anthropologists circulating around, so I was fairly well plunged into anthropological life in that sense» (Broughton, 2008, p. 54). This intellectual environment profoundly influenced her upbringing and education, and ultimately, her narrative:

«Obviously, something seeped through, a kind of cultural relativism, a kind of nobody really has the word but everybody's word is worth listening to» (Mellor, 2008, p. 6);

«I'm interested in other cultures. I have this great advantage of not being brought up ethnocentric, of not being culture-bound. Of course, we're all culture-bound in that we grow up in one culture.

But I grew up amongst people who spent their life thinking about other cultures and about the way others thought—different races, different people. [...] All this shows up very clearly in my books» (Broughton, 2008, pp. 54-55).

Anthropology shaped Le Guin's way of perceiving the world and the otherness that inhabits it. Her father's work, embedded in the Boasian school of thought, put her in contact with ideas of anthropological holism and cultural relativism (Collins, 2009). As a result, her novels entail a marked openness to ambiguity and a preference for suggestive rather than definitive thinking. This inclination toward exploration and connection-making is vividly reflected in the way she constructs her fictional worlds and cultures. Collins describes her "speculative anthropology" as «atmospheric and proximal rather than a conscious program» (Collins, 2009). What Le Guin's narrative reflects is not anthropological factual knowledge, but rather an anthropological mode of thinking.

Indeed, Le Guin engaged with anthropological ideas far more deeply than most who have never formally studied the discipline. Her profound grasp of the anthropological mindset allows her to transform fantastic fiction into a powerful medium for representing – and speculatively experimenting with – anthropological concepts and methods. Ultimately, because of the peculiar nature of her narrative, Ursula Le Guin's work offers a privileged case study for the exploration of the intersections between anthropology and the fantastic.

3.4. Reflecting on anthropology

By examining the underlying mechanisms of the fantastic – as a conceptual framework, a source of affective engagement, and a narrative space where worldbuilding becomes visible – the constructed nature of these narratives becomes unmistakably clear, revealing the predominance of intentional design. Fantastic worlds and narratives are entirely shaped by the author, even when a concealed narrative voice attempts to preserve the illusion of an ontologically independent reality. They never truly are: they remain intrinsically tied to the conceptual and culturally constructed reality of the real world, as well as to the author's perception of it. The inescapable interconnectedness between reality and fictional worlds – and the dependence of the latter's interpretation on the reader's lived experience of the former – inevitably constrains the scope of imagination. Since the

fantastic is commonly conceived as «the free play of a creative imagination, the limits of fantasy should be as broad as the limits of one's mind. This is not the case, as each fantasy world is a fairly tight transformation by the players of their mundane, shared realities» (Fine, 1983/2002, p. 3). Imagination is inherently constrained by the human experience of the real world, which provides the raw materials from which authors construct their secondary worlds. Although human experiences are shaped by a wide range of cultural, historical, and socio-political contexts – resulting in significant diversity – certain experiences are so pervasive as to be nearly universal. Others reflect recurring patterns in how people interact with and adapt to their environments. Faced with similar circumstances and challenges, human responses often converge, leading to the repetition of themes, structures, and solutions across narratives:

«I think audiences don't always realize that there's really very little new that we can imagine. It doesn't come completely out of nowhere, human communities and societies have been inventive and creative from the beginning. And how we function and keep going, despite our worst sometimes, very little of this is new. I've learned when I think I've invented something, to go and research it and see who else was doing it before me in the real world. And that supports the writing for me, because then I can learn how they did it, I can bring that into the fiction in ways that work» (N. Hopkinson, personal communication, August 9, 2024).

Yet, despite the centrality of creative agency in shaping the diegetic world, there is no single, fixed interpretation of that world. The creator does not possess exclusive authority over its meaning. A fictional reality does not exist in any objective sense; its ontology is contingent on the act of reading and the interpretive frameworks brought to it. Each reader, through their engagement with the narrative and its world, contributes to its construction, revealing that meaning emerges not solely from the text itself, but from the dynamic interplay between text, context, and reader:

«It is fascinating to me to see how far off what I mean people can go, but I also recognize that there is value in that for them. I try not to always be saying: “No, that's not what I meant”, cause I'm not sure how much of that matters, what I meant. [...] I once was at a feminist science fiction convention that happens in Madison, Wisconsin doing a signing and they put me all alone at a table in the middle of the hallway, which is a very isolating space to be. A woman came up to me and said she'd just finished reading *Midnight Robber*, my second novel [...] she sat beside me for most of that hour and asked me questions about the novel: she had understood not a single thing the way I had written it, nothing. She interpreted everything differently, it was just a different novel. But she loved the novel

she read, so who am I to tell her? I told her some of what I had intended, but I didn't want to destroy her enjoyment in the story» (N. Hopkinson, personal communication, August 9, 2024).

Building on these principles, fantastic fiction can be interpreted through an anthropological lens, regardless of the author's original intent or awareness of anthropological theory.

Given the multiple points of intersection between anthropology and the fantastic – and grounded in the understanding that fantastic narratives are themselves constructed – the same critical lens used to deconstruct fiction can be applied reflexively to anthropology itself, revealing its own constructedness and the narrative strategies it employs in representing cultural realities (Fabian, 2014; Nazaruk, 2011). In this sense, anthropological texts can be understood as forms of storytelling – «properly experimental and ethical» (Clifford & Marcus, 1992, p. 2) – as much rhetorical and poetic as they are political. Viewing ethnographic accounts through this lens «serves to highlight the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts. It undermines overly transparent modes of authority, and it draws attention to the historical predicament of ethnography, the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures (Clifford & Marcus, 1992, p. 2; citing Wagner, 1975). Such an approach foregrounds the narrative strategies embedded in ethnographic writing and challenges the assumption that anthropology offers a direct, objective window into cultural realities.

The underlying premise of this view is that anthropological understanding – like any form of knowledge that «appears as "real" in history, the social sciences, the arts, even in common sense, is always analyzable as a restrictive and expressive set of social codes and conventions» (Clifford & Marcus, 1992, p. 10). As products of such conventions, ethnographic analyses must be understood as deeply embedded within the cultural contexts in which they are produced. These contexts carry with them specific influences: shifting power dynamics, political agendas, rhetorical strategies, and historically situated experiences. Far from being neutral or objective accounts, ethnographies are shaped by particular, culturally located perspectives. They are inherently mutable – subject to change across both time and space. As Clifford notes, «ethnography is actively situated *between* powerful systems of meaning» (Clifford & Marcus, 1992, p. 2), meaning that the production and interpretation of ethnographic texts are never detached from the discursive and ideological frameworks that surround them. When created or read within different cultural settings, these texts are likely to generate different interpretations and conclusions,

further underscoring their constructed and contingent nature. Anthropological perspectives are inevitably constrained by their own constructions – specifically, by the epistemologies that define the discipline and which themselves emerge from culturally situated contexts. As such, they reflect a limited viewpoint shaped by processes of inclusion and exclusion that respond to underlying power dynamics and academic constraints. In summary, ethnographic accounts are culturally constructed interpretations of other cultures and phenomena, formulated and debated within a culturally contingent epistemological framework. This recognition must inform both the production and interpretation of anthropological knowledge, prompting a rejection of the notion that anthropology engages with absolute truths. Instead, it invites an embrace of anthropology as a dialogic process of engaging with multiple, situated interpretations. Moving in this direction, James Clifford advocates for the necessity of what he terms the *specification of discourses*: «the action of always asking in ethnography «who speaks? who writes? when and where? with or to whom? under what institutional and historical constraints?» (Clifford, 1992, p. 13).

Acknowledging the contexts of construction rather than concealing them, the ethnographer ceases to be a detached, superior observer and instead becomes a present, active voice – sharing personal impressions and emotions that are recognized as integral to, rather than obstacles in, the research process. In fact, for a long time, anthropology has been concerned with aligning itself with a particular vision of knowledge production grounded in Western scientific traditions and positivism. This approach often involved minimizing – or even entirely excluding – the emotional and empathetic dimensions inherent not only to the research process but to any human endeavor involving relationships. The aim was to preserve scientific rigor and presumed objectivity, often without critically reflecting on how – and by whom – the standards of objectivity were established. This perspective neglected the fact that science itself is a product of social processes, culturally constructed and shaped by a limited view of reality. The inherent impossibility of producing a single, definitive analysis of literary works sets them apart from the natural and hard sciences: literary texts are seen as too mutable and unstable, their meanings contingent on the multiple, shifting perspectives of individual interpreters. As Clifford explains, citing De Certeau: «the fictions of literary language were scientifically condemned (and esthetically appreciated) for lacking "univocity" the purportedly unambiguous accounting of natural science and professional history. In this schema, the discourse of literature and fiction is inherently unstable» (Clifford, 1992, p. 5).

In fantastic fiction, as highlighted in the analysis above, these aspects are particularly amplified and emphasized. This is evident, among other things, in the mode's historical use for political and propagandistic purposes – just as other forms of knowledge production, such as genetics and history, have been employed. The resistance of the fiction to conforming to strict scientific standards was often perceived as a diminution of its value. Consequently, anthropology sought to distance itself from literature and its narrative devices. However, the interpretative turn brought a significant shift in this attitude, shifting the discipline's focus toward meaning-making, subjectivity, and the constructed nature of cultural narratives (Geertz, 1973), and leading to the recognition of the «literary or rhetorical dimensions of ethnography» (Clifford, 1992, p. 4) as active and essential components of anthropological work.

This transformation introduced a vital dimension of self-reflection regarding the contingent and constructed nature of ethnographic accounts and, more broadly, on anthropology as a discipline. The literary nature of ethnography was repositioned as a central characteristic of anthropology, stressing that acknowledging the rhetorical and interpretative dimensions of ethnographic writing does not diminish its value or scientific legitimacy; rather, it enables a richer, more nuanced understanding and broadening of what constitutes science. This perspective fosters a reflexive approach to anthropology, highlighting the discipline's constructed nature and opening up new possibilities for its textual renditions:

«[To] recognize the poetic dimensions of ethnography does not require that one give up facts and accurate accounting for the supposed free play of poetry. "Poetry" is not limited to romantic or modernist subjectivism: it can be historical, precise, objective. [...] Ethnography is hybrid textual activity: it traverses genres and disciplines (Clifford, 1992, p. 26).

This also invites a reflection on the language used to communicate anthropological insights, considering how traditional academic discourse often imposes limitations and barriers that hinder accessibility for a broader audience (see section 4.1).

Given the intersections discussed in this chapter between anthropology and the fantastic, the two can be placed in dialogue and mutually inform each other in productive ways. Both literature and anthropology aim to represent human experience and share compelling similarities in structure, narrative strategies, and modes of expression, particularly in the use of storytelling to convey meaning, explore subjectivity, and interpret social life. Yet they are not identical: anthropology relies on fieldwork, observation, and

interpretation of social realities, while fantastic fiction constructs imaginative scenarios that reveal cultural, social, or ethical tensions. However, anthropology can serve as a critical tool for analyzing works of fantastic fiction, exposing parallels between narrative events and real-world social structures. Conversely, fantastic fiction can be approached as a form of speculative ethnography, offering a creative space to examine social issues and provoke reflection beyond the limits of formal ethnographic methods (Capello, 2020; Craith & Kockel, 2014; De Angelis, 2002).

Furthermore, the fantastic can function as a powerful medium for communicating anthropological ideas, employing a language and set of codes that distance themselves from the often-closed confines of academic discourse. This allows for a more inclusive and accessible mode of expression, capable of reaching broader audiences beyond strictly academic contexts. However, a disclaimer is necessary to properly contextualize these ideas. There are important limitations to the ways in which anthropology and the fantastic can interact and be compared – boundaries that must always be acknowledged when engaging with this interdisciplinary dialogue.

First and foremost, anthropology is not fiction, and fiction is not anthropology. While the fantastic mode is characterized by the portrayal of explicitly unreal, fictional events – occurrences that would be impossible in the empirical world – anthropology involves the representation and interpretation of cultural realities. These realities are grounded in the lives of real, living individuals and communities and are presented as actual rather than imagined. They both construct narratives through culturally influenced language and modes while creating the illusion that what is represented exists independently of the author's and reader's interpretative mediation. In literature, especially in the novel, this strategy aims to produce and sustain the form of engagement that defines the genre's success. In anthropology, it has historically served to maintain scientific rigour and a sense of objectivity, as social scientists long sought to align their language and methods with those of the natural sciences. In this process, however, anthropology often set aside more affective, poetic, and expressive dimensions of writing, whose importance has been increasingly reasserted, particularly since the interpretive turn. The conception of anthropological writing as purely objective – and thus as a direct representation of observed contexts – overlooks the crucial role of context, which is always shaped by diverse and intersecting personal, social, and political experiences, as well as by the author's positionality. These same conditions apply to both anthropological and literary texts, which

are produced within and shaped by such contexts. From this perspective, anthropology risks missing the opportunity to analyse its own practice through an ethnographic lens, a paradox in itself. Anthropological and literary texts are therefore not isolated productions; rather, they are part of broader forms of expression that are interconnected and mutually shaped by the social, historical, political, and personal contexts in which they emerge (Capello & Scandurra, 2025; De Angelis, 2002; Scandurra, 2024). As Clifford Geertz explains – referring to two examples of literary text and anthropological account – «The conditions of their creation, and the point of it (to say nothing of the manner and the quality) differ. But the one is as much a fiction – "a making" – as the other» (Geertz, 1973, p. 16). James Clifford further clarifies the use of this possibly controversial term by stating that:

«To call ethnographies fictions may raise empiricist hackles. But the word as commonly used in recent textual theory has lost its connotation of falsehood, of something merely opposed to truth. It suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive. Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of "something made or fashioned"» (Clifford, 1992, p. 9).

As demonstrated in the analysis so far, both are constructed representations shaped by distinct concepts, objectives, and creative processes, yet each remains the product of the specific perspectives of their respective authors. The aims of these texts also differ fundamentally by definition. Anthropological texts specifically seek to explain the cultural practices of human groups, aiming to «reduce the puzzlement [...] to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise» (Geertz, 1973, p. 16). In contrast, fantastic fiction does not claim to explain reality but rather evokes emotional and intellectual responses that resonate with real-life experiences, thereby creating a comparative bridge between fiction and reality. That said, the two forms of representation share considerable thematic concerns and overlapping fields of knowledge, within which their comparison becomes particularly fruitful. These areas of intersection offer meaningful opportunities for generating compelling insights and for constructing productive analogies that can be applied in varied contexts. In particular, they hold promise for informing practices of communication, education, and community engagement – topics that will be further explored in the following chapters. Some key thematic intersections include – but are not limited to – questions about the future, the relationship between humans and more-than-human entities, the encounter with otherness, legacies of imperialism and colonialism, conceptions of nature, the Anthropocene, and the cultural construction of time.

Finally, fantastic forms of expression possess an intrinsic aesthetic value that transcends their interpretative potential. While the metaphorical dimension of the fantastic and its ability to evoke parallels with real life are undoubtedly significant and offer many practical applications, they are neither the sole nor the most important aspect. The purely presentational and aesthetic dimension of the fantastic flows seamlessly alongside its symbolic meaning, with neither taking precedence over the other. This balance is something Davide Monopoli frequently emphasizes:

«Bisogna fare attenzione a non inflazionare la dimensione metaforico-figurativa, rischi se no di cadere nella logica del discorso piuttosto che in quella dell'immagine. La fantascienza va bene di per sé, l'immaginario non lo devi mai giustificare. Il mio approccio è molto nietzschiano. Per la mia formazione freudiana-nietzschiana, la dimensione del valore non mi piace per nulla, la trovo una difesa anche quando il valore è positivo, lo trovo manipolatorio e instradante. Anche, dare un valore, dire giusto e sbagliato, trasformando così qualche cosa che ha una natura più magmatica che è proprio quella dell'immagine. Quindi non è più una questione di entrare nei contenuti, ma vedere dal di fuori le forme. C'è una dimensione il cui funzionamento è semiotico, dell'immagine più affettiva, più partecipativa, più identificatoria, dove spesso, come nel rituale, non c'è distinzione fra l'oggetto del rituale e il soggetto che lo pratica. [...] Questo per dire che noi possiamo raccontare tante cose con l'immaginario fantastico-fantascientifico, ricordando però sempre che va bene anche di per sé, che rappresenta qualcosa di per sé, senza doverlo attaccare per forza ad altro, che questo qualcosa di per sé non è escapismo dalla realtà, ma è rappresentazione psicologica di fatti psicologici. Però, malgrado questo, le metafore sul mondo sono molto ricche: il rapporto con l'alterità, con l'ignoto, con il diverso e tutto questo, la scoperta di mondi nuovi, andare oltre i confini eccetera. È una motivazione forte¹⁰⁹» (D. Monopoli, personal communication, April 1, 2023).

¹⁰⁹ One must be careful not to inflate the metaphorical-figurative dimension too much, otherwise you risk falling into the logic of discourse rather than that of the image. Science fiction is fine on its own; the imaginary should never have to be justified. My approach is very Nietzschean. Due to my Freudian-Nietzschean background, I don't like the concept of value at all. I find it to be a defense mechanism, even when the value is positive. I find it manipulative and prescriptive. Even just assigning value, saying something is right or wrong, transforms something that has a more magma-like nature, which is precisely the nature of the image. So, it's no longer about entering into the content, but rather about observing the forms from the outside. There is a dimension whose functioning is semiotic, of the image, more affective, more participatory, more identificatory, where often, as in ritual, there is no distinction between the object of the ritual and the subject who performs it. [...] This is to say that we can tell many things through the fantastic-science fiction imaginary, always remembering, however, that it is valid in and of itself, that it represents something on its own, without necessarily having to be tied to something else, and that this "something on its own" is not escapism from reality, but a psychological representation of psychological facts. Nevertheless, metaphors about the world are very rich: the relationship with otherness, with the unknown, with the different, and all of this, the discovery of new worlds, going beyond borders, and so on. It's a powerful motivation (D. Monopoli, personal communication, April 1, 2023).

On the contrary, anthropology is fundamentally about interpretation – this has been central to the discipline at least since the interpretative turn. This also involves considering the context in which a work was created and the cultural background of its author – factors often set aside in literary studies, which tend to focus solely on the text itself. In literary criticism, contextualizing a text within its production environment and authorial intent is sometimes viewed as limiting a pure, literal, or aesthetic interpretation. French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes famously argues that «To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text... Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile» (Barthes, 1977, p. 147). In anthropological analysis, however, the context of production is crucial, as it reveals key cultural facts – not only for the enjoyment of the text itself but for its anthropological interpretation. I further argue that the literary and anthropological analytical dimensions do not oppose each other; on the contrary, an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing fantastic texts and works could offer a more complete and compelling understanding, enriching insights in both fields.

To conclude, while the aesthetic dimension of the fantastic will be only implicitly considered throughout this dissertation – indeed, it has been a determining factor in the selection of the literary and artistic works examined – the primary objective is to provide an anthropological interpretative analysis of the intangible heritage of the fantastic, its underlying mechanisms, and the potential of its aesthetic to communicate anthropological themes.

Building on the theoretical framework established in Chapter 3, the following chapter shifts from conceptual exploration to communicative application. While the previous discussion highlights the epistemological and methodological affinities between anthropology and the fantastic, Chapter 4 extends this argument by examining how these shared features can be mobilised beyond academic contexts. In doing so, it moves from analysing the relationship between the two fields to considering the practical potential of the fantastic as a medium through which anthropological knowledge can be translated, disseminated, and made accessible to wider audiences.

Chapter 4. Communicating through the fantastic

In this chapter, I will consider the fantastic as a language, adopting a broad understanding of the term according to Peyna Lin's conception. Lin (2010) defines language as a category that «includes all tools used in the process of communication» (Lin, 2010, p. 553), thus encompassing diverse media and expressive forms.

Starting from the issue of communicating academic – particularly anthropological – knowledge to the general public, I will address the importance of, and recent institutional efforts toward, bridging the divide between specialized discourse and broader audiences. I argue that the fantastic can serve as an effective alternative to technical and institutional language for disseminating such knowledge. Because of its inherent characteristics, the fantastic can act as an ideal communicative tool: it can introduce complex academic topics to the public in a way that is engaging, relatable, and socially meaningful. I explore this potential by reflecting on an experimental event organized with the Vancouver Arts Colloquium Society (VACS) as part of my fieldwork in Canada, which later inspired a related experience in Turin.

As an alternative language, the fantastic offers anthropology – and academic knowledge more generally – a means of entering people's everyday lives, fostering direct impact, and contributing to initiatives that promote socio-cultural cohesion. In doing so, it can also help cultural and educational institutions strengthen their connection with the wider public and enhance their social relevance. In the following sections, I will analyze the features of the fantastic that make it particularly suited to these purposes. Framing it within the sphere of popular culture will allow me to discuss its diffusion through mass media and its consequent accessibility and influence on collective imaginaries. These very characteristics have led some scholars to regard the fantastic as a form of contemporary mythology. I will explore this perspective and examine its implications for understanding the fantastic as a repository of symbols and meanings that constitute a kind of intangible cultural heritage.

Finally, I will focus on one essential quality that characterizes fiction in general and fantastic fiction in particular: relatability. Through its capacity to generate empathy and emotional engagement, the fantastic not only enhances understanding and recognition but also facilitates the internalization of complex ideas. Its accessibility, diffusion across

various media, and ability to elicit emotional responses make it a powerful medium for translating academic thought into shared cultural experience.

The concepts analyzed in this chapter were informed by interviews and materials collected during my fieldwork at UBC in Canada. The voices presented here belong to professionals I engaged with whose work operates at the intersection of community engagement, art events, and artistic languages. In the next chapter, these concepts are further developed and examined through a case study on postcolonial fantastic fiction.

4.1. The problem of communicating academic knowledge

Like most scientific disciplines, anthropology primarily communicates through formal, highly technical academic language. Its intended audience is usually composed of experts in the same field or members of the academic community. While this mode of communication ensures precision and rigor, and is still considered indispensable by its proponents (Thompson & Watkins, 2021), it also limits the discipline's ability to engage with a broader public. Although academic language varies across contexts, is mutable and porous, it is generally considered «intrinsically more difficult than other language registers» (Snow & Uccelli, 2009, p. 114). In fact, the complexity of the messages conveyed in academic writing, the density of its informational content, the specialized and often interdisciplinary lexicon it requires, and the less transparent communicative context compared to other registers, all contribute to making academic language more challenging to interpret than other forms of language (Snow & Uccelli, 2009).

As a result of these features, academic language is, in most cases, not widely accessible. Most people – often referred to as the general public (Maile & Griffiths, 2014a) – are not provided the necessary training or even the basic background knowledge required to fully comprehend academic texts. This inaccessibility contributes to a persistent divide between scholarly discourse and other ways of understanding the world, a gap often reinforced by hierarchical perceptions of legitimacy and value. In technical terms, no form of understanding is inherently superior to another; there is no objective basis for such a claim. However, the historical role of academia in Western society has led to the glorification of a positivist approach to reality – valued for being the «result of systematic, rigorous procedures» and «subject to refereeing processes where ideas and theories are refined through critique and empirical analysis does not, in itself, invest this type of

knowledge with status» (Maile, 2014, p. 33). Nevertheless, this form of intellectual authority has long been associated with a particular social class – namely, the intellectual elite – whose status was built precisely on their privileged access to, and control over, the production of formally sanctioned discourse. In the 19th century, a process of (partial) democratization of intellectual production began, as the bourgeoisie started contributing through their expertise in fields such as business, finance, and management. These emerging forms of knowledge were seen as less abstract and more rooted in everyday life, with a tangible impact on people's material conditions. In contrast, traditional academic discourse was increasingly viewed as disconnected from practical concerns and largely irrelevant to the needs of ordinary people. Although the working class remained excluded from formal participation in these domains, they nonetheless experienced the effects of this shift, and, in some cases, individuals were even able to leverage this new cultural capital to improve their social standing (Olson & Torrance, 2009).

The division between what Stella Maile (2014) describes as «‘academic’ or ‘bookish’ knowledge [...] and ‘common-sense’ practical or applied knowledge» (Maile, 2014, p. 34) remains evident in contemporary perceptions, albeit in more nuanced and context-dependent forms. Nevertheless, it continues to shape public imaginaries surrounding scholarly expertise. The distance that persists between academic institutions and the general public both reflects and reinforces this divide. As Maile notes, scholarly discourse is often «symbolically loaded and, as such, is often either defensively rejected as having little worth for people’s lives or courted by those who believe knowledge from the ‘academy’ is the best kind of knowledge» (Maile, 2014, p. 33). Moreover, access to academic resources is not universally guaranteed. Individuals who are not affiliated with universities often face restrictions, and even those within academic institutions may encounter significant economic, logistical, or technological barriers.

As a consequence, although universities and cultural institutions have made efforts to enhance public outreach and engagement – reflected in broader policy and institutional changes (Maile & Griffiths, 2014b) – a significant gap between academic discourse and everyday understanding persists. This leads the general public to feel – and indeed be – excluded from academic discourse, which consequently often remains confined within the narrow boundaries of specific disciplines or, at best, within academic settings. Nevertheless, the importance of accessing academic insights and participating in the

discourse surrounding knowledge production and dissemination cannot be overlooked. As Martin, Maton, and Doran argue:

«To access academic discourse is to access means for achieving social power, epistemological power, or axiological power. Access may lead to success in myriad ways. [...] Academic discourse is particularly powerful. In its manifold forms it offers access to wealth, health and the capacity to create or destroy worlds, real or imaginative. Accessing academic discourse, that is to say the task of understanding its nature and developing ways of enabling everyone to grasp, shape and change academic discourse, is an issue of social justice» (Martin et al., 2020, p. 1).

It is important to clarify that, as the authors themselves explain, the term *academic discourse*, as used in this case, is not confined to a specific context of production or disciplinary field. Rather, it encompasses a range of practices across diverse contexts. This perspective stems from the recognition that «Scholars can succumb to the seductive illusion that their own professional discourse is the only legitimate currency and fail to see that non-academic knowledge possesses its own forms of power, its own wellsprings of understanding and luminous insight» (Martin et al., 2020, p. 1).

Even more crucial than accessing institutionally produced knowledge, but indeed closely connected to it, is the ability to develop what education and information sciences refer to as “information literacy”¹¹⁰ – defined as «the ability to identify information needs, locate information, manage, evaluate, and effectively manipulate and use it in situations where it is needed» (Lin, 2010, p. 549). This skill is fundamental in every aspect of life and is recognized by the Association of College and Research Libraries, as cited by Lin (2010), as: «a “key component, and contributor to, lifelong learning”, including individuals’ “roles as informed citizens and members of communities” and their “increasing responsibilities in life”» (Lin, 2010, p. 550). In this context, education and the acquisition of information literacy are understood as more than mere preparation for entering a professional field or achieving economic goals – objectives that are often implicitly prioritized in institutionalized education. Rather, they are viewed as essential pathways to equipping individuals with the tools needed to become engaged, informed, and responsible citizens capable of functioning effectively within society (Lin, 2010). In other words, education

¹¹⁰ I intend the term *literacy* in a broad sense, following the precisation provided by Olson and Torrance (2009) drawing from anthropological works, that «literacy may be taken up in radically different ways in different societies at different times and with different consequences» (Olson & Torrance, 2009, p. xvii).

fosters awareness and critical thinking, qualities that are especially vital in today's climate of political manipulation, human rights violations, and the erosion of critical thought. Information literacy, therefore, serves as a foundational tool for supporting deliberative democracy.

As previously mentioned, academic institutions are increasingly recognizing their responsibility to contribute to a broader form of education, one that seeks to make a concrete and meaningful impact on society. This involves addressing critiques of academic knowledge as socially irrelevant and bridging the still persistent divide between theoretical and practical forms of understanding – boundaries that, encouragingly, are becoming more porous. A fundamental way to achieve this goal is to «open knowledge previously restricted to specific scientific or other communities to lay scrutiny, as well as to open up political arenas to more direct processes of citizen involvement» (Barnes, 2008, p. 468). However, engaging publics beyond academic contexts requires more than simply granting access to knowledge – it also involves making that knowledge understandable, relatable, and relevant. This means contributing to information literacy, attracting interest, and demonstrating how academic work relates to people's lived experiences. At its core, this is a matter of social justice, inclusivity, and equity in access to education (Barnes, 2008; Lin, 2010). Within this framework, the communication of science and academic research is not a secondary concern but a core responsibility of scholars. If we fail to communicate our findings effectively – ensuring they are understandable, accessible and relevant to wider audiences – the knowledge we produce remains self-contained and ultimately loses its purpose. Over the past two decades, universities have increasingly emphasized their engagement with society, and science communication has become central to what is now commonly referred to as the “third mission” of higher education. Although it is not yet a fully established or consistently defined field, there is growing institutional awareness that the production of knowledge must go hand in hand with its dissemination. Communicating research, making it available to civic society, and fostering dialogue with the broader public are now seen as essential components of institutional missions. This shift not only strengthens relationships with other social and cultural actors but also influences how academic knowledge and institutions are perceived and valued. As noted in the previous sections, academic language is one of the primary factors contributing to the divide and sense of detachment between scholars and the general public. Therefore, one of the most

compelling strategies for addressing this issue is to identify alternative modes of communicating academic knowledge.

4.1.1. AIR Salon No. 170 *Exploring the Fantastical Within*

While conducting fieldwork in Vancouver, I had the opportunity to apply this strategy firsthand by organizing an event based on these principles in collaboration with Keiko Honda.

I first met Keiko in August 2024, when Bernie Perley (see section 5.2.1) – who had previously worked with her – introduced us. Among her many roles, including that of a lifelong learning educator, Keiko Honda runs the Vancouver Arts Colloquium Society (VACS)¹¹¹, which she describes as:

«an art-supporting organization that uses the power of art to bring communities together in a simplest form aiming to develop problem finding, problem solving and cooperation skills among community members through art, and developing connections, especially intergenerational ones» (K. Honda, personal communication, August 18, 2024).

They promote and organize artistic projects, workshops, courses, and events centered on a wide range of themes and designed to engage diverse communities in processes of co-creation.

Around VACS, an interesting community of practice has formed, which can be seen as combining characteristics of both MUFANT's heritage community and the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria*. It brings together scholars, experts from different fields, artists, students, and art enthusiasts who collaborate on a range of creative and academic projects, much like in MUFANT's community. At the same time, it resembles the *Tavolo* in the way participants interact and meet through dialogue, with each person offering their expertise while actively engaging with others, learning collectively in a non-hierarchical environment. People also sometimes meet simply to spend time together and share special occasions. One such example, which also involved me directly, was a Thanksgiving dinner hosted by Keiko, to which she kindly invited me, giving me the opportunity to experience

¹¹¹ <https://www.myvacs.org/>

my first Thanksgiving celebration. The atmosphere surrounding VACS is therefore a blend of intellectual, artistic, and personal connections, grounded in creative endeavors and discussions, collective planning of artistic activities, and the creation of a space where people can share time together in a simple sense of community, connecting with one another.

This kind of atmosphere is particularly evident during the Artists-in-Residence Salons that Keiko periodically organizes. I attended one of these salons and also hosted another. The evenings began with people gathering at Keiko's beautiful Vancouver home, immersed in nature and filled with artworks, some of which were created by Keiko herself. We shared a buffet dinner, to which everyone contributed, spending time in pleasant conversation. This was followed by the salon's themed presentation, which in both cases was highly interactive and actively involved participants, who were consistently encouraged to share their thoughts and reflections. As Keiko explains:

«I really do believe that conversation dialogue is our strongest tool for change, so I create the space for communities to come together through dialogues» (K. Honda, personal communication, August 18, 2024).

And her salons are indeed this kind of space. Keiko kindly allowed me to contribute when, in October 2024, we organized a salon titled *Exploring the Fantastical Within* in which I presented my research and experimented with the languages of the fantastic (Figure 10). We used these languages to design a group activity that encouraged participants to reflect on how they imagined Vancouver in the future, integrating their hopes, anxieties, and predictions into their visions. After presenting the key points of my research, I provided the guests with a list of narrative prompts to guide the creation of a fictional futuristic setting representing Vancouver 150 years from now. Each group was asked to describe their vision in a few sentences. The groups then presented their imagined scenarios, which served as the basis for a discussion on the themes of the future and its influence on present-day life. This activity served as a way to introduce the themes of the anthropology of the future in a non-technical, creative, and interactive manner, engaging an audience of non-specialist participants and inviting them to actively share their perspectives rather than remain passive listeners.

This experience served as the blueprint for structuring *Futuri/Presenti*, an event which I organized for *AnthroDay 2025* in collaboration with *CentroLIBENTER*, an

association dedicated to supporting the psychological and physical well-being of young people through free projects, meetings, and seminars. Together with art educator Mara Salis, with whom I had previously collaborated at MUFANT, where she was a volunteer in the National Civil Service, and psychologist Monica Maccarrone, we designed a workshop aimed at exploring the relationship of younger generations with the concept of the future, delving into its anthropological and social significance as a dimension often perceived as uncertain. The first phase of the workshop was structured as an open dialogue on the anthropological and social significance of the concept of “future”. We provided guidance based on our specific areas of expertise, combining psychological, social, and anthropological insights. We reflected on the culturally constructed nature of temporal dimensions, illustrated different cultural conceptions of time, and drew on examples from fantastic fiction as a way to imagine possible future scenarios. In the second phase, we collaboratively created a collage of words and pictures, fostering both a shared and personal exploration of our imaginaries of the future and encouraging connections between different visions (Figure 11). Finally, I introduced examples from Octavia Butler’s *Parable* series (1993) to further inspire reflection and discussion. The participants appreciated the activity and asked for bibliographical references to further explore the topics discussed. Since then, *CentroLIBENTER* has changed its name and organizational structure, becoming *Futuri/Presenti*¹¹², named after the title of this event. Working with Mara and Monica on this event was a real treat and marked the first step in an ongoing collaboration.

4.2. The fantastic as an alternative means of communication

The collaboration experience with Keiko informed and sustained my reflection on how the fantastic can serve as a meaningful and effective medium for facilitating the communication of anthropological ideas, epistemological perspectives, and alternative ways of engaging with reality.

What is most crucial at the initial stage is the creation of an accessible entry point that fosters curiosity and engagement. Due to its specific characteristics, the fantastic can

¹¹² <https://www.instagram.com/futuripresenti/>

play a valuable role in breaking down barriers. At this level, conveying highly technical or theoretical content is not essential. Rather, the focus should be on communicating a particular worldview and introducing audiences to alternative ways of perceiving and sense-making. Naturally, the information conveyed through fantastic narratives is neither factual nor scientific. However, it is highly evocative and can serve as an effective entry point for introducing broader audiences to specific topics and new modes of thought. Taking the example of cultural relativism, discussed in the previous chapter, the function of the fantastic is not to provide a comprehensive account of the concept, its historical development, or its theoretical implications. Rather, it can introduce audiences to relativistic thinking, helping to shift their perspective from an ethnocentric view to a recognition of the existence of multiple ways of interpreting reality. Once the barrier of detachment – or, more accurately, disengagement – has been overcome, deeper exploration can follow.

To proceed with the analysis of the characteristics that make the fantastic a valid alternative to academic forms of expression, it is useful to frame it within the category of popular culture, where it has held a significant presence since the early days of mass media (Batzke et al., 2018; Boulding et al., 2011; Kac-Vergne, 2017). Popular culture – or pop culture – is the set of ideas, practices, beliefs, images, objects, and phenomena that are prevalent and widely accepted within mainstream society. It encompasses areas such as music, television, film, fashion, slang, food, technology, social media trends, and more – typically reflecting and shaping the tastes and interests of the general public at a given time. Pop culture is mostly disseminated through mass media, namely the various forms of mass communication that are widely consumed by the general public, including television, radio, social media, newspapers, and magazines. This type of media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, disseminating information, and influencing cultural trends (Storey, 2018; Tolson, 1996). A fundamental characteristic of pop culture is that it «is widely favoured or well liked by many people» (Storey, 2018, p. 5). The widespread consumption of pop culture, coupled with the increasing availability of digital technology, has made its content far more accessible than traditional academic materials. As access to the internet and digital devices continues to grow¹¹³, a broader audience is able to engage with these media. In

¹¹³ As Ytasha L. Womack (2013) notes, the connectedness and access to public platforms with lower barriers to entry made possible by internet access and digital technologies, while powerful tools for BIPOC

contrast, academic content often remains confined to exclusive institutional settings and is typically reserved for those with access to higher education. In practical terms, virtually anyone with an internet connection and a basic device can access popular culture, while academic knowledge remains comparatively restricted. As media studies Andrew Tolson explains, «we live in a world that is saturated with mass media, consumed on a daily basis» (Tolson, 1996, p. ix), a phenomenon that he calls *mediation*. He argues that «one thing achieved by mediation is a vastly increased access to information, now transmitted instantaneously around the globe» (Tolson, 1996, p. 10). Many of these forms of mass media have a low barrier to entry, are widely available, accessible, and highly interconnected, making them particularly democratic vehicles of communication – especially when contrasted with the exclusive settings and restricted formats through which academic knowledge is typically circulated.

From a different perspective – through comparative subtraction – pop culture can be understood as a residual category, «the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture» (Storey, 2018, p. 5). In this view, popular culture is often characterized as mass-produced, formally simplistic, excessively commercial, and passively consumed. It is sometimes seen as one of the most visible outcomes of the cultural “Americanization” process, which contributed to the global spread of a diluted and commodified version of culture – one that even the least educated segments of the population can easily access and participate in. This conception reflects an elitist understanding of Culture (with capital C), seen as something exclusive, accessible only to those deemed truly “worthy,” a notion often tied to social class, economic capital, and educational privilege (Barthes, 1972; Storey, 2018). While high culture is traditionally reserved for intellectual and economic elites, popular culture – particularly when interpreted as folk culture – can be understood, as Storey puts it, as «a culture of the people for the people» (Storey, 2009, p. 9). In this sense, it can function as a means of class affirmation, cultural pride, and even political resistance, especially against the forces of modern capitalism that underpin such classifications. However, even within this oppositional framing, the distinction between high and popular

communities to create and disseminate content, are by no means guaranteed for everyone. She highlights the persistent inequalities that shape this landscape – inequalities marked by the digital divide, disparities in access to computers, connected devices, and broadband in BIPOC communities, and the chronic lack of such resources in their schools. These conditions render the realm of internet and technological access yet another terrain of unequal comparison and imbalance of power between groups.

culture continues to reinforce a hierarchical understanding of social structures and cultural legitimacy. One of the main implications is that culture, to be real «has to be difficult. Being difficult thus ensures its exclusive status as high culture. Its very difficulty literally excludes, an exclusion that guarantees the exclusivity of its audience» (Storey, 2018, p. 6). This is one of the issues I contest most strongly and believe deserves greater attention when considering how to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and the general public. I argue that the gatekeeping of knowledge – through the deliberate creation of barriers, whether linguistic or structural, and the maintenance of a level of difficulty intended to exclude those without specialized education – has significantly contributed to the deep divide between academia and broader society. This practice has shaped the widespread perception of academic knowledge as inaccessible, irrelevant, and disconnected from real-life concerns. Finding an alternative way to communicate it is not about simplification, but about identifying the most effective and thoughtful language for conveying scientific concepts. This involves adapting the mode of communication to suit the intended audience, taking into account the context, the goals of the exchange, and the audience's background. This applies to all kinds of cultural communication and concerns every cultural institution. As explained Shirish Rao, Senior Director of Public Engagement and Learning at the Vancouver Art Gallery:

«It's not that particular communities are interested or not interested in art, which is sometimes the assumption, it is the recognition that the welcome is not being extended in a language or a manner that is understood. So, we take steps toward a demystification of that it might require a Ph.D. to decode even the didactic on the wall. We are so active in our work with young people, with school children who come in every day, in creating accessible pathways for them to understand. The approach we take is not a simplification, but in fact a meeting of people where they are» (P40SR, personal communication, October 21, 2024).

Indeed, communicating effectively means making knowledge accessible not by diminishing its depth or complexity, but by expressing it in a way that fosters genuine understanding and engagement.

The language employed in fantastic fiction in all its forms is generally more accessible and less technical than that found in academic discourse. This does not imply that it is necessarily simpler or lacking in complexity – on the contrary, it can be highly intricate and challenging to follow, as anyone who has attempted to read *The Silmarillion* (J. R. R. Tolkien, 1999) can confirm. However, it does not presuppose specialized

background knowledge, nor does it rely on a technical lexicon (Lai, 2023). As such, it presents fewer entry barriers and remains broadly accessible to most people engaging with the various media through which the fantastic is expressed. As Snow and Uccelli (2009), point out, «control over academic language is a requirement for success with challenging literacy tasks» (Snow & Uccelli, 2009, p. 112). Consequently, when discussing scientific – and particularly anthropological – theories in detail, a certain level of linguistic complexity is unavoidable, as it mirrors the intricacy of the subject matter. Yet, if the goal is to bridge the gap and provide individuals with an accessible way into understanding how different frameworks for interpreting reality operate, the fantastic can be a highly effective tool. Everything necessary to understand the story and the context in which it unfolds – such as information about how the secondary world functions, the names of characters and places, historical background, and more – is typically provided by the author. Even when certain elements are left implicit or taken for granted, it is usually because the subject matter draws on a widely shared intangible cultural heritage of symbols, imagery, and meanings – so deeply embedded in the collective imagination that explicit explanation becomes unnecessary. Some examples include dragons, aliens, ghosts, wizards, and robots – figures that, as images and concepts, are widely recognizable and understood without requiring detailed description, regardless of an individual's level of knowledge or familiarity with fantastic narratives and their tropes. These figures are extensively employed across a wide range of media and cultural contexts – from direct representations in dedicated television shows and films to advertising campaigns and even colloquial expressions.



Figure 8 Tuborg beer advertisement referencing J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was created by the French agency Publicis Conseil, with Pierre Pénicaud as Art Director and Olivier Altmann as Creative Director¹¹⁴.



Figure 9 Poster *Ce vojo crede* ("I want to believe in it" in the Roman dialect) created by Tic Edizioni, an independent publishing house based in Rome. The concept was developed by Emanuele Kraushaar, with graphic design by Reg Mastice III¹¹⁵.

In fact, popular media greatly amplified the reach of the fantastic, making its figures easily accessible to a large number of people with minimal barriers. Science fiction, fantasy and horror have occupied a central place in pop culture productions since its very beginning (Boulding et al., 2011; Kac-Vergne, 2017), shaping narratives, aesthetics, and collective imaginaries across different platforms and generations. According to English literature scholar Mrinalini P. Thaker:

Symbols surround us in numerous forms and form a complex part of our daily lives. [...] Symbols represent a nation's culture, heritage, and history and are part of collective human consciousness.

¹¹⁴ This image is reproduced here for educational and research purposes under EU copyright exceptions for quotation and illustration in teaching and research (Directive 2001/29/EC), solely for analysis, critique, and discussion within this thesis.

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Being vehicles for communication within a frame of reference, symbols also convey influential meanings based on a set of collective values, potentials, and philosophies. They can cause us to think and behave in certain ways. Symbols can also lure us together via encoded information, or they can create blockades separating us. [...] As such Symbols have become global in our modern lives. Modern symbols are unequaled, transcultural, and transmedia (Thaker, 2022).

Indeed, the symbols of the fantastic permeate the collective imaginaries of billions of people around the world, playing a significant social role in their lives by responding to key socio-cultural functions of sense-making and collective identification. Because of its pervasiveness, recognizability, and constant presence in everyday life, the fantastic is often described as the mythology of the contemporary world (Barthes, 1972; Berger, 2013; Chakraborty, 2022; Dei, 2023; Storey, 2018; Tolson, 1996). As clarified by Andrew Tolson (1996), building on the theorization of literary critic and semiotician Roland Barthes (1972), when understood as mythologies, the symbols of the fantastic constitute a set of meanings that are «part of a common cultural currency, a cultural heritage, into which we are all (formally and informally) socialised» (Tolson, 1996, p. 5). These mythologies emerge from the interplay between signs (or symbols) and their associated meanings. Every sign conveys a denotative meaning, derived from its literal interpretation – for example, the alien as a creature coming from another planet –, and a connotative meaning, rooted in «the wider cultural associations which we bring to the literal meaning» (Tolson, 1996, p. 6) – for instance, aliens as the ultimate representation of radical alterity. These associations are so deeply embedded in people's lives and ways of thinking, and so pervasive in popular media, that they often become invisible – turning into «the taken-for-granted 'common sense'» (Tolson, 1996, p. 7)¹¹⁶. It is this shared attribution of collective significance, recognized by a broad audience, that situates the symbols of the fantastic within the framework of contemporary mythologies. They function as common repositories of meaning that can be referenced to convey a wide range of messages, from commercial to educational and political ones. These symbols and the connotations attached to them are culturally and historically constructed. They are grounded in «shared cultural codes [and]

¹¹⁶ Barthes (1972) refers to this process as naturalisation, a phenomenon that mirrors the normalization of culturally constructed practices and elements discussed in the previous chapter. An anthropological approach to the study of the fantastic also entails examining this contextual level of signification, with the aim of understanding how it is produced, how widely it circulates, the impact it has on individual and collective life, and how it can be mobilized to convey specific messages.

not simply produced by the makers of the image, but activated from an already existing cultural repertoire» (Storey, 2018, p. 126). Therefore, the observers also play an active role, interpreting the meaning of signs based on their prior knowledge, perspective, and the cultural context in which they live, as well as the symbolic resources they draw upon – either consciously or unconsciously. The myth-like nature of the fantastic lies in the fact that it is both grounded in a set of cultural elements and norms and continuously contributes to the construction of culture itself. This dynamic, together with its central role in the lives of individuals and societies and its reciprocal relationship with them, supports the idea that its tropes and figures function as symbols that form part of those «representations, expressions [and] knowledge» (UNESCO, 2003, p. 4) that UNESCO recognizes under the category of “Intangible cultural heritage”. And as such, the fantastic functions «as a factor in bringing human beings closer together and ensuring exchange and understanding among them» (UNESCO, 2003, p. 3).

The widespread presence of the fantastic in popular culture and media, and its digestible language, make its symbols understandable, recognizable, and easily accessible in a variety of forms. These characteristics are strategic for communicating academic knowledge to a wider audience, helping to make it more approachable and comprehensible. However, this does not necessarily make such knowledge engaging or relevant to people’s everyday lives – an essential condition for truly beginning to bridge the divide between academia and the general public.

4.2.1. Eliciting empathy: the emotional power of the fantastic

Introducing people to new ideas and unfamiliar concepts is often a challenging task (Lin, 2010). Individuals tend to engage more readily and deeply with information that aligns with what they already know, as it feels more familiar and accessible. In contrast, ideas that appear too distant from their existing worldview, beliefs, values, or perceptions are often met with indifference or resistance. This phenomenon is described by American communication theorist and sociologist Everett M. Rogers (1983) as *homophily*. On a social level, one of the most significant aspects of homophily is «the tendency of individuals to associate and bond with similar others» (Miller et al., 2019, p. 153). Since we often rely on our personal and collective experiences as models for interpreting other people’s behavior

(Hollan & Throop, 2011; Throop & Zahavi, 2020), it is not surprising that we tend to empathize more easily with those who share similar cultural traits or life experiences. Therefore, homophily facilitates empathy. Conversely, it is more challenging to understand and accept the perspectives of individuals who are markedly different from ourselves. Hollan and Throop (2011), building on Jodi Halpern, define empathy as «a first person–like, experiential understanding of another person’s perspective. [...] a type of reasoning in which a person emotionally resonates with the experience of another while simultaneously attempting to imaginatively view a situation from that other person’s perspective» (Hollan & Throop, 2011, p. 2). The definition adopted by Bal and Veltkamp (2013) highlights the social dimension of empathy, emphasizing the effects it can have on interpersonal relationships. They understand empathy as «the cognitive and intellectual ability to recognize the emotions of other persons and to emotionally respond to other persons» (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, p. 2). In this sense, empathy plays an active role in shaping human interactions. It is central to social life, involving both cognitive and emotional processes, many of which operate automatically. Empathy is a crucial ability because it enables individuals to interpret and understand others’ emotions and behaviors, as well as the underlying reasons behind them. This understanding allows people to adjust their interpretations of others' actions and respond appropriately. To summarize, homophily fosters an empathic response by making someone else’s experience feel closer and more relatable to the observer. This sense of relatability, in turn, enhances the perceived relevance of the experience or narrative in the observer’s own life. When people see aspects of themselves reflected in a story or piece of information, they become more open to engaging with it – more willing to listen, learn from it, and internalize its message. Therefore, when it comes to communicating new information and encouraging engagement with academic knowledge, empathy and homophily play a strategic role that is worth considering. In fact Peyna Lin identifies, homophily alongside common language, as the «prerequisites for effective communication» (Lin, 2010, p. 552). When conveying information to the general public, communication strategies must be tailored to the needs and characteristics of the intended audience in order to ensure the message is both effective and impactful. This involves taking into account what the audience perceives as familiar and relevant – experiences, values, and narratives that feel close to their own lives and communities. In other words, it requires identifying what they can empathize with. As Lin (2010) points out though «education cannot solely depend on homophilous language, tools,

or knowledge; otherwise no new knowledge would be learned» (Lin, 2010, 554). Exposing people to new ideas – concepts that they cannot interpret solely through their existing experiences and knowledge – is essential for sparking a shift in perspective and, ideally, fostering social innovation. Nevertheless, using effective language and appropriate means of communication is equally important to prevent the knowledge we aim to share from being perceived as too detached, unintelligible, and ultimately not worth engaging with. Among the many possible strategies, fostering a sense of relatability through empathy is one of the most effective.

Interestingly, studies in cognitive science (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Lin, 2010; Oatley, 2016) have demonstrated a unique connection between fiction and empathy. People who read or engage with fiction tend to develop a deeper understanding of others' perspectives and become more empathetic, which in turn enhances their social skills. In contrast, research suggests that reading non-fiction does not have the same effect, since the logical and scientific language characteristic of non-fiction often lacks the emotional depth needed to evoke strong emotional responses. The key to the impact of fictional narratives lies precisely in their ability to evoke emotions and simulate the socio-cultural dynamics found in the real world. By drawing parallels with their own lived experiences, readers are able to identify with characters and form para-social relationships with them (Oatley, 2016). They explore the characters' processes of sense-making and experience the events of the story as if living them firsthand. The situations experienced by fictional characters are often more unusual and intense than those encountered in everyday life. Consequently, the emotions these situations evoke tend to be stronger and more extraordinary. In the case of fantastic fiction, which depicts impossible and highly imaginative scenarios, these effects are greatly amplified. Within fictional narratives, readers can fully experience intense emotions without the constraints imposed by real-life situations. Fiction provides a safe space where readers are free from the demands of social interactions and the need for self-protection. Experiencing these emotions carries no immediate real-world consequences and does not affect their relationships with the fictional characters, as those characters are not real. As a result, there is virtually no limit to the range and depth of emotions readers may allow themselves to feel. These para-experiences – especially in the case of fantastic fiction – allows readers to live through situations that are generally more intense and markedly different from their everyday lives. Such engagement requires an imaginative effort from the reader, who is guided throughout the narrative to shift their

point of view and adopt new perspectives, accepting them regardless of how unfamiliar or strange they may seem. As Bal and Veltkamp (2013) aptly put it: «some stories are able to make sense out of the senseless, and offer possibilities to understand other people across time and space, an opportunity which is not readily available in daily life» (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, p. 2). At the same time, even the most bizarre fictional narratives reflect, at their core, very human situations and emotions with which readers can easily relate. It is this blend of familiar and unfamiliar elements that makes fiction work as «a set of simulations of social worlds that we can compare, as it were stereoscopically, with aspects of our everyday world, to suggest insights we might not achieve by looking with the single eye of ordinary perception» (Oatley, 2016, p. 618). Because they simulate social interactions that can occur in real life, fictional narratives can serve as a space for practicing and improving one's social skills. The «consciousness of selves and others» gained through engaging with fiction «can be internalized to augment everyday cognition» (Oatley, 2016, p. 618) and «integrated into broader response patterns in daily life» (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, p. 2). Bal and Veltkamp (2013) offer an explanation for this phenomenon drawing from the concept of the Immersed Experiencer Framework:

«When an individual reads a text, neural webs are activated while reading, through which an event in a story is simulated mentally by the reader. Finally, the reader integrates that what is read with existing mental models. Hence, this model explains at the language comprehension level that readers actively process texts and integrate these texts in their own human experiences. Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that seeing or reading about another person experiencing specific emotions and events activates the same neural structures as if one was experiencing them oneself, consequently influencing empathy» (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, p. 2).

For this process to be effective, readers must be genuinely invested in the story and emotionally transported into it. After reflecting on and internalizing the information gained during reading – as well as the emotional responses it provoked – the initial effects on empathy enhancement begin to emerge. These effects tend to grow stronger over time (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Oatley, 2016).

All these processes are not activated – or at least not to the same extent—when reading non-fiction. As a result, academic knowledge conveyed through a technical language does not produce the same effects on readers, particularly in terms of empathy and social behavior, as fiction does. One reason behind this difference is that non-fiction typically lacks the narrative and emotional elements that facilitate immersion, emotional

resonance, and perspective-taking. Furthermore «when people organize information in stories (a process that fiction should facilitate, as it consists of stories already), the representations of these stories last better and longer. Thus, the effects of fiction should generally last longer than in logico-scientific mode of thinking» (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, p. 3). These cognitive mechanisms – amplified by the radical distance of fantastic fiction from reality – make it a particularly compelling tool for generating concrete social impact. By engaging the general public and exposing them to academic knowledge through an alternative, imaginative, and accessible language, fantastic fiction opens new pathways for learning, reflection, and empathy. It activates in the reader «an associational network of memories, images, and meanings in his or her mind, which in turn are mapped onto the experiences and perspectives of the other in an attempt to understand them» (Hollan & Throop, 2011, p. 14). This enables information conveyed through fiction to be perceived as relatable by the general public. It becomes connected to their own experience of the world and, as a result, is seen as more relevant and meaningful in their lives. Therefore, fiction can be a powerful tool for encouraging people to imagine and accept alternative ways of living, while also training their imaginative thinking – which is, after all, the most fundamental ingredient of change: every form of transformation begins with the ability to envision how things could be different, and social change is no exception. Engaging with the fantastic – and consuming fantastic productions in all their forms¹¹⁷ – can have a tangible impact on an individual's ability to develop interest in, understanding of, and connection with someone else's experience. This, in turn, can influence individuals' behavior toward others, particularly those who may be different from themselves. By extension, such individual changes have the potential to ripple outward and affect entire communities. This process can be intentionally supported and integrated into community engagement strategies, positioning the fantastic as a valuable tool for fostering socio-cultural innovation.

The fantastic – and especially its expressions in popular culture – has often been viewed in predominantly negative terms, as a means of escaping reality. It is frequently seen as a way to retreat into a virtual world in order to avoid confronting the challenges and problems of the real, or primary, world (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Boulding et al., 2011; Dei

¹¹⁷ The positive effects on empathy enhancement have been observed not only in relation to literature, but also in the consumption of video games and television dramas (Oatley, 2016).

et al., 2023; Storey, 2018). However, a variety of scholarly approaches to the study of the fantastic have shown that it is far more than a frivolous or purely consumerist form of expression. The fantastic can serve as a powerful and impactful tool for communication – capable of delivering satirical commentary and critical political perspectives on society. Moreover, it offers a space to imagine, envision, and actively think toward the construction of a better future, largely free from the constraints of current reality. For instance, it enables us to look further ahead than the limits imposed by present-day technological capabilities. In this sense, the fantastic can be understood as the expression of a collective dream (Storey, 2018), a means that provides «escapism that is not an escape from or to anywhere, but an escape of our utopian selves» (Richard Maltby, 1989, as cited in Storey, 2018, p. 9). In the words of the Italian collective of authors Wu Ming, the fantastic offers «Non l’escapismo di chi cerca un paradiso a buon mercato, ma l’impegno intellettuale di chi s’interroga su come costruirlo»¹¹⁸ (Dei et al., 2023, p. 211).

The communicative potential of fantastic fiction does not lie in representing facts or providing scientific, objective insights on any topic; rather, it «is primarily aimed at eliciting emotions» (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, p. 2). The readers become transported into the narrative, forming an emotional connection with the story by recognizing parallels with their own personal experiences, beliefs, and values. Based on these connections, they interpret the story and attribute meaning to it in ways that can be deeply personal. It follows logically that there is no single, correct interpretation of a story – not even necessarily the one intended by the author. Once the story is shared with an audience, the author is no longer the sole interpreter; the meaning evolves through each individual reader’s interpretation and the collective understanding of the audience as a whole. This is a result of the freedom afforded by the fantastic as an imaginative language – not limited by the voice of an authority and accessible to a wide audience. However, this advantage can also pose a risk. Because the language of the fantastic is not objective, it lacks precision, and the messenger has far less control over the message than they would with more traditional, authoritative means of communication. Hollan and Throop, referring to Roger Ivar Lohmann’s contribution in the volume they curated (2011), state that «any imaginatively based form of social knowing must inevitably lead to inaccuracies and mischaracterizations

¹¹⁸ «Not the escapism of those who seek a cheap paradise, but the intellectual commitment of those who question how to build it» (Dei et al., 2023, p. 211; translation mine).

at times» (Hollan & Throop, 2011, p. 15), People's emotional responses can vary greatly and unpredictably since «caring expressions of empathy, however culturally patterned and valued, are always contingent, varying not only by social and economic conditions, but also by age, gender, status, and life experience» (Hollan & Throop, 2011, p. 15). Moreover, the emotional response to fictional narratives – both at the individual and collective levels – can be instrumentalized to influence people's perceptions of the social realities around them¹¹⁹. As a form of literacy, fictional language «is as likely to be an instrument of social control as it is an instrument of liberation; much depends on context and use» (Olson & Torrance, 2009, p. xvii). This mechanism can be harnessed to foster social cohesion and stimulate innovation in human relationships; however, because it operates by shaping emotions and perceptions, it can equally be deployed as a powerful tool of propaganda¹²⁰. Depending on who wields it and in what context, fictional narratives can be used to harm, spread hate, and provoke conflict just as readily as they can promote empathy and positive change.

Like any powerful communication tool, the fantastic as a language must be handled with care to prevent its message from being instrumentalized or diverted from its intended objectives. Yet, when applied thoughtfully, the fantastic holds remarkable potential as a medium for communicating anthropological and academic knowledge and fostering social awareness across diverse contexts. In particular, when combined with the pervasive reach of popular culture and media, the fantastic can become an even more effective vehicle for shaping collective imagination and public discourse. Popular culture – through film, literature, television, videogames, digital platforms and more – has the power to make complex ideas accessible, to normalize new perspectives, and to influence social attitudes far beyond the confines of academia. Furthermore, their reach and accessibility allow them to influence people's perceptions and ways of thinking more deeply than traditional academic discourse often can. Discussing the role of media in shaping knowledge, Brockmeier and Olson (2009) note that «the technological, social, and cultural changes of

¹¹⁹ For instance, popular characters like Superman and Wonder Woman have been used since their creation to convey ideologies that range from conservative to more liberal perspectives (Boulding et al., 2011).

¹²⁰ See Jessica Imbach's article *Chinese Science Fiction in the Anthropocene* (2021) where she explores the propagandistic use of science fiction by the Chinese government. Imbach also addressed this topic during the inauguration of the exhibition *Hic Sunt Dracones: L'irresistibile ascesa della fantascienza cinese* at MUFANT in December 2023 (see footnote 164).

modern communication have had a greater and further-reaching impact on our thoughts about language than all mainstream linguistic thinking» (Brockmeier & Olson, 2009, p. 17). Popular media, therefore, serve as a powerful vehicle for disseminating academic knowledge – particularly within the social sciences and the study of everyday phenomena – and for generating tangible social impact and fostering socio-cultural innovation. As Professor Biz Nijdam, Director of the Research Excellence Cluster Popular Media and Social Change at UBC, observes, social change is ultimately most effective when it enters the realm of popular culture:

«There are all of these relationships between popular media, popular culture and social justice discourses and whether or not social change is effective, and it really isn't until it also hits popular media: civil rights and advances in gender politics and whatnot are not truly successful until we see them entering the popular sphere» (B. Nijdam, personal communication, October 9, 2024).

An example of application of these principles is *To Be Continued...* (1998; Figure 12), a mixed-media installation by artist and writer jil p. weaving who has also served as an arts administrator for the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, working on community engagement through the arts.

I saw the piece at the Surrey Art Gallery in the context of the exhibition *Future Memoria*¹²¹, and I met jil there during a guided tour led by Curator Rhys Edwards, in dialogue with the artist and other contributors. After the visit, I introduced myself to jil and told her about my research. We talked for a while and it was clear that she would have been a precious interlocutor. In the following months we met a couple of times and during our lengthy conversations over tea and blueberry scones made by her husband Keith, also an artist, she told me about her work with community engagement inspiring much of my

¹²¹ I visited the *Future Memoria* exhibition at Surrey Art Gallery in July 2024. The exhibition explored different ways of imagining the future through art, tracing a broad spectrum of futurity and presenting both utopian and dystopian visions. These contrasting perspectives were expressed through artworks in a wide range of media, which encouraged visitors to reflect on hope, fear, and the role of imagination in shaping possible futures, both conceptually and in practical terms. The exhibition also examined collective experiences that sought to put visions of a better future into practice, such as the creation of eco-communities and a commitment to community life.

<https://www.surrey.ca/arts-culture/surrey-art-gallery/exhibitions/future-memoria>, accessed in November 2025.

understanding of the field. We also talked about her art, especially in relation to its use of science fiction references.

To Be Continued... is a mixed-media installation comprising a website and a series of oil-on-panel paintings. Its narrative is set in the near future and presents an ironic utopian/dystopian vision of motherhood, informed by feminist thought, socialist imaginaries, and contemporary debates around reproductive technologies. Through a computer placed in a dark room staged to resemble an office, visitors can access the website of the fictional Department of Maternal Affairs (DMA), an intergovernmental ministry that promotes “mombot” technology – cyborgs cloned from the mother’s DNA and designed to help – replace – mothers in the physical and emotional labor of childbirth and parenting. While this may initially appear as a promising innovation, the authoritative tone of the site conveys a sense of control and surveillance over maternal labor, provoking unease about the commodification of motherhood. The painted panels, styled like comic strips and featuring two federal agents inspired by Dana Scully and Fox Mulder from *The X-Files* (Carter, 1993), depict the investigating into transgressive behaviors and the apparent sabotage of mombot units. Through this narrative, the agents uncover the manipulation carried out by the Department of Maternal Affairs on the one hand, and the emergence of a mombot liberation movement on the other. The artwork explores the contradictions of contemporary motherhood, the intrusion of technology, and the social conflicts arising from biogenetic interventions and the pressures placed on women in relation to motherhood. While discussing this piece during our interview, jil explained the influences, ideas and principles that guide her work, including her choice to reference science fiction as a critical and imaginative framework:

«I was in an artist collective called Monster Central, and it was a group of women who were all looking at technology and theories in technology and technological development. My son was seven or eight, so I'd just been at home raising him and being an artist, writing for grants and being in an arts collective, but I wasn't in a formal work environment. Of course, I had felt quite strongly the expectation that as a woman if you don't work during the period of your child's young childhood than you have a gap in your experience. At that time the ideas of how science and medicine in the future were going to affect fertility, maternity, childbirth, in vitro fertilization, and the way technology was affecting women's bodies were very current. So, because of all of those cultural pressures and the fact that I was exploring ideas of technology, it just made sense: this is an aspect of women's lives that is undergoing radical change and it's happening willy-nilly, so it felt important to discuss that in a way that initially people would be attracted to, but then they would see the problematic side of it. There're all conditions that women were living with, the pressures and then

all of the kinds of solutions that are being proposed. But when there are things that we can't see, because we've been given a version of them so consistently that we can't see past that version, it's like sitting in a room with one-way mirrors and we just see what's mirrored back to us. We don't see what's on the other side. So, I think that's where things like science fiction, fantasy, magical realism are the tools that can be used in some kind of narrative form» (jil p. weaving, personal communication, August 14, 2024).

jil's work demonstrates how the languages of the fantastic can draw people closer to pressing social issues by presenting them in ways that are not immediately recognizable, sparking curiosity and engagement. This approach is informed by her extensive experience in community engagement, which has given her insight into how people encounter and interpret complex social matters. When expressed through a mode that departs from academic, technical, or strictly political discourse, and elicits emotional responses, these ideas can reach a broader audience and become subjects of collective negotiation, exchange, and transformation. As Stella Maile (2014) explains:

«In the 21st century, being attentive to opportunities for publicly and critically engaged social science is essential given the range of socio-technical developments in multimedia and computer technologies, which expand the public arena for critical argument and debate beyond face-to-face encounters. [...] By opening up sites of discussion and debate, much can be gained from people's abilities to think, critique, and shape their social worlds. The sharing of social-scientific inquiry when applied to everyday problems can acquire critical importance when we turn our attention to the broader public sphere in which activities occur between state and private life» (Maile, 2014, p. 37).

The next chapter will present a case-study analysis of how the language of the fantastic – and the cultural heritage that informs it – is used by BIPOC authors and artists to counteract discriminatory forms of public and media representation. Drawing on the specific context that formed the core of my fieldwork research, it will examine how these creators mobilize the fantastic as a mode of cultural resistance and social critique, as well as a means of imagining alternative realities in which the burdens of racism, discrimination, and the impositions of mainstream cultures no longer constrain their own growth, potential, or that of their communities.



Figure 10

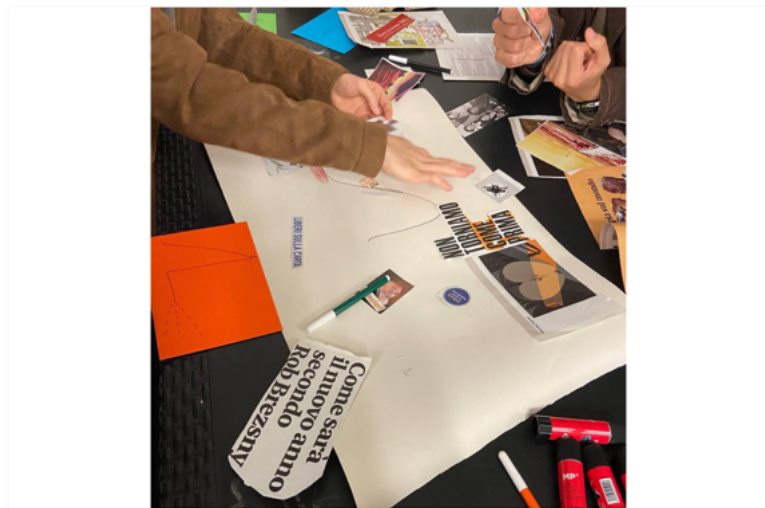


Figure 11



Figure 12 weaving, jil p. (1998). To be continued... [Mixed media installation].

Chapter 5. Postcolonial Fantastic Fiction

Talking specifically about science fiction, Ursula K. Le Guin often emphasized that this genre is deeply rooted in the real world and the present, rather than being solely about a future, hypothetical, or entirely imagined reality. She affirmed: «Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive.” [...] “I write science fiction, and science fiction isn’t about the future. I don’t know any more about the future than you do, and very likely less» (Le Guin, 1960, para. 7-19).

Science fiction – and fantastic fiction more broadly – serves as a metaphorical description of the present world and time, especially in an era where media representation significantly influences social dynamics and intercultural relationships. The language of the fantastic enables nuanced representation and critical reflection on the power structures underlying social issues, matters of inclusion and exclusion, and inequalities between groups and cultures. Simultaneously, it functions as a tool for denouncing, confronting, and coping with collective traumas, offering imaginative alternatives to difficult situations that can serve as a foundation for envisioning actual change. In this chapter, I explore these potentialities of the language of the fantastic through the specific lens of postcolonial fantastic fiction.

In the research phase underlying the findings presented here, reflections on my positionality were particularly significant and were further prompted by the need to ensure that my research aligned with the ethical guidelines of both the University of Milano-Bicocca and the University of British Columbia¹²².

As a white European anthropologist, I questioned my authority to speak about experiences that do not belong to me, a question that I also discussed directly with several interlocutors¹²³. In particular, I reflected on the reasons that led me to choose the case of postcolonial fantastic fiction over any other possible option. Indeed, the prior engagement and ongoing interest of MUFANT in this field, and even more so my personal fascination

¹²² As a requirement for my participation in the VIRS (*Visiting International Research Student*) program at UBC, within which my collaboration with the institution was formalised, my research project was submitted for review by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board.

¹²³ I would especially like to thank Bernie Perley for patiently listening to my reflections and for offering valuable insights on this and many other matters.

and connection to my previous research, were decisive in this choice. However, the quality, complexity, and stratification of meanings, as well as their suitability for the kind of analysis of the fantastic and its socio-cultural uses that I aimed to conduct, were the primary factors that guided my selection.

With a view to addressing some of the potential ethical concerns that might emerge, rather than discussing postcolonial fantastic fiction in isolation or from an external, overarching interpretative perspective, I aimed to ensure that BIPOC voices were included without being tokenised, highlighting their contribution to the field. I sought to situate these experiences within the wider tradition and landscape of fantastic storytelling, while also acknowledging the historical treatment of minorities within the field. At all times, I strived to follow as closely as possible the guidelines I became familiar with during my research regarding terminology and framing, including by directly asking for preferences. I also continuously revised my positionality in order to understand how it was shaping my perception. This tendency manifested more positively than negatively, as I found myself appreciating these experiences more than more traditional Western ones, since they spoke more directly to my personal and academic interests. It was never my objective to evaluate the literary or artistic quality of the works, a task that would require far greater specialised expertise; however, I recognise that this bias may have led me to be more generous and positive than strictly objective in my assessments. My academic training also influenced my conversations with some BIPOC interlocutors, particularly First Nations artists and authors, as I became aware that both they and I placed greater emphasis on personal background in relation to origin and cultural identity. At times, this focus was also deployed strategically, or in a performative way, to reinforce the messages they convey through their work, extending them into the conversational context.

During my Canadian fieldwork I interacted mostly with BIPOC professionals and academics who were not in positions of oppression relative to mine; on the contrary, in terms of funding, mobility, visibility, class, and institutional authority, they were in most cases significantly more advantaged than I was. As a result, if anything, my bias tended to operate in this direction. On the side of the interviewees, a similar dynamic occasionally emerged, in the sense that I was sometimes perceived as having greater access to funding, institutional backing, or opportunities than is typically the case for a Ph.D. researcher. Overall, I did not experience any issues in my relationships with my interlocutors, and I

encountered on their part a level of openness and willingness to engage that I greatly appreciated.

I begin this chapter by examining the power dynamics embedded within mass media representations of BIPOC cultures and marginalized groups, highlighting the profound social consequences of stereotypical, negative portrayals and the effects of misrepresentation or complete erasure. Next, I will explore these dynamics in the context of future imagining, focusing on the importance of envisioning oneself in the future. I will consider the social and psychological impact of exclusion from these future representations and the consequences for BIPOC individuals who find themselves confined within a future narrative dominated by the limited and ethnocentric worldview of Western cultures.

Following this, I will discuss the role of the fantastic as a form of resistance against dominant narratives of discrimination and as a medium for social critique. I will also address its function as a means to heal and cope with collective trauma and the lingering effects of coloniality, with particular attention to the works of BIPOC artists and authors encountered during my fieldwork research. This will be followed by an in-depth exploration of the expressive potential of fun – both as a language and as an emotional response that it aims to evoke.

The subsequent sections will focus on postcolonial fantastic fictions as expressions of otherwise thinking – representations of alternatives that inspire socio-cultural movements and contribute to processes of self-determination. The balancing of artistic and literary evolution with the critiques and pressures these BIPOC creators face will also be discussed.

Finally, I will conclude with the analysis of the intertwined roles of imagination and hope in processes of socio-cultural change, considering the unique contributions that an anthropology of the fantastic can offer in understanding and facilitating these transformations.

The considerations presented in this chapter were developed by combining literature with insights collected during fieldwork in Canada, engaging with authors and artists, most of whom also serve as experts in the field, either at UBC or at other institutions. The interlocutors cited in this chapter all identify as part of BIPOC communities and work on themes of the fantastic in relation to their cultural backgrounds. The selection of interviewees was drawn from various sources, including institutional contacts at the university, online research on individuals integrating the fantastic into their creative

practices, authors whose works I had read or encountered in exhibitions, and those I was already familiar with through my previous research. This was particularly the case for Kwakwaka'wakw artist Andy Everson (see section 5.2.; Figure 13). His art was also featured in the exhibition *Science Fiction(s). If There Were a Tomorrow* at the Weltmuseum in Vienna, which I visited in October 2023. During the visit, I had the opportunity to speak with the curators Claudia Augustat and Tobias Moerike, who shared insights into the guiding principles behind their work. The exhibition also included pieces from Pakistani artist Saks Afridi's (see section 5.2.) *Space Mousque* series (2018; Figure 14) and Bois Forte Band artist Rory Wakemup's (see section 5.1) *Smart Wars* (2019; Figure 15).

5.1. Media representation between inclusion and exclusion

Mass media play a crucial role in shaping collective imaginaries and societal perceptions. The very act of imagining is rooted in a socio-cultural environment shaped by shared points of reference, common past experiences, aspirations, hopes, fears, and anxieties. In the contemporary world, these elements are increasingly influenced by mass media and the content they circulate. Their global reach is further reinforced by the widespread diffusion of internet technologies. As a result, the social phenomenon of imagining has reached a new level of complexity, involving vast numbers of people across the globe who now draw from similar media sources. What was once a strictly local experience of collective imagination – largely determined by how people lived their everyday lives within specific spatial and cultural contexts – has become global. Individuals from diverse backgrounds now contribute their perspectives to shared conversations as members of virtual communities that may have little in common beyond an interest in a particular type of content or media experience (Appadurai, 2005; Bleich et al., 2018; Rohrer & Thompson, 2023). Thus, collective imagining is becoming an increasingly rich form of social action, capable of bringing together individuals from vastly different contexts within what Appadurai (2005) describes as *mass-mediated sodalities*. While this shift offers many positive aspects – particularly the opportunity to encounter diverse points of view and engage with a level of cultural and experiential diversity that, although not all-inclusive, was unimaginable before the advent of mass media – it can also affect society negatively by generating or fueling tensions and disparities. This largely depends on the type of

content circulated and the messages it conveys. In fact, research shows that «exposure to inclusive content can help reduce biases in perceptions of minorities, while racially and gender-homogenized content may reinforce and amplify such biases» (AlDahoul et al., 2024, p. 1).

In the context of fantastic fiction, cultural portrayals can serve as a powerful tool for challenging prejudice and breaking down stereotypes, while also drawing attention to real-life social issues mirrored in secondary worlds. Thoughtful representations can foster a deeper understanding of alterity, promote positive social change, and influence interpersonal relationships and intercultural coexistence (Jariah, 2025). However, these portrayals are not without risks: fictional cultures are shaped through the deconstruction and re-elaboration of real cultural elements and intercultural dynamics (Wolf, 2012; see section 3.3). Therefore, careless or biased depictions can perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce negative societal perceptions. As Daniel Heath Justice explained during our interview:

«The unfortunate reality about a lot of speculative fiction is that, for as imaginative as it claims to be, it often has just fallen into very, very clichéd notions of cultural difference. I always find it really fascinating that people can imagine bug eyed monsters from beyond the stars, but they can't imagine a black protagonist in a movie. So, I think it can be really powerful and transformative, but it often is not. It often replicates existing power dynamics, but with science fiction trappings around it» (D. H. Justice, personal communication, August 27, 2024).

Consequently, media representation becomes a critical arena in which disparities emerge between groups that receive positive visibility and those that are either overlooked or portrayed through harmful stereotypes.

As Sanchez-Taylor (2021) argues, «peoples of color are always forced to view themselves through a lens of whiteness» (Sanchez-Taylor, 2021, p. 7), a dynamic that positions them as “the Other” and depicts their identities within discourses of alterity. Historically, marginalized groups have occupied a subordinate position within mass-media representation, appearing far less frequently than white, heterosexual, able-bodied people. When they are represented, their roles are typically limited to secondary characters or narrative supports for white protagonists. When individuals and communities repeatedly see themselves portrayed as less than or as permanent outsiders, their ability to envision and pursue meaningful roles in a society that systematically excludes them is weakened. This fosters the belief that the opportunities and privileges afforded to more represented

groups were never designed to include them. Such dynamics have tangible and deeply impactful consequences for people's lives and for how they perceive themselves (AlDahoul et al., 2024; Jariah, 2025). American author, filmmaker, and cultural critic Ytasha L. Womack addresses this issue, drawing on her own personal experience, in the introduction to her book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013). She writes:

«While it was fun to be the chick from outer space in my imagination, the quest to see myself or browner people in this space age, galactic epic was important to me. Through the eyes of a child, the absence of such imagery didn't escape me» (Womack, 2013, p. 5).

The dynamics of media representation – or lack thereof – are deeply embedded in social systems and power structures of inclusion-exclusion that remain heavily skewed toward a narrow and restrictive set of expected images and portrayals. This is particularly evident in representations that foreground traumatic histories, adverse social conditions, or demoralizing statistics – often presented in biased or uncritical ways. In such narratives, authors frequently rely on a narrow set of defining traits to construct entire fictional cultures, especially when portraying secondary groups. These groups are commonly designed to embody “otherness” for the main character(s), serving primarily to accentuate cultural contrasts rather than to offer nuanced or fully realized depictions. Characters drawn from marginalized communities, as well as fictional cultures inspired by them, are disproportionately subjected to reductive portrayals compared to their white counterparts (AlDahoul et al., 2024). As interdisciplinary Ligwilda'xw artist Sonny Assu notes:

«I started to investigate how Star Trek was using Native American mythology and conversations, but what I noticed is that they were doing it from a very stereotypical standpoint: they're looking at it more like a monoculture as opposed to multiple cultures» (S. Assu, personal communication, September 2, 2024).

This flattening of cultural diversity compresses a vast range of human experiences into a few broad categories, erasing nuance and complexity. Science fiction, in particular, often exacerbates this problem through the homogenization of cultures, both on Earth and beyond. In secondary worlds featuring planetary systems that include Earth, humanity is often depicted as a monolithic entity: people from across the globe are simply “humans” or “earthlings” with internal distinctions erased in contrast to alien civilizations. Such portrayals reinforce the notion that cultural reductionism is acceptable and go unchallenged

in speculative narratives. Similarly, fictional planets with supposed cultural diversity often portray entire societies through a single, uniform expression, despite claims of multiple cities, regions, or nations (Haslam, 2015; Wolf, 2012). While some simplification may be necessary to maintain narrative clarity (see section 3.3.1), the risk of fostering a disregard for cultural complexity remains significant. As Toronto-based artist and Afrofuturologist Quentin VerCetty explained during our interview:

«I think the biggest risk is creating this idea that all black people are the same. That's first and foremost. Create this idea of a monolith. [...] The risk is media might make people think: "Ok. We recognize black people are good and we think all black people are like this, what we just saw. We think all black men should be like T'Challa, we think all black women should be like Shuri"»¹²⁴. Creating these stereotypes. And they might be positive, but they still can be limiting» (Q. VerCetty, personal communication, October 14, 2024).

When cultures are reduced to caricatures, their complexities are distilled into a few simplistic traits that are often either stereotypically negative or unrealistically idealized. For instance, in the case of Indigenous peoples, this tendency frequently manifests as romanticization. As Bois Forte Band artist Rory Wakemup mentioned in our interview:

«There are lots of stereotypes about Indigenous peoples of the Americas, especially in the United States. We're often romanticized and dehumanized and there's what's called "the European gaze" or "the museum effect", that really pigeonholes us in this antiquity or Bambi arts and no one really wants to hear about our issues of today, let alone any issues of today that they want to avoid, that escapism in TV and mass media» (R. Wakemup, personal communication, August 29, 2024).

Even without ill intent, reducing people's lives and cultures to a series of idealized depictions ultimately results in their dehumanization. They cease to be seen as peers or individuals and are instead treated as representations of a concept constructed by outsiders to serve their own purposes. Furthermore, this leads to the marginalization and erasure of important social issues, which are left unaddressed or ignored, concealed beneath a surface of overly simplified positivity.

¹²⁴ Here, Quentin VerCetty is referencing characters from the *Black Panther* universe (Marvel, 1966).

At the other end of the spectrum, negative portrayals based on ethnocentric preconceptions and discriminatory narratives foster attitudes of devaluation and mistrust toward BIPOC communities. As Quentin VerCetty noted in our interview:

«There's actually so much more negative representation that exists then there is positive and so how are you gonna see me as a human being or me as a person, or not to judge me without knowing me, if all you see is people who look like me doing negative things, or all you see is negative things are related to people who look like me? You're automatically going to think negative things about me. And might even dehumanize me. There are so many movie examples of the dehumanization of black people, black men, black women, and making us seem like we're monsters or like we're villains and all these different things» (Q. VerCetty, personal communication, October 14, 2024).

These attitudes and the construction of stereotypical portrayals – whether deliberately negative or idealized – spread quickly and are extremely difficult to undo. One consequence is a pervasive lack of respect for specific groups, which lies at the root of phenomena such as cultural appropriation and outright disregard for cultural traditions. When cultures are reduced to nothing more than a commodity, they are easily dismissed as unimportant and treated as something that can be taken, altered, or exploited without regard for consequences. An emblematic example is the use of Indigenous symbols and figures as mascots for sports teams and related institutions in the United States – an issue that Rory Wakemup denounces and explores critically in his provocative work, using *Star Wars* (Lucasfilm, 1977) as a reference. During our conversation, he explained:

«In grad school I just decided to start addressing those issues with performance. *Darth Chief, Mascot Hunter*¹²⁵ was actually gonna be a satire performance of BDSM; it was going to sexually fetishize Chief Illiniwek, which is a mascot that's been banned. Colleges or universities have banned racial mascots or mascots that deal with race or Natives, but in Illinois, they had Chief Illiniwek, which was this gymnastics, 100% fake, boy-scout-created, kind of sexually fetishized, romanticized version of what they think we are. So, I was gonna gag-ball them and all that stuff to sexually fetishize that mascot to kind of flip the script, to show folks how we feel fetishized and marginalized and dehumanized by their actions. There's this campaign in Illinois too, they call it “Save the Chief” and they're trying to bring Chief Illiniwek back, they really love their fake chief and all this stuff. So, when you dehumanize their mascot, make fun of it and sexualize it and abuse it, you say: “That's how it makes us feel”. Folks just have to experience it. So, through imagination and that kind of performance or the metaphors or through the fantastic, it opens up that element of their imagination

¹²⁵ (Wakemup, 2014)

to feel it, to be in our shoes, it helps them imagine being on the other side of racism, maybe» (R. Wakemup, personal communication, August 29, 2024).

Media do not simply reflect social dynamics, they also contribute to actively shape them through the selection of topics and subjects, the ways to present them and to structure the discourse around collective issues (Hall et al., 2013). The ways in which BIPOC and marginalized groups are depicted in mass media have a profound impact on how they are treated by society, as well as on their access to opportunities and social spaces. While many of these barriers are externally imposed, some arise from internalized limitations – self-restrictions shaped by a sense of disempowerment reinforced through media portrayals of these communities and individuals. Identifying, analyzing, and addressing the areas in which such patterns occur is the first step toward exposing these latent dynamics of discrimination. Bringing them to light, lays the groundwork for challenging and dismantling the structural and cultural mechanisms that perpetuate inequality, while also raising awareness of the subtly imposed limitations that constrain individuals' opportunities and agency.

5.1.1. Imagining the future

Among the areas in which this phenomenon of exclusion is most evident and impactful, the representation of the future is frequently highlighted, both in the literature and in the interviews I conducted during my fieldwork.

Time is one of the most prominent elements in fantastic narratives, often serving to distinguish genres. Temporal settings not only provide the backdrop for fantastic fiction but also shape its themes and narrative possibilities. For example, high fantasy is frequently set in the past, while science fiction tends to look toward the future. While these conventions appear across different traditions of fantastic fiction, and have been appropriated by BIPOC authors and artists, the influence of Western conceptions of time remains evident, once again highlighting and reflecting the historically ethnocentric orientation of the fantastic mode.

The conception of time is culturally constructed and varies based on the point of view of the observer. This idea is captured in the concept of temporal cultural relativism, defined as the notion that «cultural temporal relativities consist of differential sets of

contingent beliefs, held by different cultures and subcultures, as to the historical facticity and anticipated possibilities of the world» (Gell, 2001, p. 55). In Western societies, the organization of time is structured around the separation of temporal dimensions and a linear, consecutive progression; «our subjective experience of time is confined to this enclave, within which we synthesize the flow of images to which we attach the indexical labels, past, present, future» (Gell, 2001, p. 254). However, numerous cultures around the world adopt very different perspectives, conceptualizing, for instance, the three temporal dimensions as intertwined rather than distinct. A compelling illustration of this idea is the notion of *Sankofa* – derived from the tradition of the Akan people of present-day southern Ghana, the Ivory Coast, and parts of Togo – which artist Quentin VerCetty foregrounds in his work through the Afrofuturistic and Pan-African ideology of Sankofanology (VerCetty, 2022; Figure 16). As he explained during our interview:

«*Sankofa* is this ancient concept, which means “without forgetting”, *san* and *kofa*. It has been translated to mean: “It is not taboo to go and get what was forgotten” and as a proverb, as a concept, it is just about how the past, present and future connect. When I went to Ghana back in 2017, the elders, respected elders of the community of the Rastafari community, told me that I should spread this message of *Sankofa*, that it is an important message for our community to recognize how we can advance in terms of making things better and how could we heal from the past. By connecting the past, we're actually paving our way forward for the future. That is the act of *Sankofanology*, the practice and exploration of connecting the past and present to build towards the future. Within many African traditions, not just Akan people, but throughout Africa, or you can say within Pan African thought, the past, present and future are not separate from one another. It's not a timeline as going from point A to point B to Point C, but rather they overlap» (Q. VerCetty, personal communication, October 14, 2024).

Conceptually, in Western societies, the view of time is more schematic and segmented. However, when examined in everyday practices, time does not always appear so clearly delineated. On the contrary, there are numerous moments in life where the boundaries between past, present, and future reveal themselves to be porous and flexible. Bryant and Knight base their discussion in *The Anthropology of the Future* (2019) on this fluid relationship between temporal dimensions, focusing on how the future intervenes in the present and how its conceptualization and construction can reveal valuable ethnographic insights about contemporary cultures. These moments, when the future

shapes the present, are what the authors define as “temporal orientations”¹²⁶. As they explain: «We are constantly anticipating, expecting, hoping for, and speculating about – and thus living – the future in everyday life» (Bryant & Knight, 2019, p. 192). This concept captures the dynamic relationship between the future and everyday actions, which often serve to lay the groundwork for prospective outcomes in the present. Thus, identifying these orientations involves understanding how «the future resides in or draws in the present» (Bryant & Knight, 2019, p. 14), *futuralizing* it. Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai also addresses the role of the future in people’s lives, theorizing that the moments in which individuals envision themselves in the future are a fundamental aspect of everyday life. He emphasizes that these moments are not confined to extraordinary or liminal experiences; rather the future is «a routine element of thought and practice in all societies» (Appadurai, 2013, p. 292). Appadurai also critiques the tendency within anthropology to focus on the future primarily as it appears in specific standout circumstances (he mentions the cases of utopian and millennial movements as examples) while paying far less attention to how cultures conceive future aspirations and the everyday practices they undertake to realize those goals. I argue that although the production of, and engagement with, works of fantastic fiction are by definition exceptional moments of creativity and immersion in alternative realities, these works nonetheless become embedded in everyday life through their pervasive presence in popular culture (see section 4.2). In this sense, the fantastic introduces a distinctive way of relating to the future in daily experience, shaping how people envision possibilities through its images, tropes, and stories. The fantastic is also a privileged space of imagination in which the creation of alternative realities – substantially different from our own – is pushed to its fullest expression. It foregrounds the construction of complex worlds and offers a domain where the limits placed on picturing the future are far fewer, opening up possibilities that exceed those available within the primary world. Appadurai draws a direct connection between the future and imagination by conceptualizing the former as fundamentally grounded in the human capacity to envision what does not yet exist – a capacity that, in turn, underpins the construction of the future itself. (Appadurai, 2005, 2013). The future, as a temporal dimension of the unknown, exists

¹²⁶ The temporal orientations identified by Bryant and Knight (2019) are: anticipation, expectation, speculation, potentiality, hope and destiny.

only in potential – it has not yet arrived and can therefore only be imagined. This establishes a circular relationship between the future and the fantastic.

The lack of representation of BIPOC individuals in fantastic fiction has significant consequences for their capacity to envision themselves in the future and to aspire to improved circumstances. Exclusion from the fantastic constrains their imaginative space and, consequently, their perceived presence in the future, limiting their ability to shape it through actions in the present. As Appadurai observes, «“the capacity to aspire” is unequally distributed and that its skewed distribution is a fundamental feature, and not just a secondary attribute, of extreme poverty» (Appadurai, 2004). This observation easily extends beyond economically disadvantaged groups to other socially marginalized communities as well. This imbalance is particularly evident in the scarce presence of BIPOC characters in widely recognized traditional science fiction narratives set in the future, which have historically been dominated by white authors. As Womack comments: «It was fairly clear that in the artistic renderings of the future by pop culture standards, people of color weren’t factors at all» (Womack, 2013, p. 7). This reflects a long-standing pattern of ethnocentrism and profoundly influences not only how the general public perceives these groups but also, perhaps more importantly, how individuals perceive themselves – their sense of what they can or cannot achieve. Such limitations constrain potential and cause self-doubt even before attempting a task or project. This dynamic contributes both to individual psychological distress and to collective social challenges within communities, reinforcing power structures rooted in exclusion and marginalization (AlDahoul et al., 2024; Jariah, 2025). Quentin VerCetty shared his personal experience during our interview:

«I come from a neighborhood called Rexdale, in Toronto, which is a low, impoverished neighborhood, what we call a priority neighborhood or disenfranchised neighborhood. A lot of the young people, including myself, when we were growing up we didn't see a future for ourselves, so we were making a lot of poor decisions because we didn't think there was a future for us and the reason we thought this was because we didn't see ourselves reflected in mainstream media and we didn't see anything in the media or in our environment that suggested that young black boys and young black people have a place in this country or a place in this world of value. [...] So, as I began to learn that we have been significant contributors to history and contributors to Canada, or what we currently call Canada, it made me realize that I was fed a story and I started to tell myself a story that didn't serve me. It was having psychological effects and it was affecting my sense of worth and affected my decision-making» (Q. VerCetty, personal communication, October 14, 2024).

When people are deprived of the opportunity to see themselves reflected in futurist narratives, and thus to envision a role in the future, argues Appadurai, «words such as “empowerment,” “voice,” and “participation” cannot be meaningful» (Appadurai, 2013, p. 289). Bryant and Knight remark the same idea claiming that «our concept of the present as present derives from the future; that without a concept of futurity the present ceases to exist as such» (Bryant & Knight, 2019, p. 16). When this is acknowledged, it becomes even clearer that the capacity to envision a future is fundamental; without it, people risk finding themselves suspended in a kind of dimension stripped of meaningful presence; a sort of limbo in which their presence is not regarded as relevant from the outside, a condition that profoundly shapes individuals’ self-perception and sense of worth.

This is not to suggest that BIPOC communities have no means of imagining themselves in the future, but rather that they are afforded fewer opportunities and less visibility than their white counterparts, whose presence in futurist narratives and popular culture is far more pronounced and whose conception of the future tends to dominate. Indeed, the perception of the future is a process situated «within society and in relation to ongoing historical processes» (Stewart, 2017 as cited in Bryant & Knight, 2019). Consequently, the ways in which people perceive and orient their lives toward the future vary considerably depending on their past experiences and present circumstances, differing across groups and cultures. Nevertheless, the vision imposed by the Western conception of advancement, progress, and modernity – steeped in notions of advanced capitalism, resource exploitation, and constant economic growth, benefiting only a privileged few at the expense of marginalized groups, nature, and human rights – is undoubtedly the representation that dominates, particularly in the media, and consequently shapes politics and broader socio-cultural dynamics. This envisioned reality demands constant change and rapid movement in order to be realized, to the point where «the future itself has contracted into the present» (Collins, 2021, p. 110). Paradoxically, these fast-paced transformations often result in the perpetuation and repetition of century-old dynamics of oppression, discrimination, and exploitation, which linger, stubbornly anchored in a society that craves constant change yet reproduces old inequalities as if they were the natural state of things (Bryant & Knight, 2019; Collins, 2021; Sanchez-Taylor, 2021; Womack, 2013). In the words of Quentin VerCetty:

«It's important for people to imagine themselves and their communities in the future because for a very long time, that narrative has been very white. That narratives have been very Eurocentric. That

narrative has been very much focused on white man controlling everything. And has been focused on the idea that other cultures, other people don't exist in places of agency and places of influence and power. So, if we're gonna get to a point where we can have peace and harmony and love amongst each other as humanity, we need to all collectively see ourselves in the future being able to experience that and not just one group of people» (Q. VerCetty, personal communication, October 14, 2024).

In this broader context of power imbalance, different cultures are often relegated to specific temporal dimensions: while some are perceived as progressing, others are seen as immobile – stuck in the past and unable to keep pace. Contemporary storyteller, playwright and novelist Drew Hayden Taylor, from the Curve Lake First Nation, identifies this issue as one of the driving forces behind his work. In our interview, he explained:

«I wanted to do a collection of Indigenous science fiction because when you think about native people, when you think about the storytelling and what's important to us, frequently it's about what we've lost, what we're trying to get back, what we're trying to reestablish. We're always looking behind us to the past and I wanted to take that lens and turn it 180° and look to the future, where will we be in 10, 30, 100 years from now?» (D. H. Taylor, personal communication, August 26, 2024).

In a world that moves so quickly, those who cannot keep up are left behind, and consequently, they are often denied a meaningful role in the present as well. Thus, time becomes yet another area of domination of ethnocentric perspectives, with its trajectory that «starts and ends with the West, with white people, with elites; the default setting, in other words, is modernity itself» (Collins, 2021, p. 111). As Collins states, this imposition not only diminishes the value of alternative perspectives on time and the future but also prevents them from being developed. Since the entire space – particularly in media contexts – is almost completely occupied by Western depictions, little room remains for alternatives. These are relegated to the corners of media representation, confined to spaces of impossible fantasies and implausible speculations (Collins, 2021). As a result, the general perception is conditioned to view the future as less realistic or attainable when BIPOC communities are involved. This is especially striking within fantastic narratives, where the imaginative possibilities are otherwise almost limitless. In Womack's words:

«When, even in the imaginary future – a space where the mind can stretch beyond the Milky Way to envision routine space travel, cuddly space animals, talking apes, and time machines – people can't fathom a person of non-Euro descent a hundred years into the future, a cosmic foot has to be put down» (Womack, 2013, p. 7).

5.2. Resistance and social critique

Womack's denunciation of BIPOC erasure in visions of the future and her call for action underscore what authors and artists of color have been doing for decades: using the fantastic as a mode of resistance. In the last few decades authors and artists of color have affirmed their presence in the field and conquered a prominent space within the discourses on the fantastic (Dillon, 2012; Hopkinson & Uppinder, 2004; Lavender, 2019; Sanchez-Taylor, 2021; Womack, 2013). They have changed the genre, not only with their presence and that of the growing variety of characters representing different cultural backgrounds, but also and more importantly by making «people of color and their cultural experiences an integral part of their narratives» (Sanchez-Taylor, 2021, p. 3). This becomes even more significant and appropriate when considering the clear parallels between tropes of the fantastic – such as encounters with otherness, experiences of alienation, imperialism, alien abduction (often compared to instances of slavery), and apocalyptic scenarios – and the lived experiences of many BIPOC communities – a metaphorical comparison, but one that nonetheless highlights important insights (Dillon, 2012; Justice, 2018; Sanchez-Taylor, 2021; Womack, 2013). For example, Pakistani multidisciplinary artist Saks Afridi has shared in our interview how his work *Insider Outsider* (also known as *UFO Rugs*) (2016; Figure 17)¹²⁷ reflects his personal experiences and his ongoing negotiation of multiple identities:

«The very first artwork [with fantastic elements] that I fabricated was the UFO rug, the *Insider Outsider* rug, and that was about feeling like an alien in your own land and in a foreign land, and being an outsider yet an insider in both places and grappling with that, trying to figure it out. The icon of aliens sort of started from there, which definitely stemmed from combating islamophobia and building bridges in a post 9/11 world. [...] I enjoy science fiction and stories around that, and the UFO is very much connected to that, so it was a combination of a deep dive into the meanings of the iconography I was using and keeping open eyes for connections and then one day connections happened and a set of different ideas all popped and made connections in my mind» (P. Ravizzotti & S. di Nunzio, personal communication, March 20, 2024).

¹²⁷ Afridi, S. (2016). *Insider Outsider* (also known as *UFO Rugs*) [Graphic]. <https://www.saksafriid.com/insider-outsider>, accessed in November 2025.

Authors and artists of color – including Afrofuturists, African futurists, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous futurists¹²⁸ – have been appropriating the tropes and conventions of the fantastic genre, transforming, adapting, and reinventing them to tell their stories and assert their presence in contemporary society. As Dillon notes, specifically regarding Indigenous peoples, the fantastic offers a «valid way to renew, recover, and extend First Nations peoples’ voices and traditions» (Dillon, 2012, pp. 1-2). This insight is equally relevant to other BIPOC communities.

This process begins with what Daniel Heath Justice – drawing on Stó:lō writer and scholar Lee Maracle – describes as «the telling of hard truths» (Justice, 2018, p. 160). Meaningful change can only take root when what must be transformed is identified and acknowledged: uncovering painful histories and confronting uncomfortable present realities, bringing to light the truths that linger in the wake of centuries of injustice and oppression. Yet this is far from an easy undertaking, for, as Justice reminds us, «we know that the truth is often hard to face» (Justice, 2018, p. 160). This difficulty applies both to those who have been harmed and to those implicated in the harm. For the former, confronting the past can be painful, carrying the risk of resurfacing trauma that may affect mental health and relationships. For the latter, acknowledging the weight of an uncomfortable history – one that is often easier to deny than to confront – can be equally challenging. In both cases, the process demands appropriate tools and supportive frameworks to make it more effective while minimizing its potential negative impacts and the risk of generating further conflict. Lee Maracle sustains that *«If you have hard truths to offer up to someone make sure the voice is soft, the language beautiful and that you protect the dignity of the other. When the storm clears, make sure you all see sunshine»* (Lee Maracle as cited in Justice, 2018, p. 160, italics in original). In our interview, David Gaertner highlighted how the language of the fantastic can contribute to this effort:

«I think it is that ability to imagine otherwise, to create worlds, to give us metaphors to interpret things that we have a hard time understanding» (D. Gaertner, personal communication, October 15, 2024).

¹²⁸ The categories mentioned above are the main ones identified by Joy Sanchez-Taylor (2021); however, new definitions, categories, and names are continuously created, reflecting the fluid and ever-changing nature of these experiences.

By using metaphor rather than speaking directly about hard truths, painful issues, and traumatic histories, fantastic fiction creates a degree of safe distance that softens the message – making it less direct and therefore less confrontational – without diminishing its effectiveness. This approach also makes such issues easier to understand and cope with, as it enables readers to see them through someone else’s eyes – engaging with them from the clearer vantage point of an observer rather than from the emotionally burdened perspective of someone directly affected.

Beginning with surface-level representation – through familiar metaphors and symbols – fantastic fiction can prompt readers and observers to explore the deeper layers of meaning embedded within these images. In this sense, the fantastic operates as an entry point into complex topics that can later be approached in progressively deeper and more direct ways. This initial gentle approach helps prevent audiences from feeling overwhelmed, making them more willing to listen, engage, and invest the effort required to fully grasp these narratives. When such understanding is carried into social contexts, the fantastic assumes a meaningful social role, fostering reflection, dialogue, and the possibility of transformation. K’ómoks First Nation artist Andy Everson shared in our interview:

«I find that for people that look at Northwest Coast art, there might be a barrier to understanding our forms: if you don't know what a Thunderbird is, or know any stories about a Thunderbird or stories about Raven or anything like that, there's a barrier to really appreciating and understanding it, other than visually. But when I'm working in pop culture imagery, there's already baggage in people's mind: they come to the piece with already preconceived notions about things. So, I like to play with those concepts of imperialism and stuff like that: that's one reason why I like to use the *Star Wars* imagery and in particular the bad guys, to talk about colonization and imperialism and how that relates to Indigenous peoples. [...] Ultimately, I want people to superficially look at it and say: “It looks great”, but then start to learn more about our history and understand what our people have gone through during colonization and experiences with imperialism» (A. Everson, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

Fantastic fiction provides a privileged and particularly effective space for reclaiming control over representation and self-representation. Being unbound by the constraints of realism, it offers expanded imaginative freedom, allowing virtually limitless possibilities for world-building and narrative development. Within fantastic narratives, authors can set aside the weight of historical trauma and its enduring effects on contemporary social structures, momentarily suspending the real-world contexts of racism and discrimination to enter what Nalo Hopkinson describes as «defended spaces where

marginalized groups of people can discuss their own marginalization» (Hopkinson, 2004, para. 7). In this sense, fantastic narratives provide a protected environment where social issues can be explored and common, biased portrayals challenged, serving as healing spaces to cope with individual and collective trauma through creativity and storytelling. In the words of Daniel Heath Justice:

«Stories can be good medicine, too. They can drive out the poison, heal the spirit as well as the body, remind us of the greatness of where we came from as well as the greatness of who we're meant to be, so that we're not determined by the colonial narrative of deficiency» (Justice, 2018, p. 5).

By employing the languages of the fantastic as a means of communication that resonates both within and beyond their communities, BIPOC authors and artists can denounce and address important social issues often overlooked by mainstream media, and bring them to the attention of broader audiences. As noted in our interview by Andy Everson:

«There are all these features of these [fantastic] narratives that tell us something about the state of women in society, the state of disabled folks in society, the state of queer folks or people of color» (A. Everson, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

Through these imaginative frameworks, authors and artists can draw metaphorical parallels between images already familiar to audiences and their own experiences, making their realities visible while offering critical commentary through speculative or imaginative forms. In some cases, these connections are particularly striking and serve as starting points to expose inequalities and power dynamics, spark conversations that challenge and dismantle them, and hopefully foster meaningful engagement. Saks Afridi commented:

«In *Star Wars* when you look at where there's the empire versus the rebels, that's a classic colonialist recipe and they have these parallels in our real world and people certainly see it and understand it, for sure. Whether they choose to do anything about it or just accept it, that's another story, but making the parallels, people certainly do» (P. Ravizzotti & S. di Nunzio, personal communication, March 20, 2024).

Sometimes, authors explicitly acknowledge the connections between real-life experiences and their works, recognizing how each informs and shapes the other and how these connections allow them to resonate with their audiences through what they have in common. Sharing her own experience Nalo Hopkinson told me:

«I was just speaking at one of the local prisons here to a group of men who had read *Brown Girl in the Ring*. [...] some of what they were asking was what was deliberate, what social aspects and cultural aspects I had put in there was deliberate. It's a common question I get that people are not sure where it comes from: these are men who recognized what I was writing, shared the background, but, like so many other readers, it's not specific to them, they think maybe I did it by accident. And so I say: "No, this is all very, very deliberate. If you're seeing it, that means I put it in there. It wasn't an accident and it went past my editor. It doesn't just fall in there"» (N. Hopkinson, personal communication, August 9, 2024).

The richness of the fantastic mode, along with the opportunities it provides for creativity and the expansion of imaginative boundaries, enables authors to address a wide range of topics and issues. Here, I present some examples of how they approach the use of the language of the fantastic, referencing authors' accounts of their literary and artistic works, drawn from my interviews. The accounts are organized according to the social issues they address:

Matters of cultural identity and the relationship with traditional practices;

«I don't think I'd be making art or this type of art if it hadn't been for 9/11 and my need to build bridges and destroy biases. So, *Space Mosque*¹²⁹ is probably very much an outcome of that, years later. But even other projects that I've worked on have kind of tackled this in different ways. So, that's one sort of personal approach. I'm also married to a Palestinian, and a lot of what has happened to the Palestinian people over the last 75 years, I've lived with for the last 22 years as well. So, that is another factor of playing in and the need for human empathy towards others that drives it. That's a major factor of drive over there. Then also geographically, the part of the world where I'm from: I'm very lucky to be from a part of the world that has a very rich visual culture, a craft culture as well. So, I like utilizing those things in my practice and sort of taking traditional practices and applying futuristic techniques and concepts onto them» (P. Ravizzotti & S. di Nunzio, personal communication, March 20, 2024).

«It was important to me with *Brown Girl in the Ring* to represent the kind of internalized self-hatred that I'm never going to lay at the feet of the person feeling it. There is a society that has put that on them. The fact that so many Caribbean people at the time when I was growing up, if we had any connection to Yoruba it was we were embarrassed about it and we didn't think of it as a real religion. We thought of it as a derivation of Christianity because we didn't know and that's because of the

¹²⁹ Afridi, S. (2018). *Space Mosque* [Graphic].
<https://www.saksafriidi.com/spacemosque>, accessed in November 2025.

efforts made by the plantation society to destroy our cultures and languages and belief systems when they forced us across the water. So, to have both someone who is deeply connected and somebody who's like: "Oh, please don't make me do this. This is that embarrassing stuff that my grandmother does", was important to me» (N. Hopkinson, personal communication, August 9, 2024)

Colonial history and critique of ongoing coloniality;

«I decided to start working on the *Interventions On The Imaginary* series¹³⁰ in 2014 (Figure 19). I worked on Emily Carr's paintings, some early Group of Seven's paintings and even some landscape painters that were going into the US, like Paul Caine. I started to think about them as a way to reclaim those colonial landscapes from the understanding of the westward expansion as the colonial construct of Canada and the United States moved west. [...] I started to think about that in terms of pairing up conversations around stereotypes with these works, but also drawing conclusions to the fact that when we're looking at otherworldly visitors or aliens, what were the early First Peoples thinking when they saw those big ships come across the ocean? Contact on the Northwest Coast happened in the 1700s, so, what were my ancestors thinking when they saw these people come here? [...] They had this ideal of Manifest Destiny and they were conquering all and taking all, but these narratives fail to address the fact that there were, and there are, Indigenous peoples on this land that were being displaced and moved, killed, all for the sake of that colonial expansion. So I found that those paintings became really important for me to use as a base for these works. [...] The first iterations of the work were more of a graffiti-tag-like system where I was reclaiming that colonial space and just putting these abstract images on top of these digital interventions, but also using them as a way to talk about how there isn't that dying or vanishing race, that Indigenous people are still here, and I wanted to be able to do so in a way that would be impactful for the youth of that era. [...] I really wanted them to understand that there were people here first and we need to honor and respect those peoples. As the series started to unfold, I started to think about them as more of otherworldly visitors, I started to see these interventions as UFOs looking at the ovoid shape, which is a prominent shape of Northwest Coast arts. Kwakwaka'wakw and Haida and Tlingit: the ovoid shape is very omnipresent in a lot of these works, and what I wanted to do with that is I really wanted to give the ovoid its own standing in its own premise, so I started to think about these things as UFO's and I started to call them *UFOvoids*. And then I started thinking about science fiction, and I started to think about *Star Trek*¹³¹, mainly *Star Trek* through the series. I'm a big *Star Trek* nerd» (S. Assu, personal communication, September 2, 2024).

¹³⁰ Assu, S. (2014). *Interventions On The Imaginary Series* [Graphic].

<https://www.sonnyassu.com/pages/interventions-on-the-imaginary>, accessed in November 2025.

¹³¹ Roddenberry, G. (1966). *Star Trek* [Media franchise].

Feminism and gender issues;

«I was also by then very much a feminist and was reading the feminist classics and that informs my reading as well as black feminism, which is, you know, a particular version of the study, and queerness, that kind of thing. Is really very much what I want to see on the page when I write, so it affects who are the protagonists in my stories. [...] Like with *Brown Girl in the Ring*¹³² I've slowly realized how important it can be to young black single mothers. In Jamaica, the reality of the woman raising her children on her own was already something that was in discussion, the society effects that led to it, but also that you could respect those women: my mother who fathered me. So, it didn't occur to me that I was doing something special. Bring it over to the US and give that book to a bunch of young black single mothers and that's the thing that they notice: is that the character is the hero, she saves the world and she does it while breastfeeding, thank you very much» (N. Hopkinson, personal communication, August 9, 2024).

Critical analysis of capitalism and consumerism;

«Around 2016-2017, I decided to come back into comic books as a conversation for my work, but from a very dramatically different angle: I really wanted to address this notion of consumerism and how we are influenced by mass media and consumerism and capitalism to buy things that we might not necessarily need. With *The Speculator Boom*¹³³, one of the base conversations that I was having with the artist statement behind it was: around the late 80s, early 1990's, the comic book industry in North America was just in full swing. [...] When I was a kid, this era became known as “the speculator boom”, and it was this era where the companies were just manufacturing issue after issue after issue to really get people hooked into the consumeristic nature of it all, with the ideals that they would be worth something in the future. But the speculator boom, maybe within five years it bust, and then all those issues that were supposed to be an investment, were fairly worthless. [...] This supposed investment was a form of wealth and I come from a potlatch practicing culture where we see wealth dramatically different than Western society does: we see wealth as something that we hoard to collect to give away. That is how you're deemed wealthy in a potlatching culture. Especially with the copper, it could be used as a tool of political engagement, so if you felt as the chief, that someone has slighted you in some way, you could actually break your copper and give that piece of copper to the individual who slighted you and it would be up to that individual to then repay you in kind to rectify the situation. And so I kind of took that theory in mind when I was working on *The Speculator Boom*, because I was actually destroying these objects of wealth. Even though I had recollected them and they were fairly worthless, there was this ideal of wealth that was built into

¹³² Hopkinson, N. (2012). *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Grand Central Publishing.

¹³³ Assu, S. (2017). *Speculator Boom* [Graphic]. Figure 18.

<https://www.sonnyassu.com/pages/speculator-boom>, accessed in November 2025.

these comic books. And so, through this completely cathartic experience, I collect comic books, I transform them into various shapes of the Northwest Coast, paint shapes around them as a way to talk about those various aspects of consumerism, capitalism, and how I am actively destroying the wealth to make something completely different out of it» (S. Assu, personal communication, September 2, 2024).

The questioning of norms and colonial impositions;

«*Having Reservation*¹³⁴ is about the settler colonial and Indigenous relationship, broadly speaking, and, as you know, one of the things that I like to explore is the colonial holidays and the calendar that's imposed on Indigenous peoples. We have to celebrate along with settler society their holidays, and we do so willingly, but the question is: do we do so unquestioningly? For me, being able to step back and say: "Oh, wait a minute, what do rabbits have to do with resurrection?" or "Why on Earth would you want to colour an egg? Why is that meaningful? And what about this elf that wears a red suit with white fur trim? Where's the logic in all this?". That allows me to have fun in my perplexity, trying to understand settler colonial cultures» (B. Perley, personal communication, September 12, 2024).

5.2.1. Fun

One specific feature of the languages of the fantastic that emerged repeatedly in my fieldwork interviews is fun – an essential element that shapes how creators engage with and reinterpret their stories. For most, it is above all an activity and aesthetic they genuinely enjoy – something they simply find entertaining to bring to life and interact with. Drew Hayden Taylor shared in our interview:

«That's why I do sci-fi, that's why I do horror, etcetera: it keeps my interest and it's just a different way of pursuing life or looking at life. It's fun. That's the operative word: I find writing these stories very fun» (D. H. Taylor, personal communication, August 26, 2024).

What counts as fun varies from person to person and is shaped by cultural context. Nonetheless, there are some recurring activities or qualities that tend to be associated with entertainment and enjoyment (Pulis, 2022), and the fantastic is frequently among them. For many of my interviewees, the fantastic is tied to pleasurable childhood memories or to

¹³⁴ Perley, B. (In progress). *Having Reservation* [Cartoon series].

emotional connections formed through playful moments shared with friends and family. As Nalo Hopkinson told me:

«It's just what I've always liked. That's the most honest answer I can give. Even as a child, I grew up in a house full of books and the ones that I tended to gravitate towards were the ones that were fantastical in some way. So that love of the fantastic was there from the beginning» (N. Hopkinson, personal communication, August 9, 2024).

Fun and humor are fundamental components of fantastic fiction, particularly in its pop culture manifestations, both in terms of creation and consumption. The connection between the fantastic and fun is widespread, as is the recognition that such experiences can have profound social effects and impact. This adds to the elements of the fantastic that make it a potentially valuable tool for communication and education. In fact, fun as a communication strategy can be used to highlight the constructed nature of social norms, revealing the often peculiar principles that underlie them and usually go unquestioned. By portraying these norms humorously, they can either be reinforced or subverted, but in any case, the process encourages critical observation and reflection. Through fun, ordinary events and norms can be viewed from an extraordinary, often extreme perspective. Humor distills emotions and tensions into striking, cathartic and out-of-the-ordinary images that frequently subvert established norms, and the fantastic provides ample space for these weird and extraordinary ideas to take shape and unfold. Their comicality helps observers recognize the contradictions in what they consider “normal” or take for granted, creating estrangement. This can have significant, direct socio-cultural impacts, particularly when it encourages critical reflection on social practices rather than blind acceptance. By making underlying problems visible, it becomes possible to take the first steps toward addressing them and fostering change (Fagan, 2005; Taylor, 2005). Moreover, fun is «deeply social: a shared laugh is an affirmation of norms, attitudes and assumptions in common. Humour can allow the tolerance of disruptive forces, teach social values and enforce social norms» (Kristina, Fagan, 2005, p. 25). For it to have these effects, however, a basic shared understanding of the references being used is required – one that is culturally constructed and contextual. This is reflected in the work of Bernie Perley. Maliseet from Tobique First Nation, he is an Indigenous anthropologist and Director of the Institute for Critical Indigenous studies at the University of British Columbia. Bernie noted in our interview:

«Humor does resonate across Indigenous experiences especially in North America. It might be a little more difficult with colleagues in the Pacific or in Asia because their references are going to be different, but in North America, a lot of the references are something that: “Oh, yeah, yeah, we know what that's about”» (B. Perley, personal communication, September 12, 2024).

In fact, within the immense variety of individual and collective perspectives that characterize Indigenous peoples and people of color, there exist certain prevailing concepts and experiences to which most can relate. These common elements can then be leveraged to elicit a reaction of amusement.

Fun can influence society in multiple ways, including serving as a valuable tool for creating and maintaining harmonious relationships among members of a community. As Fagan (2005) explains, every society requires harmony to function, particularly small groups and communities whose existence may be threatened by external forces, as is often the case in marginalized populations. Fun can promote social cohesion by helping to resolve conflicts, addressing interpersonal issues positively, and managing problematic behaviors in a teasing, lighthearted, constructive way. In Rory Wakemup's words:

«That's how we'll self-correct folks in community if they're starting to stray: we'll joke with them and laugh with them about how stupid they're being and that's kind of a nice way to help folks get out of a rut or educate them or let them know they're being idiots without just accusing of them of being an idiot, which might push them further down the idiot rabbit hole. Using humor to try to bring them out» (R. Wakemup, personal communication, August 29, 2024).

Rory Wakemup highlights how humor can be used to lead people toward understanding rather than presenting them with direct information or judgment. It encourages critical thinking, introspection, and social reflection. In this sense, it functions as a non-coercive tool of social control: rather than relying on an authority figure who passes judgment and expects others to accept it, humor invites people – through enjoyment and play – to «indirectly explore troublesome or contradictory areas of life. There are usually many possible “lessons” condensed in a joke, none of which represent *the* lesson» (Fagan, 2005, p. 31, emphasis in original). These concepts extend to broader discourses as well, encompassing not only interpersonal interactions but also wider socio-cultural critique. For instance, speaking about his comic project *Having Reservation* (Perley, In

progress), Bernie Perley describes his work «as an exercise of critical indigeneity¹³⁵» (B. Perley, personal communication, September 12, 2024) that uses humor as a mode of communication. The series of comics revolves around the idea that from an Indigenous point of view, many things settlers call “normal” can look downright absurd – and sometimes the only possible response is to laugh. These comics explore the everyday puzzles and pressures created by structural violence on Indigenous lands, highlighting the strange disconnect between settler ideas of “proper culture” and the ways Indigenous communities continue to live, adapt, and resist. As Bernie Perley explained:

«That personal series has the working title *Having Reservations*. As an Indigenous person, I do have a Reservation and that's Tobique First Nation, but I also have reservations about colonial settler society and its imposition on Indigenous communities. So, the title allowed me to have fun with it, and it sets the tone for how a person should read the comics: it's going to be about irony, but it's also going to be about critique. The goal isn't to make fun of anyone, but to use humor as a way to make space for healing. Through ethnography in comic form, we're invited to laugh together at the oddities of settler-Indigenous relations and to imagine, side by side, better ways of relating and healing» (B. Perley, personal communication, September 12, 2024).

Identifying, acknowledging, and discussing the issues that affect any human group is the first step toward addressing problems and fostering change. In some cases, however, this process can be traumatic, leading people to avoid it and resist engaging with topics that feel too heavy or painful to confront. Although this reaction is understandable, it can ultimately be harmful, as avoidance prevents individuals and communities from actively coping with their trauma and moving forward. While the issue is vast, context-dependent, and varies significantly from case to case, humor is widely recognized as an effective tool that can ease the difficulty of this process. One of its key functions is to enable difficult issues to be approached indirectly – often through metaphors –, making them more accessible and less emotionally taxing. As shared by Sonny Assu:

«What we think about as aliens, settlers are aliens to the First People. So, it was interesting to pair those two conversations together in a way that was humorous, it was tongue-in-cheek¹³⁶. I wanted

¹³⁵ Perley is also the author of another cartoon series published in *Anthropology News* titled *Going Native* (Perley, 2016; Figure 20). Building on the same premises as *Having Reservations*, this series provided him with a venue to critique the discipline of anthropology while also having fun with it, especially through playful inversions of what happens when a Native person enters the field.

¹³⁶ Artist Sonny Assu is referring to his series *Interventions On The Imaginary* (see footnote 130).

to make light of the situation just because colonization is a very heavy topic, it's a very heavy and very important topic. But I feel that if we approach things with humor, we're going to be able to understand each other a lot better. [...] that's what I really appreciate about the work that I'm able to do, because I feel that if I'm able to bring people into a conversation with humor, it's gonna help them alleviate some of the stress that they may be feeling about tackling these issues that challenge these ideals of what this place is and what the construct of Canada is as a colonial entity» (S. Assu, personal communication, September 2, 2024).

As previously discussed, the fantastic, more broadly, functions as a medium through which individuals can approach difficult conversations with greater ease, enabling deeper engagement with issues that matter both to their personal lives and to the well-being of their communities. Once people begin to engage with their problems, they can start to cope and heal. Although this process is often difficult, painful, and usually long, it can benefit greatly from laughter, as humor helps alleviate some of the pain and reduces the stress and tension generated by the process itself. Having fun together can unite people just as powerfully as sharing a traumatic experience – only in a positive, constructive, and transformative way. Authors and artists who recognize this potential – especially those who have lived through similar experiences themselves – are often able to shape their work in ways that give their audiences access to the same sensations. As Bernie Perley recalled during our interview:

«One of the things that I remember in my academic career is, especially at Harvard, there weren't too many of us Native PhD students. When we did find each other, we would often gather around a large table and usually we had somebody from sociology, somebody from french, somebody from anthropology, another person from religious studies, we're coming from all over and we're talking about our experiences in the classroom, like: “Can you believe this professor said this? How do we deal with this?”. But by the end of the conversation, we're all laughing. We're laughing at the absurdity, and that allowed us to vent our anxiety and our frustration. For me, this is where I understood the old adage “laughter is good medicine”; it relieves some of the tension, some of the anguish. So, when I'm talking about these difficult subjects and Indigenous settler colonial histories, I know that what I need to do is not just focus on the trauma, but find some way to relieve the anxiety that comes with that trauma. [...] And I can see the kind of palpable relief when people are laughing that: “Yes, this was awful, but if we're able to laugh about it, then it relieves some of that anxiety”. [...] If we can laugh about it, then we can find a way of moving forward» (B. Perley, personal communication, September 12, 2024).

Being able to laugh at something does not diminish its importance or seriousness – as long as it is done consciously and respectfully. It is neither diminishing nor disrespectful;

rather, it provides a way to view trauma from a different, less frightening perspective. Rory Wakemup explained:

«My work also has parallels with Native humor: we don't laugh at genocide or we don't laugh about the topic or whatever, but humor is what helps us survive and get through. We don't laugh at it, we find a way to laugh through it, because it's just so depressing» (R. Wakemup, personal communication, August 29, 2024).

Healing from trauma takes many forms and is experienced differently by each individual and community. While it may not be effective in every case, humor represents a particularly valuable tool in this area, capable of serving a cathartic purpose. I believe the clearest explanation was provided to me by Drew Hayden Taylor, who in turn shared the words of an elder from his community:

«An elder from the Blood reserve once told me that in his opinion humor is the WD40 of healing. WD40 is the kind of oil you put on machines, door hinges, on bike chains, etcetera, it just makes things move smoothly and better. So, he says humor is the WD40 of healing, meaning humor helps with healing» (D. H. Taylor, personal communication, August 26, 2024).

It is important to note, as Justice (2018) emphasizes, that while Indigenous and BIPOC writers and artists have confronted oppressive contexts – creating rich practices that employ the fantastic in many forms, engaging with colonialism and serving as a tool to cope with its lingering effects «these traditions are in no way determined by colonialism. Indigenous texts are by and large responsive, not reactive» (Justice, 2018, p. xix). This also applies to their use of humor: although it is employed «to subvert white society and to counter colonization and stereotypes» (Kristina, Fagan, 2005, p. 24), the ways BIPOC authors express fun have an independent life and validity, and do not exist solely as reactions to colonialism. Still, humor can be a powerful means for marginalized groups to reclaim control over their own narratives and to help new generations recover from the intergenerational trauma that the enduring impacts of colonialism and coloniality continue to impose.

These concepts and purposes are encapsulated in the notion of *Funktivism*, as coined by artist Rory Wakemup. In his own words, *Funktivism*, a blend between fun and activism, describes «a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous and playful action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue for enjoyment» (<https://sites.google.com/site/rorywakemup/>, November 2025). It can serve as

a powerful educational tool, encouraging reflection on specific issues and motivating people to take action in support of social, political, or humanitarian causes. Wakemup incorporates it into his performative works, in his collaboration with organizations to lead peaceful protests and demonstrations¹³⁷, and uses it in his workshops – especially when engaging with the youth in his community.

A particularly interesting project in which he applied this concept, pairing it with fantastical themes, is *Smart Wars: Kill the Idiot, Save the Fan* (Wakemup, 2019), a community performance art piece created with a group of community members and youths. It began with a workshop where participants designed and made costumes that combined *Star Wars* characters with elements of traditional regalia. The outfits were crafted by the participants themselves under Rory's guidance:

«In *Smart Wars* it would be a month or two of workshops making stuff, and educating folks about the issue, or educating each other about the issue, I should say. Then we come up with a performance together: it's very collaborative, or, for a lack of better term, democratic. [...] There's no planning, you're just in the workshops and you come up with ideas and you have an end goal performance date somewhere, you line up somewhere in community or whoever your sponsor is. Over that month or two you're developing that with this group of 20 people that are making the outfits» (R. Wakemup, personal communication, August 29, 2024).

The outfits were then used in the final performance, where participants acted out a battle against a group of racist mascots and performers portraying stereotypical representations of Indigenous people. This approach took the very images that had historically been used to dehumanize Indigenous communities and re-appropriated them, allowing participants to reclaim these representations and use them to convey their own messages. As Wakemup pointed out, the objective of the projects was:

«Educating youth on the power of art to dehumanize in our history, then using arts and our knowledge to educate others about it» (R. Wakemup, personal communication, August 29, 2024).

The participants learned about the history behind these stereotypical representations, the colonial violence their community lived through and the resilience they

¹³⁷ For instance, in the contexts of the MMIW (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women) and #MMIR (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives) protests.

<https://sites.google.com/site/rorywakemup/mmir?authuser=0>, accessed in November 2025.

demonstrated by keeping their cultures alive. Projects like this are particularly important in contexts where, like in North America, certain uncomfortable parts of history are often neglected. Indigenous youth in the U.S. and Canada frequently grow up without learning about their own histories in school, as these topics are not included in the syllabus. Nonetheless, understanding this history and its implications is crucial for fully appreciating their communities, cultures, and traditional practices. Rory Wakemup's workshop addressed, among other things, this vital need:

«In a matter of a couple of months really being able to educate a youth on stuff I never learned in school... They don't teach this and now they're trying to ban it, now that we are starting to get headway in curriculum, in books, they're trying to ban books because they're afraid of their own history, because they want to repeat it. That's not like they're afraid of the history, and they don't want their kids to hear about bad stuff, they want to repeat it, Trump's made that obvious and all his followers, that's how racism is today» (R. Wakemup, personal communication, August 29, 2024).

By using iconic characters and imagery from the *Star Wars* saga, appropriated and reframed through an Indigenous lens, *Smart Wars* leverages familiar moral contrasts between tyranny and rebellion to educate youth about their history and to challenge the dehumanization perpetuated by stereotypical representations. Wakemup describes it as art therapy for the community, emphasizing that the goal is not simply to produce something, but to come together, create, and discuss important issues. By using a fun, collaborative approach, the project educates participants and fosters reflection on topics and historical facts that are often overlooked or even suppressed in other educational contexts. The use of fantastical elements and pop culture references helps participants connect with the project through familiar imagery, sparking interest and engagement. These metaphorical connections allow them to relate the experience to their own lives, think about what needs to change, and consider how to make those changes.

The use of fun and entertainment as educational tools has proven successful in many cases. Studies have shown that «learning occurs in a social and emotional context. The way that learners are feeling will affect their receptiveness to the learning experience.» (Pulis, 2022, p. 77). The learning process begins with the desire to know new things, an emotion that goes beyond mere curiosity and extends into a sense of wonder (Pulis, 2022). When educational experiences are made enjoyable, this sense of wonder is stimulated: students become less bored, more attentive, and more receptive, fostering a greater desire to learn. Fun activities also enhance concentration, help learners recognize connections between the

material and their own lives, and improve retention of the information. A fun, entertaining, and informal learning environment also helps reduce the anxiety and fear that can be associated with more traditional, performance-focused educational settings. This, in turn, makes the learning process more effective and fosters a greater motivation to continue learning (Lucardie, 2014). Wakemup also highlighted this aspect in reference to *Smart Wars*, expressing hope that the fun and collaborative nature of the project helps participants feel more at ease, more open to learning and reflection, and encourages further exploration of the topics:

«With the humor and satire of it, maybe it opens it up for folks to talk about it more comfortably with others that might be able to answer more of their questions» (R. Wakemup, personal communication, August 29, 2024).

A very important component of the workshop was sociality, an aspect studies identify as crucial, since learning is perceived as more enjoyable when shared with others and fosters the creation of new relationships as well as the strengthening of existing ones (Lucardie, 2014; Pulis, 2022). *Smart Wars* embodies all of these characteristics. The social aspect of the project is central – arguably the most important element – and is enhanced by the use of themes and activities that participants find entertaining and engaging. Activities such as costume-making, arts and crafts, and performance are enjoyable in themselves and help the youth associate the lessons with informal, fun, and memorable experiences. In this project, the final product is not the main goal; rather, the process of coming together and creating collectively is the real objective:

«In the workshop, it sounds like folks will sometimes not even do artwork, they'll just show up and sit there and eat the food and talk amongst themselves and it's kind of a... In a helpless situation, sometimes it's just nice to know you're not alone and other folks are going through it and I don't know what they talk about most of the time, because I'm busy doing art. So, I guess that in and of itself is the success story, its effectiveness as being art therapy» (R. Wakemup, personal communication, August 29, 2024).

The use of images from a classic work of fantastical fiction, *Star Wars*, helps youth identify with the story and concepts conveyed through the imagery. It allows them to see that their own experiences can relate to pop culture and have relevance in the contemporary world, through representations they can control, shape, transform and use – rather than

being imposed by others who view them only as stereotypes or exploit them for their own purposes:

«It humanizes us, not only do the outfits make us relevant in 21st-century society, but we're out there having fun protesting or trying to raise awareness» (R. Wakemup, personal communication, August 29, 2024).

5.3. Imagining otherwise

Addressing and counteracting stereotypical representations through artistic means and pop-culture references helps bring these issues to the attention of the general public and initiate critical discussion, hopefully fostering broader sociocultural transformation. In the last few decades, BIPOC authors and artists have increasingly used these means to claim more space within pop culture, offering direct interpretations of their lived realities and providing richer, more nuanced portrayals of their cultures as complex, refined, and future-forward – challenging the flattened representations historically filtered through a gaze shaped by whiteness and coloniality (Hopkinson & Uppinder, 2004; Sanchez-Taylor, 2021; Womack, 2013).

BIPOC creators often weave together traditional elements and fantastical tropes, interpreting the mix in inventive ways that ultimately claim and celebrate their contributions and place at the heart of today's societies. In fantastic fiction, underrepresented groups can see themselves reflected in stories and adventures in which their lives are not limited by the constraints imposed by realistic portrayals of historical, cultural and social events and conditions. The stereotypical and damaging representations of their cultures and communities, the traumas they continue to endure, and the social disadvantages in which they are often left by the rest of society can be set aside in fantastic worlds, where these harms may never have existed and therefore do not hinder the realization of characters' goals and dreams – as they so often do in reality (Sanchez-Taylor, 2021). On the one hand, this freedom allows authors to craft their narratives without the burden of current or past misrepresentations of their communities or cultures. In explaining these concepts, Womack (2013) cites scholar of Afrofuturist critical theory Reynaldo Anderson, who points out that: «An Afrofuturist is not ignorant of history, but they don't let history restrain their creative impulses either» (Reynaldo Anderson as cited in Womack,

2013, p. 16). The same applies to other similar cultural movements. On the other hand, through speculative and fantastic fiction, BIPOC creators can challenge dominant, biased portrayals of their communities and distorted historical accounts – not by denying or forgetting violent and traumatic experiences and socio-cultural challenges but by reframing them, shifting the perspective, and opening space for new interpretations. In other words, imagining otherwise. As Daniel Heath Justice explained in our interview:

«My personal philosophy is: imagine otherwise. And because I'm a literary historian and I do a lot of work with history, one thing that always interests me is what might have been had things gone in a different direction and what might be different in the future if we changed things now. So, it really is thinking about otherwise futures, but also otherwise past, and also understanding that a lot of the way we understand the past is through a colonial lens, and if we think more through Indigenous perspectives and the perspectives of other marginalized peoples, the past is a very different place as well» (D. H. Justice, personal communication, August 27, 2024).

Fantastic narratives function as powerful sites for otherwise thinking. They create opportunities for BIPOC authors and artists to rethink and re-interpret dominant ethnocentric depictions of peoples and events through the languages of the fantastic – either by inventing entirely new scenarios or by reclaiming and transforming images that have historically been used to stereotype them (Adare, 2005; Fraile-Marcos & López-Serrano, 2021; Marez, 2004). Rory Wakemup's use of references to *Star Wars* offers a clear example of this practice. As he explains:

«For *Star Wars* it originated with my alter ego, kind of appropriating Darth Vader. In *Star Wars*, George Lucas got lots of inspiration from the Indigenous culture here. So, I wanted to appropriate his work like he appropriated our culture, or his *Star Wars* culture like they appropriated our culture, and then use it to make myself relevant as a Native person in the 21st century» (R. Wakemup, personal communication, August 29, 2024).

A subgenre in which this potential is fully realized, and these principles are put into practice is apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction. Associated with both past and future settings, it is very common in science fiction and in speculative fiction more broadly – but endowed with particular resonance when the authors are BIPOC. This is largely because the erasure of entire Indigenous cultures, along with the devastating effects of colonial violence and oppression, is often discussed as a lived apocalyptic experience. As Potawatomi philosopher and environmental scholar Kyle Whyte notes:

«Indigenous peoples do not always share quite the same science fiction imaginaries of dystopian or apocalyptic futures when they confront the possibility of a climate crisis. [...] the hardships many nonIndigenous people dread most of the climate crisis are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured already due to different forms of colonialism: ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration» (Whyte, 2018, p. 226).

By setting their stories in apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, and dystopian scenarios, authors and artists of color can envision alternative paths and outcomes within fictional worlds that echo the historical conditions endured by their communities. This imaginative space invites both insiders and outsiders to consider those histories, the reactions they have prompted, their lasting effects, and potential strategies for addressing their impact. These narratives allow for the confrontation of race, discrimination, and power dynamics, while also foregrounding the resilience, adaptability, and strength of these groups and their ongoing resistance to coloniality. In fact, the apocalyptic visions crafted by BIPOC authors and artists often emphasize different aspects than mainstream depictions, which tend to focus on violence and individualism. Works such as Octavia Butler's *Parable series* (1993), Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (2012), and Cherie Dimaline's unfinished series *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) highlight community, mutual aid, and collective survival, often incorporating traditional knowledge – languages, medicine, survival skills, and storytelling. This focus reflects how these communities have historically survived, evolved, adapted, and resisted, reimagining ways of being together and sustaining their culture even after the end of the world as they knew it (Justice, 2018; Womack, 2013).

This use of the cultural heritage of the fantastic by authors and artists of color represents a powerful shift, particularly in the context of struggles for self-determination and decoloniality. By telling stories grounded in their own socio-cultural experiences, they offer rich, nuanced portrayals of their realities and exercise greater control over how their cultures are presented to the wider public. In reclaiming a relevant and visible place at the forefront of contemporary society, they open up spaces in which their voices can be heard and valued and assert agency over their own representation, even as they navigate the ongoing traumas of colonialism and discrimination. In doing so, they profoundly impact both their communities and society at large, providing fresh perspectives on BIPOC cultures and articulating hopeful visions for the future.

Cultural movements rooted in the imaginative power of the fantastic emerged precisely in response to the need to pursue these aims. Sanchez-Taylor (2021) identifies

Afrofuturism, *Latinx futurism*, *Asian futurism* and *Indigenous futurism* as key examples of such movements; however, these are inherently fluid categories, continually developing, evolving, and adapting to new contexts. During my research, I also encountered related terms such as *Africanfuturism*, *Sufi futurism*, *Indofuturism*, and *Arabfuturism*, which further illustrate the breadth and dynamism of these speculative cultural frameworks. While often grouped together as postcolonial movements (Hoagland & Sarwal, 2010), each of these is both shaped by and expressive of its own specificities, rooted in cultural traditions, beliefs, practices, and forms of representation, as well as in aspirations for the future, social engagement, and connections to contemporary communities and their socio-cultural contexts.

Afrofuturism is probably the most emblematic and mature of these movements. The name *Afrofuturism* was introduced by American writer, lecturer and cultural critic Mark Dery in his essay *Black to the Future* (Dery, 1994), where he used it to describe the wave of commentary emerging from Black sci-fi enthusiasts – students and artists alike – who, throughout the 1980s and '90s, were reimagining conversations about art and social transformation through science and technology. Dery's work marked the beginning of Afrofuturism's formal scholarly examination (Womack, 2013). As Womack (2013) explains:

«Whether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it's a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques» (Womack, 2013, p. 9).

Afrofuturism challenges earlier representations and analyses of Black and African American cultures by offering new perspectives that arise from within those cultures themselves, rather than from an external – and often biased – point of view. By seeking to recover the often-overlooked histories of people of African descent and highlight their contributions to science, technology, and science fiction, Afrofuturists also strive to assert the presence of people of color within conversations about cyberculture, modern science, technology, and pop culture, grounding their work in cultural traditions, beliefs, practices, visions for the future, social engagement, and the lived experiences of contemporary communities (Womack, 2013). In the words of artist Quentin VerCetty:

«Afrofuturism is seeking to say: “Hey, we have something valuable to offer, we have been offering valuable things to civilization, to humanity from the past, and we see ourselves doing that not just for ourselves, but for humanity itself”. Afrofuturism is offering the fantastic and speculative and unique ways that those things can manifest to even start to have those conversations, because for a very long time we weren't included in the conversation» (Q. VerCetty, personal communication, October 14, 2024).

Similarly, other postcolonial movements confront the dominant and damaging portrayals of BIPOC cultures by taking them apart, deconstructing them, and reshaping them into narratives that reflect the complexity and lived realities of these communities, rather than reducing them to caricatures. This includes countering narratives that cast minorities solely as victims and thereby strip them of agency; the framing of technological progress as inherently aligned with Western success while traditions and Indigenous knowledge systems are dismissed as primitive; and the retelling of historical experiences normally told exclusively from the perspective of the victors, who are typically positioned as white. BIPOC authors reclaim and reinterpret these discourses rooted in coloniality, contributing to decolonialize knowledge and creating new spaces, amplifying BIPOC voices, and fostering more equitable relationships among different cultural groups (Dillon, 2012; Sanchez-Taylor, 2021; Womack, 2013).

However, this does not mean that all authors of color working in fantastic fiction share the same goals, aspirations, or communicative methods. A critical approach is therefore essential to avoid homogenizing BIPOC experiences or reproducing colonial patterns of dehumanization, simplification, and devaluation. Daniel Heath Justice addressed this point during our interview, speaking specifically about the representation of queer identities in fiction:

«I think it does matter that you have people who have lived experience, even understanding that that lived experience is going to be diverse as well and not every queer character is going to represent every queer person's experience. They can't, and they shouldn't. But if we have more queer people writing about these things and more Indigenous people and more black people and more women and more gender diverse people, you will have a better range of perspectives and experiences in the world» (D. H. Justice, personal communication, August 27, 2024).

While their role in challenging and reshaping public perceptions is important, authors and artists from marginalized groups – including BIPOC creators, LGBTQ+ writers, and others – should not be burdened with the responsibility of providing “accurate”

depictions of their cultures, educating the general public, or always centering their work on cultural representation. Although these contributions are indeed valuable, creators from marginalized communities, like any other writers and artists, have the right to produce work freely, exploring any themes or genres without the pressure of serving as spokespersons for their communities. Unfortunately, this expectation is one that they frequently encounter. As Nalo Hopkinson shared in our interview:

«I get to write whatever I want. And I've seen other writers chafing against it. Somebody like Ted Chiang¹³⁸ was not putting his chineseness in the forefront, he's not putting Chinese culture and history and anti-Asian racism in the forefront of his stories. People have asked him why not? And he says: "When I want to I will, but I get to write whatever the fuck I want". He says it more polite than that, but not much more polite, and I remember thanking him for seeing it, because that's what we're battling for. And for him to be able to just do it, is so precious. If you are thinking that Ted's work is not political, you're not reading the same fiction of his that I am. He just doesn't usually inflect it with what you would expect. So yeah, there is that pressure. I'm seeing it less from informed readers and definitely less from professional reviewers who are by nature informed. So, it's easing up. It's partly also the assumption that I would write working class characters: I'm middle class as fuck. Just because I will put those characters in doesn't mean that it's base-norm for blackness or that I necessarily know what I'm doing. So I have had to deliberately make it part of what I do that I will put in characters who come from a similar background to me. You're fighting all the time, right? You're always resisting. But it's the literature that resists, so there is so much room to do it» (N. Hopkinson, personal communication, August 9, 2024).

At the same time, there is an understanding that any creator depicting a culture must do so thoughtfully and respectfully, as the choices made in representation can profoundly impact people's perception both within and outside marginalized groups. For BIPOC authors, the pressure to represent their cultures with care can be deeply personal, shaped by self-reflection, cultural awareness, and a sense of responsibility. As Justice (2018) notes, building on Lee Maracle's warnings in the context of Indigenous fiction, authors must exercise mindfulness when incorporating elements of their traditional cultures into fantastic narratives. Given the sensitive nature of much traditional First Nations knowledge, careful attention is essential to avoid misrepresentation. While this responsibility applies to all authors, Native creators are often held accountable not only by broader audiences but also

¹³⁸ Ted Chiang is an award-winning American science fiction writer of Chinese descent. His work *Story of Your Life* (2016) inspired the movie *Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016).

by their own communities and the cultures they represent. Although this pressure can sometimes feel burdensome, it also provides an opportunity to actively shape understandings of what it means to be Indigenous in the contemporary world and to contribute meaningfully to processes of self-determination. Talking about his own experience as a writer, Justice explains:

«The pressure I feel is to make sure that I represent accurately. I wasn't raised in a Cherokee community, I was raised in my mom's hometown: my mom was white, and my dad was Cherokee. So, I was raised in a largely white context, so I don't want to be seen as kind of the representative for Cherokee culture, because I'm not that, and I can't be that, and I always try to be quite explicit about that. So, when I do speak from a Cherokee perspective, it's from a Cherokee perspective, my Cherokee perspective having been raised outside of community, which is not the same as somebody who was raised in community with particular kind of cultural grounding. So, I don't feel a pressure from readers to speak as a Cherokee, my pressure is a more internal one. I want to make sure that if a Cherokee person is reading this, that they feel like I've been respectful in the way that I've approached it, regardless of whether or not they're grounded in culture or not. So, it's really just wanting to make sure that my own people, my own family, my own nation feels that I've approached the conversation carefully and respectfully and not misrepresented anything, but also didn't kind of presume too much as a representative» (D. H. Justice, personal communication, August 27, 2024)

It is crucial to acknowledge that BIPOC authors are not representatives of their entire Nations or communities. Yet, those with strong connections to their traditional cultures frequently approach their work with care and responsibility, consulting their communities and making a deliberate effort to understand their perspectives. Reflecting on his own work – which blends imagery from pop culture, comics, and science fiction with the traditional Kwakwaka'wakw art style – artist Sonny Assu explained during our interview:

«I think earlier on, when I was still developing the work that I was doing with the heavy pop cultural stuff, comic books and like, there was some pushback from the community. And I came to the understanding that there was pushback from the community because they are of the generation that suffered the most through colonization and the residential school system in the modern context. A lot of people who were opposed to my work during the time, like some aunts and uncles, they lived through those things, they went to residential school, they went to day school, they were told that they weren't human enough and they were tasked with keeping the culture alive, keeping the language alive, keeping the songs alive, keeping the art alive even if they had to do it underground or out of sight of people who may chastise them. And so when I would have people in that community who were of that status, who were those elders, and they had lived through that stuff, I

kind of took that with a grain of salt, because I felt that they come at their work as a way to preserve and maintain culture because it was taken away from them and they're preserving and maintaining it so that it benefits my generation and benefits my children's generation and everything that comes after. So, there was a lot of pushback earlier on. I still get the occasional people commenting that this isn't Native enough or whatever. Generally, they're not even of my culture, so it doesn't really bug me all that much anyways. But now I think because I've been so successful in my career over the last 20 years and I've been able to build a name for myself and to bring my arts around the world and talk about my art around the world, I think a lot of people who were hesitant about my work at first have come around to see it as a benefit, to see that I am bringing our culture, which is alive and starting to thrive again, to various places around the globe and have them understand where we come from as Indigenous individuals from this specific area» (S. Assu, personal communication, September 2, 2024).

Indeed, the use of fantastic and pop culture imagery by BIPOC authors and artists can be controversial. As discussed earlier in this work, the fantastic has a history marked by discrimination and Eurocentric portrayals that have produced harmful representations. For this reason, employing these modes to tell their own stories and express their perspectives can sometimes be perceived as endorsing or perpetuating that exploitative history. In reality, however, these authors deliberately appropriate a medium historically steeped in coloniality to advance self-determination projects and bring attention to the causes they defend. This approach is not without challenges, and it can be deeply fraught for creators who must continually question their choices – or who face criticism for employing a historically biased form of expression. Nalo Hopkinson addressed this tension in the introduction of *So Long Been Dreaming* (2004) where she writes: «To be a person of colour writing science fiction is to be under suspicion of having internalized one's colonization» (Hopkinson, 2004, para. 3). Reflecting on this issue, Hopkinson recounts a conversation with her friend and colleague Zainab Amadahy¹³⁹, who remarked:

«We've been taught all our lives how superior European literature is. In our schools, it's what we're instructed to read, to analyze, to understand, how we're taught to think. They gave us those tools. I think that now, they're our tools, too» (Zainab Amadahy as cited in Hopkinson, 2004, para. 4).

¹³⁹ Zainab Amadahy is a Toronto-based author of futuristic fantastic fiction, screenplayer, community organizer and educator.

BIPOC creators of fantastic fiction are doing precisely this: they take a medium that was historically used – sometimes inconsiderately, sometimes deliberately – to portray their cultures negatively and transform it for their own purposes. By reshaping and adapting it, they turn it into a tool to affirm their presence, amplify their voices, and engage audiences in ways that foster a deeper understanding of their experiences and those of their communities on their own terms.

5.4. Imagination, hope, change and anthropology

Postcolonial forms of expression within the mode of the fantastic offer a powerful example of how fictional narratives can be used to elaborate, convey, and communicate important themes and socially relevant topics in effective, emotionally engaging, and impactful ways. Far from being merely an aesthetic exercise, imagining alternative realities to the one we inhabit in order to highlight, discuss, and confront social issues, discrimination, and injustice becomes a way for BIPOC individuals and communities to cultivate hope for a better life and future – one defined by stronger intercultural relationships, equality, and fair access to education, opportunities, and living conditions. Appadurai affirms that imagination is a «vital resource in all social processes and projects» (Appadurai, 2013, p. 3). Imagining otherwise is therefore the first step toward realizing collective aspirations and transformations. It is only by envisioning a different reality – and by believing in the possibility of bringing it into being – that people are moved to work together toward shared goals, whether this means creating virtual spaces to exchange ideas about a favourite show, organizing meetings, flash mobs, and public events, or raising funds for a cause deemed important. Hope functions as the tool that gives shape to potentiality. Once this potential takes form, it becomes easier for individuals and communities to recognize it as a concrete goal and to mobilize around it. Hope inhabits the creative space between actuality and the realm of “what-ifs,” a space where possibilities are acknowledged and begin to take shape, even if they are not yet realized. This unrealized yet tangible potential, as Bryant and Knight (2019) suggest, defines hope as «the *pursuit* of materializing the otherwise-than-actual» (Bryant & Knight, 2019, p. 137). In this sense, hope is the bridge between abstract imagining, or dreaming, and action. It is a powerful

social driving force that motivates commitment, cooperation, and the pursuit of meaningful change (Appadurai, 2013; Bryant & Knight, 2019; Collins, 2021). In Womack's words:

«The audacity of hope, the bold declaration to believe, and clarity of vision for a better life and world are the seeds to personal growth, revolutionized societies, and life-changing technologies. Desire, hope, and imagination are the cornerstones of social change» (Womack, 2013, p. 42).

The socio-cultural implications produced by these narratives are fully tangible: even though their language operates through impossible realities and imagined worlds, they are still fully embedded in the logics and dynamics of ethnocentrism and global capitalism (Collins, 2021). Postcolonial fantastic narratives can inspire emotions and actions, uniting people around a shared language, a set of images, tropes, and stories, and offering a means to communicate their hopes, potential, and goals both within their communities and beyond them. They become a way to affirm presence – asserting their role in the past and the present – and to express a commitment to claiming a central place in the future, despite the difficulties, resistance, obstacles, and structural disadvantages encountered (and imposed upon them) along the way.

Imagination and hope are therefore deeply social and political forces, shaped by the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, inequality, and access to opportunities. Because they both influence culture and serve as means through which cultures represent themselves – especially in an era in which mass media and globalized pop culture circulate images and narratives of the fantastic on an unprecedented scale – an anthropology of the fantastic becomes an essential component of the discipline. Its contribution is, among other things, to give space and visibility to otherwise ways of imagining the world and the people who inhabit it across all temporal dimensions. It challenges the idea that the only valid way of imagining is the Western one, fostering awareness that alternative imagined realities can exist and actively shape the present. In Samuel Collins' words:

«Raising the possibility for radical alterity is one of the chief roles of cultural anthropology in the twenty-first century. [...] Anthropology's role is to gesture to radical alterity and, in turn, shift attention away from the inexorable tide of mass-produced homogeneity to divergent cultural practices and possibilities» (Collins, 2021, p. 8).

The anthropology of the fantastic approaches postcolonial fantastic fictions as specific forms of radical alterity and otherwise thinking, recognizing its social role. At the same time, it explores fantastic narratives and the movements they inspire as spaces for

critical reflection and as sources of potential for socio-cultural innovation. Highlighting the role of BIPOC creators in this context aligns with the goal that anthropology should pursue, as suggested by Collins: «to allow these cultural footnotes to the grand myths of the West to cascade into an ultimately destructive arc of emergent differentiations where “other” futures undermine “our” futures and, in the shifting terrain, suggest the possibility of difference» (Collins, 2021, p. 116-117). The social role and presence of marginalized groups in the past, present, and future is not a fantasy – it has always been here. An anthropology of the fantastic that incorporates BIPOC experiences into discourses on the fantastic mode – without tokenizing them or confining them to separate categories, but instead recognizing their specific, culturally rich, and transformative contributions – responds to the goal of bringing these communities out of the shadows cast by historical erasure, biased narratives, and limited media representation.

While anthropology can play a role in imagining otherwise – casting new light on the past, illuminating the power dynamics underlying its narratives, and envisioning alternative futures that may shape how people act in the present – the primary potential of the anthropology of the fantastic lies in observing and facilitating the realization of imagined futures and alternatives to the path traced by the Western perspective of modernity and capitalism. In doing so, it brings to the forefront human experiences of sociality, community building, and collective creativity. In this sense, anthropology can assume an active role in socio-cultural innovation, leaving «the “no-place” of theoretical conjecture for something by definition compromised by lines of power» (Collins, 2021, p. 116).

The cultural heritage of the fantastic can serve as a powerful tool in this process, helping people reimagine their experiences and the spaces they inhabit. Under such a transformative light, an abandoned train station in a suburban neighborhood can become a site of intergalactic encounters, a garden overtaken by vegetation can be reimagined as a planetary ecosystem cloaked in forest, and a former elementary school can transform into a Museum of Fantasy and Science Fiction. These imaginative dimensions underpin the practice-based component of the research and its application in the neighbourhood of Borgo Vittoria, which is presented in the following chapter.



Figure 13 Everson, A. (2016). *Resistance Giclée*. [Graphic].

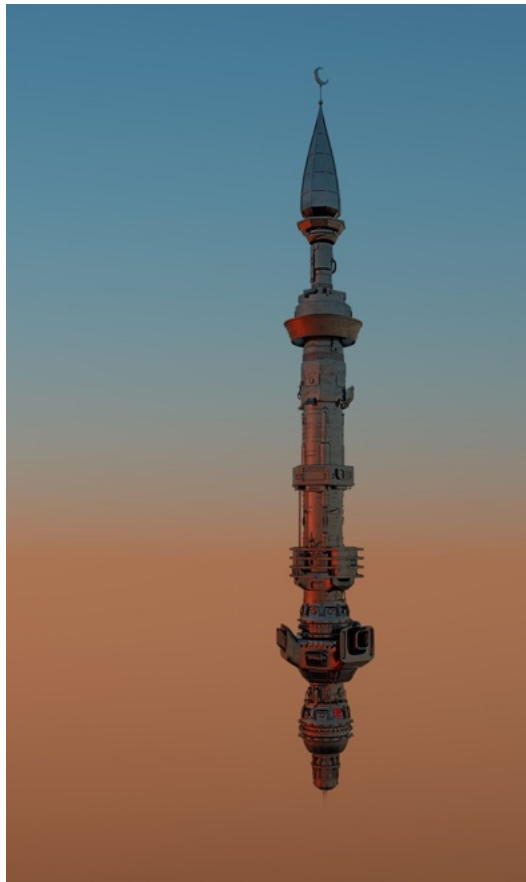


Figure 14 Afridi, S. (2018). *Sighting No. 1* [Digital art].



Figure 15 Wakemup, R. (2019). *Smart Wars: Kill the Idiot, Save the Fan* [Community performance].



Figure 16 VerCetty, Q. (2017). *Dance for her Pride* [Digital art].



Figure 17 Afridi, S. (2016). *Insider Outsider Prayer Rug* [Graphic].



Figure 18 Assu, S. (2021). *There will be Order and Beauty! A New Discipline* [Graphic].



Figure 19 Assu, S. (2016). Yeah... Shit's about to go sideways. I'll take you to Amerind. You'll like it, looks like home [Digital intervention on an Emily Carr painting (Cape Mudge: An Indian Family with Totem Pole, 1912)].

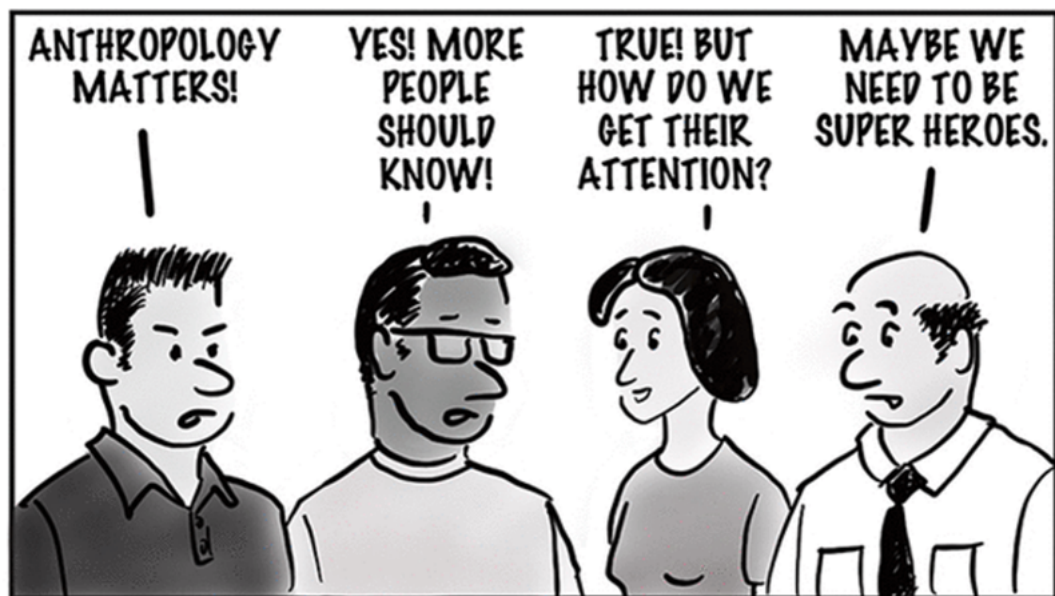


Figure 20 Perley, B. (2016). Going Native [Cartoon series]. Anthropology News.

Chapter 6. Engaging Communities Through the Fantastic

This chapter presents the practice-based phase of the research. It examines how the theoretical framework and empirical insights developed in the previous chapters – together with findings from my Canadian fieldwork on community engagement – were translated into situated community engagement practices returning from the Vancouver context to the neighbourhood of Borgo Vittoria in Turin. On the one hand, this transition required the adaptation of the models identified in the Canadian context to the setting of the northern outskirts of Turin; on the other, it enabled the application of the research principles aimed at strengthening MUFANT's presence and social role within the surrounding territory.

This phase of the research involved a renewed collaboration with the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria* and the associations connected to it, especially the *Centro di documentazione storica* (CDS) and the *Associazione Italiana di Architettura del Paesaggio* (AIAPP), with whom I had stayed in touch during my time away from Turin. Their collaboration with MUFANT also continued, particularly through *Guida Galattica per Esploratori Urbani*¹⁴⁰, a project developed by Professor Francesco Vietti and CDS in collaboration with the University of Turin. The project that saw the contribution of a group of students from the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society and consisted of a guided tour of Borgo Vittoria to identify locations where the neighborhood's history – introduced by Roberto Orlandini – intertwined with sci-fi imaginaries. The connections were explored by examining both the urban environment of Borgo Vittoria and the narratives of science fiction through the conceptual lens of anthropology.

The practices developed in Vancouver were analysed in relation to the findings from the fieldwork in Italy, with particular attention to the needs, expectations, and potential of both MUFANT and the Borgo Vittoria neighbourhood. This process took into account the distinct histories, forms of civic participation, and organisational structures that characterise the Italian context (see section 2.2).

Throughout my research, the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria* has played a strategic role. It represents a grassroot, open, democratic and horizontal form of community coordination

¹⁴⁰ Translation: Galactic Guide for Urban Explorers. The project's title references Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979).

which functions as a shared space for dialogue, collective decision-making among associations, informal groups, individual residents, local businesses, and professionals, and local collaborations. In this final phase, the Tavolo once again proved to be a strategic partner, playing a key role in mediating between diverse actors and in co-designing, promoting, and supporting the initiatives that will be described in this chapter.

It begins with a discussion of the main insights from this fieldwork, conducted in collaboration with the Department of Anthropology at UBC and drawn from a series of meetings with experts in the field. Although these practitioners do not work directly with the fantastic – or do not place it at the center of their current practice, despite having engaged with it in the past – they operate in contexts in which imagination and creativity play a fundamental role in fostering relationships, activating participation, and building communities. Their work spans a range of fields, including art, museum education, theatre, and libraries. Drawing on these experiences, and integrating them with relevant literature, I developed a set of guiding principles that informed the design of my subsequent interventions. These principles were adapted to the specific social, cultural, and institutional context of Borgo Vittoria, as well as to the needs, expectations, and potential of both MUFANT and the surrounding territory. On this basis, I elaborated an application plan for the final months of my collaboration with the museum. This plan, which functions as a methodological and operational framework for the projects discussed in this chapter, is presented at the end of the first section.

The remainder of the chapter adopts a case-study approach, presenting and analyzing three projects developed on behalf of, and in collaboration with, the museum. Each case study is examined both as a concrete outcome of the research process and as a site for reflection on community engagement strategies in practice. The first case study focuses on *CarnevAlien*, a multi-layered project encompassing several activities and events organized in February 2025. The second case examines the model of guided tours developed and applied on multiple occasions, with particular attention to the tour organized in May 2025 for the *GePA Days*. The final case study discusses two events centered on the medium of role-playing games, realized respectively in May and December 2025. All projects were developed through collaborative processes involving the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria* and some of the organizations represented within it – CDS, AIAPP and *Il Laboratorio delle Donne* – as well as external organizations including *La Pentola del*

Drago, La Compagnia della Fenice, and the association Fondazione Educatorio della Provvidenza.

For each case, the description of the activities is integrated with a critical reflection on the principles that informed their design, the outcomes they generated, and the insights they offer into the potentials of imagination-based practices for community engagement within a museum context.

6.1. Community Engagement Strategies

After reflecting on the conceptual and theoretical framework underpinning the applied phase of my research in collaboration with MUFANT, and before beginning work on the projects with the *Tavolo* and the actors in Borgo Vittoria, I shared the main conclusions drawn from my Canadian fieldwork and established the objectives, methods, and strategies for this final phase of the research. We defined the specific areas of intervention and the aspects on which to focus, the outcomes we wanted the museum to achieve, and the corresponding objectives we aimed to pursue. Once we established the desired results, drawing on the examples of Canadian institutions and their modes of operation, I identified the most effective strategies to attain them, based on both the findings from the fieldwork and insights from the literature.

The first step in this process involved examining developments in the field of museology over the past decades. The definition of museum and its institutional role are constantly being reconsidered and renegotiated to respond to changes in the social contexts in which museums operate, both locally and globally. The traditional view of a museum as a standalone entity, whose sole purpose is to educate a public that exists in a socio-cultural space separate from the institution and serves exclusively as a passive audience, is now widely regarded as outdated. This perspective perpetuates the understanding of museums as entirely – and even ontologically – separate from their audiences, positioning both parties as distinct entities. Such a dichotomy encourages museums to pursue and measure a form of unidirectional impact on the communities in which they operate, using approaches that resemble operational efficiency evaluations in production industries – approaches that are not directly applicable to cultural sectors (Hopkins Brocq et al., 2021; Kelly, 2006). According to ICOM's 2022 definition:

«A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing» (International Council of Museums (ICOM), 2022).

This definition underscores an understanding of the museum and its social fabric as a continuous, intertwined relationship, in which museums and their audiences are mutually interwoven. Museums are increasingly expected to be inclusive, open, and democratic, moving away from traditional, elitist conceptions. They are called upon to adopt participatory approaches and to play an active, central, and meaningful role in the lives of the communities within the territories they serve, by engaging people as effectively as possible. S. R., an educator at an art gallery in Toronto, who I contacted through another interlocutor of mine and interviewed through an online meeting, explained:

«If museums are not dealing with audiences and communities and they're not actively producing programs to bring people in, I think they're missing out on a large part of what museum's capacity is. So, I would say that's key, from the way I understand museums, I think that audience engagement is absolutely key» (P40SR, personal communication, October 21, 2024).

A central aspect of these directions in contemporary museology is creating environments in which audiences feel at ease, transforming museums from the elitist, separate, and somewhat intimidating institutions they once were into spaces where people can come together, feel welcomed, think critically, express themselves freely, and find inspiration – without being compelled to accept imposed ideas. This is a point I discussed with Shirish Rao, Senior Director of Public Engagement and Learning at the Vancouver Art Gallery. I met him in his office overlooking Robson Square, in the heart of Downtown Vancouver – one of the city's most vibrant civic centers, frequently used for public events and protests. Aside from visiting the gallery for the first time, our interview gave me the opportunity to discuss his professional insights. He explained:

«The thing is to not necessarily see programming as an interpretive act. That is necessary, but a gallery is also a kind of a house of culture, so people need to enter it on their own terms and so it's not always a strict definition that you are in here now to understand this exhibition, but we create programming that simply offers it as a place to gather. [...] And I think the more that we can be a

place where people are at ease, the better. That's how one creates dialogue by ensuring the conditions for free expression are in fact felt» (S. Rao, personal communication, August 30, 2024).

Adopting a participatory approach is also a step toward making museums and cultural institutions more relevant in people's lives, while addressing several common criticisms that often discourage museum attendance. These include insufficient engagement with community interests; the privileging of authoritative voices over visitors' perspectives; limited opportunities for creative expression and contribution; restricted accessibility and unwelcoming spaces; the repetition of similar experiences that offer little incentive for return visits and the low visibility and discoverability of programs (Gurt & Torres, 2007; Simon, 2010). The goal of cultural institutions is increasingly to counteract these tendencies and reshape the way audiences perceive them. The Museum of Anthropology at UBC (MOA) ¹⁴¹ is very active in this sense with the institution placing strong emphasis on remaining attentive and up-to-date to ensure that the museum plays a significant role in the life of the city of Vancouver and for the student community at UBC. Jennifer Kramer, Curator of the Pacific Northwest, during our interview at the museum told me:

«Basically, the idea, I think, is to make people feel that the museum is their place, for their community engagement, so that they have a stake there» (J. Kramer, personal communication, October 17, 2024).

According to this approach, it is no longer sufficient for the museum to merely present cultural heritage for the audience to consume passively. Nor does this type of offer capture people's attention or align with the objectives of most local organizations such as the *Tavolo*. Instead, museums must make the heritage they preserve – and the knowledge it embodies – accessible to the community, pursuing collective goals that enable the audience to take an active role in the cultural experience. This was a central aspect of a particularly compelling exhibition I had the pleasure of visiting at the Museum of Pop Culture in

¹⁴¹ MOA has served as a key point of reference in both this and my previous research. I consider it an illustrative case for informing my understanding of museum practices and a valuable example for observing current trends in museology. <https://moa.ubc.ca/>, accessed in November 2025.

Seattle: *Massive: The Power Of Pop Culture* (Figure 21). In my interview with Associate Curator Adeerya Johnson, who worked on the exhibition, she explained:

«We want local folks in the community to feel like MoPOP is the place for them to express themselves. Our new exhibition *Massive: The Power Of Pop Culture* was really fun to put together and I think we didn't want to explicitly define what pop culture is, but more so ask people and call them into the space to think about what they think pop culture is» (A. Johnson, personal communication, October 23, 2024).

By adopting this philosophy and strategies museums can assume a meaningful role within communities, serving as collaborative spaces for cultural reflection. To achieve this, they should create conditions that allow the community to engage with heritage, both tangible and intangible, in ways agreed upon with local representatives, addressing the specific needs of the territory – avoiding confinement within their walls and, figuratively, within the limits of their institutional space (Gurt & Torres, 2007; Hopkins Brocq et al., 2021; Kelly, 2006; Morse, 2020; Simon, 2010). As Shirish Rao shared in our interview regarding his work at Vancouver Art Gallery:

«Something that I think I've really tried to stress in my role here, is that we should leave the building, because very often brick and mortar institutions that sit there like a museum, expect that everybody will come to you, and it's therefore so important to leave and go do other people's things. So, we build community by showing up elsewhere by, sometimes partnering with events that happen in other people's locations. Which was not necessarily initially the impulse of the institution, which is to say: "You come here". So, that's been a very conscious effort. We worked, for example, with the *Ismaili Centre* in Burnaby, or with the *Surrey Art Gallery*, or Richmond, leaving our building. And I think that builds community, because to have community come and engage with you, you should be engaged with them, otherwise it's a one way conversation» (S. Rao, personal communication, August 30, 2024).

Cultural institutions can foster participatory transformation by collaborating with third-party actors to develop mediated strategies for community inclusion – aiming to generate social impact by actively strengthening their presence in the territory and working with local organizations and communities, rather than acting on their behalf (Gurt & Torres, 2007; Hopkins Brocq et al., 2021; Kelly, 2006).

In the specific context of Borgo Vittoria, the *Tavolo* serves as a strategically important partner in MUFANT's institutional efforts to establish and maintain a connection with the neighborhood, bringing together local residents and representatives of community

associations. This hybrid composition enables direct engagement with the neighborhood while also leveraging an established and highly active collective in the area, one experienced in cultural initiatives. Collaborating with them to communicate and develop participatory projects is therefore more efficient and immediate than attempting a direct approach, which would require building meaningful, sustainable relationships with individual residents or small groups – a process that typically demands in-depth research and years of effort. Collaboration with the *Tavolo* offers the museum the opportunity to engage – directly or indirectly, depending on the chosen approach – in advancing the community’s objectives, while simultaneously assuming a more central role in the life of the neighborhood. For these reasons, the *Tavolo* was identified as the most appropriate interlocutor for this research in order to achieve the objectives agreed upon with the museum.

Once this was discussed with MUFANT, attention shifted to strategies and methods. Various options were analyzed and deliberated. The first key consideration was that the museum could approach building a relationship with the territory in two main ways: through *public outreach* initiatives and through direct *community engagement*.

In the former case, activities of this type generally serve an educational purpose, aiming to help new audiences understand the museum while maintaining existing relationships with institutions and individuals within the heritage community. They are particularly useful for sustaining connections with actors on the periphery of the community. These activities are usually conducted outside the museum, often in collaboration with other organizations or as part of larger cultural initiatives, and typically involve one-way communication: the museum presents a pre-designed program that participants can engage with, but have little opportunity to influence (Simon, 2010). Examples of public outreach activities that MUFANT regularly engages in include travelling exhibitions, school workshops, seminars and meetings with experts from the heritage community, and participation in festivals or fairs such as the *Salone del Libro* or *Torino Comics*. Initiatives of this kind are fundamental for museums in fulfilling their mission of actively engaging with and activating the cultural heritage they represent – alongside cultivating institutional relationships and participating in public events and the cultural life of the territories in which they are located. Nevertheless, aligning with the broader international trends in contemporary museology requires that such initiatives be complemented by additional activities of direct community engagement.

These activities often are structured according to modes of operation and logics that differ from those of public outreach efforts. They are typically promoted, supported, or coordinated by the museum with the aim of actively involving local communities and organizations in the co-design of activities based on shared interests and goals. Instead of offering pre-packaged programs, the museum contributes its knowledge, cultural heritage, and, in some cases, its spaces to support projects and activities that respond to the needs and aspirations of its partners, while still respecting its own mission. Through this approach, the museum moves from being an external institution offering passive consumption of its collections to a facilitator of active community involvement. As S. R. shared during our interview:

«I believe that the key is in making things available and not forcing them on people. I'm trying to avoid creating the kind of environment where I am teaching something and the audience is learning. I would much prefer to create opportunities to share ideas and learn from each other. Coming from an academic background, my first instinct is to explain things, but I also think that it doesn't necessarily work because it creates that hierarchy that I really want to avoid» (P40SR, personal communication, October 21, 2024).

By fostering reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships with the territory, and encouraging the active participation of audiences, the museum becomes an integral part of the local social fabric, serving as a central reference point for socio-cultural activities.

While it remains important to identify common ground and to take into account both institutional and local interests, the objectives of community engagement necessarily differ from the traditional goals of cultural institutions, such as increasing visitor numbers or enhancing their public visibility. The emphasis shifts away from the production of outcomes defined primarily by quantitative criteria – despite the problematic fact that cultural institutions are often evaluated on this basis for funding and public accountability – and toward the facilitation of processes of integration and collaboration among diverse actors, with the aim of generating a meaningful socio-cultural impact within the territory which is primarily qualitative in nature (Kelly, 2006; Simon, 2010). As community librarian S. G. explained in our interview in relation to her work:

«Traditionally, there was a very clear goal of getting people into the library. Now, and this is something that is an interesting thing to think about in terms of the museum, my goal is to serve them without strategic goals wherever they are. My work is guided by the mission of the organization, but there are lot of stuff that you could do that would be directly promoting the mission

of the museum, not the community part: the museum part through the community part» (P32SG, personal communication, September 11, 2024).

The objective is not necessarily for the museum to have a direct impact on the territory or to operate within it firsthand, unless doing so is part of its specific institutional mission. While museums do engage with social issues, they are not social service organizations in the same sense as NGOs or advocacy groups. Their primary mission does not involve direct social intervention, nor are they required to produce material social change or directly improve people's lives. Rather, they are expected to have an indirect impact on the territory, contributing to the life of their communities by maintaining an active presence and playing a meaningful role.

Examples of community engagement include co-designed workshops and labs, participation in local initiatives, co-planning events within public festivals, and projects that connect the museum's heritage with that of the community. These activities can generally be structured along two main directions. In the first, engagement moves from the outside toward the museum, involving the public in the design of activities carried out within the institution, including the curatorial process itself. As reported by Curator Adeerya Johnson during our interview, this is the model followed at MoPop for one of their public programs:

«Our guest curator program is about allowing folks to engage with our culture and to engage with our artifacts, to come in and share their stories and their connections that have resonated with them with certain pop culture icons. And so we continue to ensure that people can be creative and think and build connections and relationships, not just with our artifacts but with other people in the museum» (A. Johnson, personal communication, October 23, 2024).

The goal in this case is to integrate visitors' perspectives into the presentation of the collections and related initiatives, emphasizing not only the cultural heritage itself but also the ways in which it is understood, interpreted, and valued by the community.

The second direction involves engagement from the museum toward the territory, making cultural heritage – particularly its intangible components – available to the communities living in the area where the institution operates. The aim is to extend the museum beyond its walls and connect it with the socio-cultural realities of the surrounding context. This approach requires a deep understanding of the territory and its specific characteristics, which in turn is supported by sustained research and ongoing engagement

with the territory and the other actors operating within it. During my interview with a member of the Learning Department at *Surrey Art Gallery*, for example, they explained the nature of their relationship with the local school district, which enables the gallery to remain attentive to how its programs can be shaped so as to remain relevant to the students and teachers with whom it works:

«We have a committee that we've formed with the Surrey School District, so, we will reach out to the school district to get feedback and have meetings with them on a regular basis to try to better understand what the needs are in the school community and on the part of teachers, and that could be non-specialists elementary school teachers or specialist teachers that are teaching in high schools. Or university for that matter too» (P20CDM, personal communication, July 25, 2024).

In most cases, human connections must be cultivated to understand individuals and their actual needs, and to encourage openness and honesty – transcending institutional preconceptions and objectives. The establishment and maintenance of ongoing relationships grounded in respect, communication, trust, and mutual benefit constitute a crucial factor (Simon, 2010). Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 2, the relational dimension is one of the most important prerequisites for a community of practice to function effectively. While negotiating these relations is both necessary and potentially highly rewarding, it can also present significant challenges. I had the opportunity to discuss this with Savannah Walling, interdisciplinary and community-engaged artist, and co-founder and Artistic Director of *Vancouver Moving Theatre*¹⁴², who I contacted through jil weaving and met in a nice little caffè in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. During our interview, over hot chocolate, she explained the philosophy that guided her work in this regard:

« Certainly, our successes are rooted in relationships of trust and support. We're also guided by values of inclusivity, accessibility, best we can, and mutual benefit: our success, because we've been a small company that have brought people together for specific projects, has been founded by working in alliance, weaving long term relationships of trust that's guided by the partners, the artists, knowledge keepers that we're working with. [...] When collaborating with other organizations some of the key principles have been certain to treat everybody we meet with respect and to do our best when we're engaging on projects and festivals to provide professional service with an attitude of partnership and cooperation and respect for the community's needs. Also, to honor the protocols of

¹⁴² <https://vancouvermovingtheatre.com/>, accessed in November 2025.

our host venues, the partners, collaborators, knowledge keepers» (S. Walling, personal communication, October 22, 2024).

A third approach to community engagement that cultural institutions may adopt involves providing spaces for initiatives promoted by local organizations or groups, which may either require support in co-designing the activities they intend to host – often focused on the cultural heritage represented by the institution – or simply need a venue for activities carried out independently. S. R. during our interview shared their experience within the art gallery where he works:

«One of the more common ways we design an event or a program at the gallery is us being approached by a student group or by a community group. They would approach us informally through conversation, or formally if someone directed them to us and they found our application form. We welcome all applicants to have a chance to talk to us, so we give them a chance to present their projects and ideas. Some of them are fully realized and they just need a space to be manifested; others are sort of at an idea stage and they need support to be developed, so we work with them on understanding where they are and what they need, and then we present them with how we do things and what we could offer, and if there is an alignment between their goals and our capacity to support the project, and if the project meets the wider institutional vision and mandate, then we proceed to collectively working together on the project» (P40SR, personal communication, October 21, 2024).

In the case of MUFANT, providing spaces for community activities could allow the museum to have a more passive, yet still significant, impact on the neighborhood – especially in a context like Borgo Vittoria, where such spaces are scarce. However, at present, I do not consider this the most suitable choice, as it does not meet the specific needs of the residents and the *Tavolo*, who require venues for meetings during late evenings or times when the museum is closed to the public. From the museum's perspective, this would entail allocating resources for managing extraordinary access to the spaces, organizing availability around scheduled events, and handling potential simultaneous use by local organizations and the public. Moreover, the *Tavolo* is currently focused on the *Stazione delle Associazioni* project (see section 6.3), which they need to promote, including through the use of the spaces at the former *Stazione Dora*. That said, this third approach could be partially integrated into future initiatives – particularly once the rooftop renovation is complete – if local groups will be interested in organizing events such as exhibitions or roundtable discussions at MUFANT.

As presented in Chapter 2, MUFANT is very active and successful in the field of public outreach, where the co-directors effectively leverage the network of relationships they have built over the years to create and continually expand the museum's heritage community. Considering this, and following discussions with the museum, it was decided that the focus of the applied phase of my collaboration with MUFANT would be on community engagement strategies, specifically those oriented in the museum-to-territory direction within the context of Borgo Vittoria. The choice was influenced, among other factors, by the fact that the interests of local actors align more closely with activities that have a tangible impact on the neighborhood and contribute to initiatives proposed by the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria*. Based on my research and observations, I considered that, at present, the conditions are not in place to involve neighborhood residents in the development of content that would integrate the museum's cultural heritage. This type of initiative tends to be successful primarily where the public already has an existing connection to the heritage displayed in the museum – for example, in local history or agricultural museums, which are inherently linked to community life (Simon, 2010). While potentially interesting, directing community engagement strategies toward this type of activity at MUFANT would have required identifying residents who were already interested in the museum's specific themes, possessed knowledge of the fantastic, and were willing to contribute to the museum's heritage while organizing themselves accordingly, thereby becoming part of MUFANT's heritage community. Currently, this does not seem to align with the interests of neighborhood residents. Additionally, implementing such activities would have required allocating significant additional resources from the museum. Therefore, I concluded that the necessary conditions to pursue this approach were not in place.

That established, the community engagement strategies for the neighborhood that I considered most realistically feasible in collaboration with MUFANT were centered on two types of projects: collaborative and co-creative (Simon, 2010).

Collaborative projects can be further divided into consultation and co-development initiatives. In the case of consultation, the museum provided its expertise in the field of the fantastic – either directly through its staff or by connecting partner organizations with other experts and institutions within its heritage community. Through this approach, MUFANT functioned as a strategic hub, offering access to both intellectual and relational resources, while serving as a central point of reference for any potential initiatives focused on themes

of the fantastic. On the other hand, co-development projects, entailed the museum actively collaborating with partner organizations in designing initiatives, contributing not only its expertise but also the direct involvement of its staff (Simon, 2010).

In both cases, the ultimate goal was not necessarily to engage directly with the end users of the projects, but rather to support the achievement of the neighborhood's collective objectives through partnerships with local organizations, such as CDS and the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria*, and to collaborate in creating initiatives that could become part of the local cultural offer. While end users largely retained a passive role, partner organizations actively shaped the development of activities rather than merely participating in pre-designed proposals. Projects of this type generally originate from institutional intentions: whether initiated by the museum or developed in response to a request from a partner organization, these activities do not emerge from the users' needs but from the institutions' desire to expand their presence and impact within the territory.

Co-creation projects differ from collaborative ones in that they assign a more central role to participants. Users – or at least some of them – are invited to contribute to the design of the proposed activity under the guidance of partner organizations. Instead of being presented with a pre-structured program, they are provided with guidelines and frameworks that allow them to develop projects responding to their collective needs and interests. Their participation is not limited to the passive consumption of a final product but remains central throughout the entire design process (Simon, 2010). In practice, the boundaries between collaborative and co-creation projects are often fluid: elements of one approach can blend with characteristics of the other, and in most cases, initiatives arising from participatory methods take on a hybrid nature.

To summarize, the possible strategies for achieving the objectives of my research and collaboration with MUFANT were twofold:

- 1) Public outreach
- 2) Community engagement

Option 2 was deemed more appropriate, and two different directions were considered:

- a) from the outside toward the museum
- b) from the territory toward the museum

We chose to pursue option b, which in turn comprises:

- i) Collaborative projects
 - (1) Consultation initiatives
 - (2) Co-development initiatives
- ii) Co-creation projects

Despite the numerous potential benefits associated with adopting a participatory approach, it can be challenging for museums to implement the necessary changes to support long-term and sustainable community engagement projects. Recognizing the widespread need to introduce new strategies gradually, guidelines recommend starting with a period of experimentation that does not demand excessive resources, either in terms of finances or staff commitment (Simon, 2010). Considering this, the final phase of my collaboration with MUFANT was designed as a period of experimentation, during which, together with the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria* and some of the realities that gravitate around it, we worked on the implementation of community engagement projects based on and informed by the anthropology of the fantastic. A common feature of the institutions I encountered is that they operate through a clearly defined division of labour. They are organised into departments, each with a specific focus and set of responsibilities. This division of work is essential, but it is equally important that departments remain in constant dialogue with one another. While each unit works autonomously, drawing on its own expertise, skills and resources, effective collaboration across departments is necessary for the institution to function as a whole. For example, Rhys Edwards, Assistant Curator at Surrey Art Gallery, after kindly giving me a guided tour of the exhibition *Future Memoria* (see footnote 121), described the organization in the following terms:

«We have different teams: we have the curatorial team, but we also have an education and engagement team. I think over half of our staff is actually focused on education and engagement, so, we work very closely with that team to develop events. We don't conceive them in their entirety, it's kind of a conversation. The education engagement team looks at what we're doing in curatorial and then they kind of riff on that. So, it's a mixture of different approaches» (R. Edwards, personal communication, July 23, 2024).

Particularly noteworthy is Rhys' emphasis on the substantial investment that art galleries dedicate to education and public engagement, highlighting the centrality of these activities within cultural institutions. MUFANT is, of course, a much smaller institution

than most of those I engaged with during my research, and significantly smaller than Surrey Art Gallery. For this reason, one would not expect it to operate through a formal departmental structure. Nevertheless, the principle of a division of labour remains applicable in this context as well. The experimental work I conducted over the final months of my research followed this same direction. I assumed the role of an ad interim community engagement manager for MUFANT, facilitating and managing connections, soliciting collaboration in various forms, and aligning the needs and resources of my interlocutors in the territory with those of the museum. This provided me with the opportunity to test and apply the theoretical and ethnographic knowledge gained during fieldwork in both Turin and Canada, as presented thus far in this and the previous chapters.

6.2. *CarnevAlien*: who's the alien?

Working together on the Carnevale was one of the first collaborations that Roberto Orlandini proposed when I contacted him to begin my research in Borgo Vittoria for MUFANT. The event had long played an important role in the history of the neighborhood, marking significant moments and bringing the community to life each year. In recent decades, however, the Carnevale has suffered from a wider decline in community participation, coupled with an increasing sense that it no longer holds the same appeal or significance it once did. Against this broader trend, Roberto invested considerable energy and commitment in convincing the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria* – the local community network of associations, informal groups, and residents – of the importance of holding a celebration for the Carnevale, which resulted in two successful events. When we first met in 2023, Roberto proudly shared what the *Tavolo* had achieved the previous year, as well as his perspective on what the celebration represented for the community:

«A dispetto di quelli che considerano il carnevale una cosa superata ci siamo impegnati in modo proprio del tutto autogestito come Tavolo lo scorso anno e abbiamo fatto la sfilata con i bambini della scuola elementare Franchetti fino ai giardini Allievo, dove sono scesi i bambini della scuola Allievo e sono arrivati anche i bambini più grandi della materna di via Orvieto, con un grande riconoscimento, da parte dei bambini in primis e degli insegnanti e della dirigente. Il sabato pomeriggio dopo abbiamo fatto la sfilata in Via Chiesa della Salute con la partecipazione della Banda Salus, che è la banda storica nata della parrocchia della Chiesa della Salute e con la partecipazione anche del Tavolo di Lucento-Vallette è venuta fuori una roba con alcune centinaia di persone. Perché

comunque credo che il bisogno anche di fare delle cose festose, a partire dai bambini che spesso soffrono delle nostre strutture sociali, fisiche e mentali, siano occasioni di conoscenza, sotto tutti i punti di vista, molto importanti¹⁴³» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

After telling me about these achievements, Roberto outlined his vision for a collaboration between the *Tavolo* and MUFANT for the Carnevale, describing how the two could work together to bring the event to life in new and meaningful ways:

«Credo che uno dei tanti argomenti importanti, soprattutto con i bambini, sia un approccio alla diversità e quindi alle forme di alieni, che abitano anche il MUFANT. Questo potrebbe sviluppare dei discorsi. Secondo me dobbiamo proprio impostare il carnevale in questo modo, dando risalto alla rappresentazione di tutto quello che è diverso, che arriva da un altro mondo, oppure arriva da un'altra regione, eccetera. Tant'è che ho detto: "Potremmo chiamarlo *CarnevAlien*". Questa potrebbe essere un'idea¹⁴⁴» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

I shared Roberto's enthusiasm for exploring the intersection between the languages of the fantastic and the theme he had proposed, seeing the Carnevale as the ideal setting to experiment creatively and weave together a rich network of ideas and messages of significant socio-cultural value, particularly within a diverse and heterogeneous context like Borgo Vittoria.

When I returned from my fieldwork in Canada and after defining the objectives for my collaboration with MUFANT, *CarnevAlien: chi è l'alieno?* was one of the first

¹⁴³ «Despite those who consider Carnevale as something outdated, last year we committed ourselves as the *Tavolo* did in a fully self-managed way, and we organized the parade with the children of the Franchetti elementary school as far as the Allievo gardens. There, the children from the Allievo school joined in, and the older children from the nursery school on Via Orvieto also arrived. The initiative received significant recognition, first and foremost from the children themselves, as well as from the teachers and the school principal. On the following Saturday afternoon, we held another parade along Via Chiesa della Salute, with the participation of the Banda Salus, the historic band founded by the parish of the Church of Chiesa della Salute. With the additional participation of the *Lucento-Vallette Tavolo*, the event turned into something that brought together several hundred people. This is because I believe that the need to create joyful occasions starting with children, who often suffer from our social, physical, and mental structures represents an opportunity for mutual understanding, from every point of view, that is extremely important» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023, translation mine).

¹⁴⁴ «I believe that one of the many important themes, especially when working with children, is an approach to diversity and therefore to forms of "aliens", which also inhabit MUFANT. This could help foster meaningful discussions. In my view, we should structure Carnevale precisely in this way, by highlighting the representation of everything that is different, what comes from another world, or from another region, and so on. In fact, I said, "We could call it *CarnevAlien*." This could be an idea» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023, translation mine).

initiatives we considered. We proposed the idea to the *Tavolo* and formed a working group composed of *Tavolo* members, representatives from CDS, and staff from MUFANT – including Mara Salis, Michele Zorzi and Scientific Director Paolo Bertetti. Roberto also reached out to an elementary school teacher he had collaborated with previously, involving some of her students as well as colleagues from other local schools.

Our first task as a group was to define and develop the theme: the encounter with otherness through the symbols of the fantastic. Over several meetings, the team – including anthropologists Glauco Barboglio, who is also a resident in Borgo Vittoria, Francesco Vietti, and myself – was tasked with compiling a list of guidelines to inform reflections on the topic, drawing on concepts from the anthropology of the fantastic, and presenting them in a simple, accessible format for the schoolteachers and their students. Mara and Michele contributed as co-developers of the guide, with Mara drawing on her expertise in art education, while Paolo Bertetti acted as a consultant on the symbolic aspects of fantastic characters. The guide was designed to provide teachers and children with simple prompts to encourage reflection on otherness and its representation in fantastic fiction, using some of the most iconic characters as examples, and to inspire them to create their own costumes based on the symbols they felt most connected to. The characters we selected as a team included the cyborg, the alien, the monster, the robot, the superhero, the witch or wizard, the dragon, and the werewolf. For each one, we anthropologist wrote a brief description highlighting how they embody different forms of otherness and how they are perceived – either positively or negatively – while also providing prompts to encourage reflection and challenge these perceptions. In choosing the characters, we drew inspiration from the objects in MUFANT's collection, connecting directly to its tangible cultural heritage with Mara, Michele, and Paolo selecting and photographing key items to accompany each description.

In developing the guide (see **Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.** II), we drew on several fundamental principles that also emerged clearly from my conversations in Canada with cultural operators and individuals involved in designing programming and community engagement initiatives. "One of these principles was tailoring content to the actual needs of the audience, a point that Shirish Rao emphasized during our interview in relation to his work at the Vancouver Art Gallery:

«I think that is one very important part of community engagement: one really has to ask: “Who's it being designed for and defined by?”» (S. Rao, personal communication, August 30, 2024).

What Shirish Rao emphasizes here is the need for cultural institutions – or the individuals responsible for community engagement – to understand their audience, including its specific expectations, and interests. Based on this knowledge, cultural offerings can be shaped to ensure that messages are effectively communicated and have a meaningful impact on the audience, thereby furthering the institution's mission.

In the specific case of the *CarnevAlien* project with the schools, these principles translated into a constant awareness of who we were writing for: elementary school children from diverse cultural backgrounds, some of whom came from socially and economically vulnerable family situations. With this in mind, with the working team that worked on the guide, we committed to keeping the language as simple as possible, so that it would not be overwhelming for teachers or incomprehensible for the children. Furthermore, we selected references that were as universal as possible, avoiding stories or characters unfamiliar to some students and preventing disparities linked to the cultural backgrounds of the children or the types of popular culture they consumed; this allowed us to steer clear of imposing an ethnocentric perspective on fantastic fiction and its symbols. We also avoided any material requirements that might put some families in a position where they could not provide their children with the same resources as others. The team adopted a democratic and inclusive strategy based on accessibility, reflecting current trends in educational programming for both adults and children within cultural institutions.

My conversations with staff at the Surrey Art Gallery were particularly influential in shaping this approach. In our interview C. D. M. explained:

«The strategies we use there are that the programming is engaging at an appropriate level, so it doesn't require specialized knowledge or specific skills in advance. There is really more of a focus on the process and learning and experiencing and not really on the outcome. Things aren't presented in that way that you need to have some amazing product at the end of your experience, and we try to make connections between what people are seeing in the gallery and the projects that they're doing in those spaces so that they can kind of find inspiration, but also it encourages them to explore the ideas that are explored in those artworks» (P20CDM, personal communication, July 25, 2024).

The working team made sure to not include any rigid or overly technical notions in the guide and instead left ample space for the children to explore the themes from their own perspectives and offer their own interpretations. In this sense, we moved away from more traditional forms of museum educational activity, in which cultural heritage on display is often approached either through highly specialized frameworks or, particularly in programs

designed for children, through largely factual and didactic methods. Such approaches frequently involve the production of an outcome based on predefined instructions, introducing an element of performativity typical of more traditional educational models – an element that does not align with the principles of contemporary museum education.

In writing the guide with the other anthropologists and the staff from MUFANT, I insisted on this aspect which was highlighted by several of my interlocutors in Canada. They emphasized the importance of understanding the museum's educational and community engagement role not as a frontal transmission of notions and information from an authoritative subject to a passive listener, but rather as a space that fosters active thinking, reflection, and the connection of concepts with personal experience in ways that are most congenial to each individual. In this sense, the museum serves as a facilitator of such a space: it creates opportunities for engagement, offers input, guidance, and inspiration, but does not prescribe how individuals should interpret the cultural heritage it represents. The aim of employing cultural heritage within social contexts is therefore to foster dialogue and encourage reflection. I discussed this with Hana Amani, artist, storyteller, and educator at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC. I approached her after attending a workshop she had organized at MOA, which used collective collage to envision the city of the future. During our interview, she shared her philosophy on museum practice:

«I don't look at museum education like I have to teach somebody something, I look at it more like: “What can they discover about themselves through this?”. I really approach things through more of a human interaction. To me, it's not about directing them, it's more: “What can you discover about yourself through this interaction?”» (H. Amani, personal communication, July 9, 2024).

Based on these reflections, for *CarnevAlien*, rather than teaching the kids about fantastic characters or tropes, the guide we developed as a team sought to provide inspiration for exploring the theme of otherness through a language that would be both engaging and fun for them. Throughout the process, we carefully ensured to find a balance between allowing sufficient freedom of expression – avoiding becoming the voice of authoritarian expertise or prescribing methods that might not meet the specific needs of our audiences – and responding to the request of the *Tavolo* to provide a set of anthropological guidelines. This reflected a strategy for community engagement projects, which Keiko Honda, Director of Vancouver Arts Colloquium Society, described as follows during one of our meetings:

«I always pay attention to providing both freedom and a little bit more structure and embracing uncertainty, ambiguities so that we can encourage people to contribute with their own multimodal meaning-making. [...] And this is not a constrained environment with top-down dynamics or a leader prescribing things, it's not anything like this. I find it similar to watching how the brain builds networks» (K. Honda, personal communication, August 18, 2024)

I sent the guide to the teachers and they worked with the children using it as the basis for structuring their costume workshops. On the morning of February 27th, classes from five elementary schools in the neighborhood gathered in the *Giardini Allievo*, to celebrate Carnevale together, with the kids proudly wearing the costumes they had created themselves (Figure 22). It was a joyful occasion: the children played, enjoyed the snacks and candy provided by the *Tavolo*, and here and there shared stories about their costumes – how they had made them and what they were meant to represent (Figure 23). I also asked for feedback from several teachers, who expressed their appreciation for the project, found the guide informative and helpful for structuring activities with the children, and showed interest in visiting MUFANT on a future school trip.

This experience provided a clear example of the communicative potential of the fantastic to introduce complex and demanding themes to a non-specialist audience while making them relatable and relevant to their experience (see section 4.2.1). Moreover, since the project was designed for children, this case demonstrated the effectiveness of the fantastic in a particularly demanding context. The use of the fantastic made it possible to address challenging topics in a way that did not feel overwhelming or didactic, instead encouraging curiosity, imagination, and emotional involvement. By drawing on familiar characters and symbols from fictional worlds, it became easier to create connections with the kids' everyday experiences, allowing them to engage with the themes at their own level of understanding. In this sense, the fantastic functioned as an effective pedagogical and interpretative tool, capable of mediating between complexity and accessibility.

In addition to these activities, Roberto emphasized the importance of incorporating a structured moment of reflection and public discussion within the *CarnevAlien* program, which took place at CDS on Friday, February 28th. It was conceived as an opportunity for collective engagement around a shared theme, grounded in inputs and perspectives introduced during previous presentations. On behalf of MUFANT, Francesco and I also participated in this component of the project through an anthropological presentation, utilizing a format more closely aligned with the traditional cultural offerings of museums

and public outreach programs, which in this case responded to the specific request of a local organization active in the territory. We presented information on how Carnevale traditions manifest in different cultural contexts, situating the experience in Borgo Vittoria and other neighborhoods of District 5 within a broader tradition that connects communities around the world. In line with this approach, I additionally presented the masked rituals of Indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast, Canada, providing an even wider contextualization of Carnevale within global practices. The discussion was then reframed from a local perspective, drawing on past experiences in the district, when Carnevale was used as an occasion to address pressing socio-cultural issues in the area, such as the pollution problems associated with Piazza Baldissera and the often conflictual relationships between different cultural groups in the district. The presentations served as a reference point for an open, informal conversation with the audience, designed to eliminate the traditional didactic distance between expert and listener and to move beyond the audience's passive role.

The final component of *CarnevAlien* was the costume-making workshop (Figure 24). Its goal was to create costumes to be worn during the events with the schools on Thursday the 27th and on Sunday the 29th, when the neighborhood Carnevale parade took place. The workshop primarily involved members of the *Tavolo*, with the intention of opening it more broadly to neighborhood residents in the future and also involving children – something that was not possible on this occasion due to time and logistical constraints.

The workshop took place on several occasions at *Stazione Dora* (see section 6.3), where participants worked with recycled materials collected from various sources, using the station and Roberto's garage as storage spaces. They also followed the anthropological guide we compiled, choosing the masks to work on in line with the theme and the guidelines we had provided. I took part in one of the sessions and made my own costume, which I later wore during the parade with the schoolchildren – and, I must admit, received some much-appreciated compliments from the kids, which certainly boosted my pride.

A key element shared by both the children's activities and the *Tavolo*'s workshop was creativity. In both cases, *making* – as theorized by Tim Ingold in his eponymous book (2013) – played a fundamental role. In both contexts, the objective extended far beyond the material outcome. What mattered most was the process itself, understood as a dynamic, relational, educational, and aesthetic experience. Making inherently involves relationships: among those who take part in the act of creation, between people and the materials they

work with, and between the creators and the place and occasion in which – and for which – they choose to create. Creation is always an interactive operation that begins with observing what already exists, identifying what is needed, and imagining what might be improved, enhanced, or built.

In the case of *CarnevAlien*, we anthropologist provided a framework through which both the kids and the members of the *Tavolo* could draw from their personal knowledge and experience with the cultural heritage of the fantastic, and see what they could build based on that and with the materials they had available. The project provided several occasions for learning, growth, and interaction, in which participants inspired one another and learned from each other.

When I joined the costume workshop, in addition to working on my own costume – which I chose in relation to what had already been created so that it would fit within the group of characters – I also observed the dynamics unfolding around me. These surpassed the scope of the practical work of making costumes, encompassing conversations about people, past and future projects, jokes, laughter, moments of venting, and informal exchanges that animated the collective process. This brought to mind the experience described by artist Rory Wakemup regarding his *Smart Wars* workshops, which – despite the significant differences in socio-cultural context – were guided by similar principles and reflected analogous relational dynamics (see Chapter 2).

Regardless of the nature of the activity, what is being produced, or the form of the final outcome, the act of making invariably involves a shared investment of time and intention. Working in this context, the members of the *Tavolo* and I were involved in a process of collective engagement that generated moments of reciprocal learning, the exchange of both practical and theoretical knowledge, and the circulation of personal reflections and experiences. It is precisely in this process that the value of the activity resided: the aesthetic dimension of making was not confined to the finished object alone. Rather, beauty emerged through the act of creation itself, as materials, colors, and gestures were brought together and transformed into a meaningful practice. This form of beauty was not only visual, but also social and cultural, grounded in the significance of creating

collectively and contributing to a project conceived for the benefit of the wider community¹⁴⁵ (Ingold, 2013).

On Sunday, the working group met at *Stazione Dora* to put on our costumes, which we distributed among the members of the *Tavolo*. The train station also served as the meeting point for anyone from the neighborhood and surrounding areas who wished to join the parade. The arrival of families was a particularly meaningful moment, as many of them had not been to the station in years and were unaware of the redevelopment project. This made the occasion an effective opportunity to concretely showcase the work the *Tavolo* had been carrying out and to demonstrate how *Stazione Dora* could become a point of reference in the community life of Borgo Vittoria (see section 6.3). From there, we all paraded through the streets and concluded the celebration in Piazza Chiesa della Salute, at the heart of the neighborhood, with snacks, music and games (Figure 25).

CarnevAlien was a particularly interesting project that emerged directly from a request by the local community and was co-developed through the integration of multiple resources and perspectives. It combined the *Tavolo*'s experience from previous years, their established connections with local schools and the neighborhood, an anthropological perspective on the fantastic, and the specific expertise on the heritage of the fantastic provided by MUFANT staff. In addition, material heritage from the MUFANT collection was brought "out of the museum walls" in digital form through the photographs attached to the guide, for use by the community, allowing this heritage to serve a practical role in their activities while complementing its intangible aspects, which were employed to introduce and reflect on the theme of otherness.

¹⁴⁵ We had already explored this dimension in another event organized for *AnthroDay 2025: Fili di Comunità alla Stazione Dora* (translation: Threads of Community at Stazione Dora; <https://sites.google.com/view/tavoloborgovittoria/anthroday-2025/fili-di-comunit%C3%A0-alla-stazione-dora?authuser=0>, accessed in November 2025), a crochet workshop developed in collaboration with *Il Laboratorio delle Donne* (translation: The Women Workshop; <https://www.elenaaloise.it/laboratorio-delle-donne/>, accessed in November 2025) and the *Associazione Culturale Didattica Keluro* (translation: Keluro Cultural and Educational Association; <https://www.facebook.com/2015keluro/>, accessed in November 2025.), both active in the *Tavolo*. On that occasion, a group of women from Borgo Vittoria came together to share their crochet skills and to teach participants, creating a space for intergenerational and intercultural exchange. The workshop offered an opportunity to reflect on the collective power of making and on the value of working together with the shared intention of bringing beauty and care into a community space such as *Stazione Dora*.

Overall, *CarnevAlien* was a project that gave me the opportunity to put into practice many of the insights and strategies I had gained during my fieldwork in Canada. It encompassed a wide range of activities, the development of which required the application of diverse strategies and their careful adaptation to different audiences and contextual situations.

6.3. Participatory Landscape Design: a guided tour

The first meeting of the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria* that I attended, in December 2023, focused on a project for the requalification of an area at the southern edge of Borgo Vittoria, which includes a complex comprising *Stazione Dora* and the former *Circolo Ettore Valli*. During the meeting, Ferruccio Capitani – an architect for the City of Turin, who also collaborated on the creation of the *Parco del Fantastico* at MUFANT and is an active member of the *Tavolo* – presented the results of the first phase of the project, which had begun several months earlier. That was how I came to learn about the future that the *Tavolo* envisioned for the future *Stazione delle Associazioni* and *Giardino Ettore Valli*.

Located next to Piazza Baldissera, *Stazione Dora* was opened in 1880 and remained in operation until 2020, when it was decommissioned. Following its closure, only an office of the local public transportation company continued to operate on the site; however, this office is also scheduled to relocate in the near future. As a result, the station is currently disused and at risk of abandonment, exposing it to potential vandalism and the emergence of episodes of minor criminality. Adjacent to the station, at the top of a slope connecting the railway area to the street level of Borgo Vittoria, lies another abandoned site. Since 1945, it housed the *Circolo Ettore Valli*, named in honor of a partisan and martyr of the Nazi-Fascist regime. The building also served as a local section of the *Italian Socialist Party* and included recreational and sports facilities, such as a bocce court. In later years, it also hosted a dance hall. The site was abandoned in 2011 and quickly became overgrown with vegetation, with deteriorating structures and signs of urban decay. Despite its current condition, the place remains alive in the collective memory of local residents, who recall it as a vibrant social hub – a meeting place where people gathered to enjoy themselves and a key point of reference for the entire Borgo Vittoria community. The degraded condition of these two sites – both deeply connected to the neighborhood and its history – was widely

regarded by the residents as a significant loss. Consequently – on the initiative of Ferruccio, the idea of a regeneration project began to take shape. The objective was to renovate and repurpose the station and the former *Circolo Ettore Valli*, giving these spaces back to the residents of Borgo Vittoria as places to use, share, and enjoy together. The project was facilitated by the *Associazione Italiana di Architettura del Paesaggio* (AIAPP) through Ferruccio, who is territorial president of the Piedmont and Aosta Valley Section, in collaboration with the *Tavolo di Borgo Vittoria*. From the very beginning in 2023, it was conceived as a participatory and co-creative process, in which the final users – residents of Borgo Vittoria and anyone interested in the future of the area – were invited to express their opinions, share ideas, and provide feedback. This approach aimed to ensure that the new spaces would be designed specifically to meet their needs and to introduce elements that would be both useful and appreciated by the neighborhood.

As a first step in identifying the community's needs, the associations created a survey and distributed it throughout the neighborhood, asking residents what kind of space Borgo Vittoria required. Echoing the insights I collected through my interviews, respondents highlighted a lack of cultural offerings and spaces where people could actively participate rather than simply attend as spectators. This need is particularly felt in the neighborhood – perhaps because of its rich history of associative life, as described in Chapter 2 (section 2.2.). Roberto Orlandini frequently emphasizes this point:

«Quello di cui sicuramente si soffre è non avere degli spazi pubblici in cui poter svolgere delle attività, in cui poter dare un riferimento alle persone affinché possano sapere, se non altro, che ci sono quattro mura, ci sono delle persone che ci fanno delle cose dentro, che è possibile entrarci senza distinzione, senza pagare una tessera e poterci organizzare delle cose mettendosi d'accordo con gli altri. E questo non c'è in questo momento qui a Borgo Vittoria. E questa è una mancanza non da poco e che secondo me sarebbe la soluzione ai problemi di sicurezza che tanto vanno di moda in questi momenti, per cui spesso senti che le persone si lamentano che non si può più uscire la sera. Perché intanto lo spazio è stato completamente abbandonato a qualsiasi tipo di presenza, i cinema sono scomparsi, bar aperti la sera ce ne sono pochi, ma molto pochi. Abbiamo quei due o tre pub che è ottimo che ci siano, ma non è che si possono sostituire come luoghi di incontro. E quindi quella

è veramente una carenza non da poco, tanto da mettere a repentaglio quell'idea di partecipazione attiva che c'era cinquant'anni fa¹⁴⁶» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

The results of the survey were discussed collectively and at public events open to all interested participants. From these meetings emerged the idea of transforming the former station into a meeting space for the associations of Borgo Vittoria, where they could host activities such as labs, workshops, public discussions, and celebrations of specific events. Meanwhile, the former *Circolo Ettore Valli* was envisioned as a park. Through Ferruccio's mediation, the projects were presented to the City of Turin and the Piedmont Region. After a pause during which bureaucratic matters were addressed, in April 2025 the City of Turin began drafting the transformation project for the future *Giardino Ettore Valli*, to be realized with European funding. At the same time, the Piedmont Region allocated funds to secure both the area and the buildings of the *Stazione delle Associazioni*.

By that point, I had built a solid relationship with the *Tavolo* and had collaborated with them on several projects, including *CarnevAlien*. While I was only an observer during the first phase of the requalification project – since it was already underway when I joined the *Tavolo* – I had the opportunity to participate in subsequent stages. I became involved specifically when Ferruccio asked me to collaborate on an event scheduled for May 2025. This took place in the context of the *GePA*¹⁴⁷ *Days* a national initiative promoted by AIAPP. In 2025, the theme was *Fare paesaggio – la centralità del mestiere del paesaggista per il benessere comune*¹⁴⁸ and the plan was to present the results of the *Stazione Dora* renovation project and the participatory design of *Giardino Ettore Valli* through a guided tour of the area.

¹⁴⁶ «What people definitely suffer from is the lack of public spaces where activities can take place, where people can have a reference point so that they can at least know there are four walls, there are people doing things inside, that it is possible to enter without distinction, without paying a membership fee, and organize things in agreement with others. And this does not exist at the moment here in Borgo Vittoria. This is a significant lack, and in my opinion, it would be the solution to the security problems that are so talked about nowadays, where people often complain that it is no longer possible to go out in the evening. Meanwhile, the space has been completely abandoned to any kind of presence; cinemas have disappeared, and there are very few bars open in the evening. We have those two or three pubs and it's great that they exist, but they cannot replace the role of meeting places. And so this is truly a major shortcoming, enough to put at risk that idea of active participation that existed fifty years ago» (R. Orlandini, personal communication, November 29, 2023, translation mine).

¹⁴⁷ *Giardini e Paesaggi Aperti* (translation: Open Gardens and Landscapes).

¹⁴⁸ Translation: Making Landscape – the central role of the landscape architect's profession for the common well-being.

The team I worked with on the project was once again quite heterogeneous. Led by Ferruccio, it included the ever-present Roberto Orlandini representing the *Centro di documentazione storica*, as well as residents who had participated in the previous stages. I proposed to incorporate into the tour the reading of selected passages from fantastic fiction, following a model previously tested in February for *AnthroDay 2025* – with the guided tour *Borgo Vittoria: una passeggiata tra passato, presente e future* (Figure 26) – and based on *Guida Galattica per Esploratori Urbani* (see p. 223). On that occasion, I collaborated with Glauco Barboglio, as well as with the *Tavolo*, AIAPP, and CDS. Together, we worked with a group of people from Borgo Vittoria, brought together through the *Tavolo*, to collectively discuss the theme of *AnthroDay 2025: Futuri Emergenti Negati Alternativi. Il futuro è già qui, ma non è distribuito equamente*¹⁴⁹. From these discussions, the team identified spots in Borgo Vittoria which conveyed the neighborhood's past, present, and future through an anthropological lens. The chosen locations became the stops on our guided tours. At each stop, Ferruccio and Roberto presented the chosen landmark, while Antonella Orlandini – who likes to refer to herself as *la “poettrice” di Borgo Vittoria*¹⁵⁰ – read a poem she had composed, inspired by the place or theme connected to it. The *AnthroDay* event was a success, and the experience was overall very positive. It brought together co-construction with some of the final users, consultation from us anthropologists, and co-development of the tour guided by our theoretical perspective. Since the *AnthroDay* event worked so well, Ferruccio proposed doing something similar for one of the next events organized by AIAPP. This approach then became the model on which we based the organization of the first event for the *GePA Days* on *Stazione Dora* and *Giardino Ettore Valli*.

In April 2025, the participatory design meetings for *Giardino Ettore Valli* resumed, and I began participating as the first step in working on the initiative. Most meetings were introduced by Ferruccio explaining the technical aspects of the part of the project to be addressed that day, as well as providing updates on the components that had already been completed. The participants – residents, members of the *Tavolo* and some architecture students that were working with Ferruccio on the project – were then invited to provide their input on matters such as where the bike path should cross the park, what activities to

<http://www.antropologiaapplicata.com/2025/12/02/atlante-siaa-gli-eventi-di-novembre-e-dicembre/>, accessed in November 2025.

¹⁵⁰ Translation: The “poetress” of Borgo Vittoria.

include for children, the best locations for benches, and anything else that might be useful or interesting to include in the future park. The discussions were always informal and spontaneous, conducted in a peer-to-peer manner without any hierarchy. As a group, we used maps and project plans to mark our suggestions and then discussed them together (Figure 27). Ferruccio provided specific information on what could be implemented and what could not. The results were then compiled by Ferruccio and his team to be presented and further discussed in the next meeting.

The role of the residents was central throughout the project. By focusing on their needs, requests, and hopes to envision the future of the space, some interesting insights emerged – insights that might not have been apparent from an outside perspective. However, for those who live in the neighborhood and experience it daily, these issues were immediately evident. This reminded me of an experience that community librarian S. G. shared during our interview, which I was able to observe firsthand during the participatory design meetings:

«I don't pretend to know what everyone needs, because there is no such thing. I just try and listen and talk and do. I actually engage with people first. Another way you can do is passive things: I was in the southeast and people had wanted health information, but I wasn't sure what that meant. I had a partner who was working for Vancouver Coastal Health, who did workshops, but so many and I didn't know which ones to pick, so I did a passive system where it was pictures, so people didn't have to read and they were able to pick their top five or whatever. And then we were able to have a really successful series of workshops because we did the ones that they picked: one was sleep and one was foot health. I wouldn't have guessed those two. So, there are a lot of different ways to find out ideas of what people need, but it will change so we have to keep asking» (P32SG, personal communication, September 11, 2024).

Listening to people and understanding their perspectives – rather than relying on an abstract notion of what they might want – is highly strategic and may determine the success of a community engagement project. Only by dedicating time to understand people's points of view and conducting careful research can a cultural offering be truly impactful within a community, helping institutions like MUFANT fulfill their goal of playing an active role in the territories where they operate. Importantly, listening is also central to the ethnographic approach, a connection that makes the pairing anthropology-community engagement especially meaningful and appropriate for this type of projects. In the case of my research in Borgo Vittoria, paying close attention to the perspectives shared by participants at the *Tavolo* – following their work, noting their interests, and tracking the

projects they were developing – enabled me to identify, create or take advantage of opportunities for collaboration. This approach made this and other projects possible, allowing MUFANT to participate meaningfully in the neighborhood's collective life through the mediation of myself and others.

During the participatory design meetings, the most evident and openly discussed aspects concerned how residents intended to use and experience the *Giardino Ettore Valli*. At the same time, less explicit ideas guided the project and shaped the vision for the space's future in a more subtle way. These themes surfaced at times, then receded into the background, yet continued to linger, quietly informing decisions and discussions throughout. My objective in participating in these meetings was mainly to identify these underlying elements and examine how they could be connected to fantastic fiction from an anthropological perspective. This connection would then inform the shaping of the event and allow for reflection beyond the practical considerations that consistently remained in the foreground. While these required a practical and factual mode of communication, the more abstract themes I was focusing on would not have had the same impact if communicated following a similar logic. As internalized guiding concepts, they needed to be presented in a more evocative way – one that could convey the emotional connection residents have with these places even to those who are unfamiliar with Borgo Vittoria. In this way, the project could also take on meaning for them beyond its more technical aspects. The importance of this aspect was highlighted by Hana Amani during our interview:

«People are not interested in something that's not relevant to them, so you have to find a way to make it universally relevant to everybody» (H. Amani, personal communication, July 9, 2024).

Because of its capacity to elicit and evoke emotional responses and to resonate with personal experiences (see section 4.2.1), the language of the fantastic was identified as the most appropriate means to achieve this effect, fostering audience involvement and engagement during the guided tour, while presenting the projects and introducing new perspectives on the spaces we visited.

From my participation in and observation of the participatory design meetings, as well as the occasions when the requalification projects were discussed at the *Tavolo*, a set of recurring ideas emerged. I later discussed these with Ferruccio and the team assembled to organize the events and together we elaborated the following list of the themes:

- Relationships between human and non-human subjects, and between humans and the natural environment
- Community, accessibility, and inclusion
- Continuity between past, present, and future in Borgo Vittoria
- Stations, trains and travelling
- Air and noise pollution
- Industrial history of the neighborhood

The next step consisted in selecting the themes that we intended to highlight in the guided tour and associating each of them with the stop where it would be addressed. As a team we then identified connections between these themes, the locations, and works of fantastic fiction capable of eliciting an emotional response, helping the audience connect with the meaning of each place, its role in the lives of Borgo Vittoria residents, and the work and hope invested in its future. In this phase of the project, I continued to act on behalf of MUFANT as a co-developer and, in addition, consulted Professors Paolo Bertetti, and Francesco Vietti to determine which book or story would better complement each stop. I then gathered their suggestions and selected specific passages to be read on the day of the event, which was titled: *Fantastici esperimenti di progettazione paesaggistica partecipata, tra il fantastico e l'antropologia applicata. Un tour tra architettura, storia e fantascienza negli spazi dell'ex Stazione Dora*¹⁵¹.

On May 24th, the team designated *Stazione Dora* as the meeting point, gathering there together with the audience. Ferruccio presented the project and Roberto shared the history of the site. I then read a passage from the text selected for that stop, after briefly introducing the theme, the book, and its connection to the location. Time was allowed for comments and questions before we moved on, following the same pattern at each stop. The tour was structured this way:

¹⁵¹ Translation: Fantastic Experiments in Participatory Landscape Design, Between the Fantastic and Applied Anthropology: A Tour Through Architecture, History, and Science Fiction in the Spaces of the Former *Stazione Dora*.

Stop 1: *Stazione Dora* (Figure 28)

Theme: Continuity between past, present, and future in Borgo Vittoria

Reading from: *Way Station* – Clifford D. Simak (1963).

Way Station follows the story of a seemingly ordinary house that is transformed into an intergalactic transit hub, a hidden “way station” on Earth overseen by an advanced galactic confederation. For about a century, Enoch Wallace has served as the human caretaker of the station, welcoming beings from across the galaxy who travel via a teleportation system. The passage describes the space that was once simply his home:

«There was no kitchen now, nor any sitting room with its old-fashioned and the rocking chair; no back parlor with its stuffy elegance of brocade and silk, no guest bedroom on the first and no family bedrooms on the second floor. It all was gone and now one room remained. The second-story floor and all partitions had been stripped away. Now the house was one great room. One side of it was the galactic station and the other side the living space for the keeper of the station. [...] On the fireplace mantel and strewn on shelf and table were articles and artifacts that had no earthly origin and some no earthly names the steady accumulation through the years of the gifts from friendly travelers. Some of them were functional and others were to look at only, and there were other things that were entirely useless because they had little application to a member of the human race or were inoperable on Earth, and many others of the purpose of which he had no idea, accepting them, embarrassed, with many stumbling thanks, from the well-meaning folks who had brought them to him. And on the other side of the room stood the intricate mass of machinery, reaching well up into the open second story, that wafted passengers through the space that stretched from star to star. An inn, he thought, a stopping place, a galactic crossroads» (Simak, 1963, pp. 27-28).

The connection we established for this first stop was based on the idea of a place that began with a specific function – the train station in Borgo Vittoria and Enoch Wallace’s house in the book – and then transformed into something new, while retaining its original appearance and, in doing so, maintaining a link to its past. What was once Enoch’s home has become a place of passage and encounter, where travelers leave a part of themselves – a story, an object – shaping and transforming the environment in the process. In a similar way, *Stazione Dora* has evolved over time, though in the opposite direction, transforming from a railway station into a home for neighborhood associations. Today, it is starting to serve as a meeting place where everyone is invited to leave their mark, contributing both to the station’s future and to its role in the life of the neighborhood.

The anthropological aspect of the reflection focused on the cultural significance of places (Aucoin, 2017) and their connection to time, understood as a dimension that shapes the present, informs the interpretation of the past, and fuels the imagination of the future (Gell, 2001). It also considered the social role of places as symbols around which a sense of community and belonging can be built (Nas, 2011).

Stop 2: Future *Giardino Ettore Valli* (Figure 29)

Theme: Relationships between human and non-human subjects, and between humans and the natural environment

Reading from: *The Word for World Is Forest* – Ursula K. Le Guin (1972)

The choice of this book was driven by the prominence throughout the story of the contrasting logics of domination and coexistence, reflected in the ways people see, experience, and interact with nature, as well as in the perception of humanity's role within the natural system. I read two different passages highlighting opposing points of view and attitudes toward the planet *Athshe* – one of the worlds colonized by humans after humanity had exhausted the resources of Earth – with its unique environment entirely covered by forests and inhabited by its Indigenous people, the *Athsheans*. The first reading presented the perspective of Don Davidson, a captain of the army stationed on *Athshe*, which he refers to by the name given by human colonizers, *New Tahiti*:

«Get enough humans here, build machines and robots, make farms and cities, and nobody would need the creechies any more. And a good thing too. For this world, New Tahiti, was literally made for men. Cleaned up and cleaned out, the dark forests cut down for open fields of grain, the primeval murk and savagery and ignorance wiped out, it would be a paradise, a real Eden. A better world than worn-out Earth. And it would be his world. For that's what Don Davidson was, way down deep inside him: a world-tamer» (Le Guin, 1972, ch. 1).

This passage reveals how Davidson perceives himself and the human race as separate and superior entities compared to nature, which exists solely to be dominated and exploited. This attitude then extends to the way he treats people as well. The opposite point of view comes from Raj Lyubov, an anthropologist who learns to understand and empathize with the *Athsheans*:

«He had also come to like the Athsheans names for their own lands and places, sonorous two-syllabled words: Sornol, Tuntar, Eshreth, Esh-sen – that was now Centralville – Endtor, Abtan, and above all Athshe, which meant the Forest, and the World. So earth, terra, tellus meant both the soil and the planet, two meanings and one. But to the Athsheans soil, ground, earth was not that to which the dead return and by which the living live: the substance of their world was not earth, but forest. Terran man was clay, red dust. Athshean man was branch and root. They did not carve figures of themselves in stone, only in wood» (Le Guin, 1972, ch. 5).

Lyubov's way of speaking about the *Athsheans* and their relationship with the surrounding environment is clearly very different from Davidson's. It is respectful of a perspective that is quite unlike the human one, a view he is learning to understand and even appreciate. The *Athsheans* do not see themselves as separate from nature, but as part of a unified system in which the well-being of one benefits the other. This idea also forms the foundation of Perspectivism, a concept theorized by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, which characterizes the cosmologies of many Indigenous populations, especially in the Americas (Viveiros de Castro, 1998).

The passages served to present a perspective on the relationship between humans and non-humans that departs from the typical Western conception. They highlight the power dynamics that govern the relationship between humanity and the natural environment, with humans perceiving themselves as separate from and superior to nature (Descola, 2021). Urban settings provide a clear example of the material consequences of this mindset, where nature is expected to constantly adapt to human goals and is often sacrificed in the name of technological progress and infrastructure development. This is particularly apparent in Borgo Vittoria, where, as noted in Chapter 2, years of ongoing infrastructure projects have increased traffic, introduced extensive construction sites that disrupt daily life, and caused significant environmental impacts – particularly on air quality and noise levels. The future *Giardino Ettore Valli* is conceived as an exception to this prevailing trend, with the aspiration that it might serve as an urban space where people can meaningfully engage with nature. From the outset, the consideration of indigenous plant species present in the area has been a central aspect of the participatory design process. The project as a whole has been guided by principles of environmental respect and sustainability, aiming to create a space of coexistence rather than domination – one characterized by reciprocal support, in which the resources offered by nature are recognized and valued, rather than treated as obstacles to be removed in the pursuit of progress. Using Donna Haraway's expression, the *Giardino Ettore Valli* as a project represents an example

of “making kin in the Chthulucene”, cultivating intentional relationships of care and interdependence among humans, plants, animals, and ecosystems¹⁵² (Haraway, 2016).

Stop 3: *Via Cambiano* bridge (Figure 30)

Theme: Stations, trains and travelling

Reading from: *L'amore al tempo dei treni perduti* – Paolo Aresi (2010)

This stop was on a bridge overlooking the railway, with *Stazione Dora* on the left at the end of the tracks. The landscape described in the passage selected for this stop closely mirrored the scene in front of us, creating an evocative parallel between the place and time where we stood and the one depicted in the book. The novel is a post-apocalyptic story that follows Tim Roca, a young boy who was only twelve when an unspecified global catastrophe upended the world. At that moment, he was on a train with his father, beginning a long journey through a Europe devastated by violence and chaos. In a future where technology is a memory and railways are abandoned, Tim and his traveling companion, Henry, follow desolate tracks in search of a community in Madrid rumored to have restored scientific and technological knowledge. Along the way, they experience numerous adventures and encounter a natural world that, though wounded, is gradually reclaiming its

¹⁵² I had the opportunity to further explore these connections in the evocative setting of the *Museo delle Scienze di Trento* (translation: MUSE; Science Museum of Trento; <https://www.muse.it/>, accessed in November 2025) during the *Ritiro Diplomatico: La Terra dura più degli imperi* (translation: Diplomatic Retreat: The Earth Lasts Longer Than Empires) which I attended in February 2025. The initiative, conceived and curated by Mali Weil, explored the museum as a “diplomatic outpost” for fostering new relationships between humans and the natural world. Through negotiation tables, discussions, and ritual practices, we engaged with a variety of themes, examining the limits and possibilities of interspecies diplomacy. The initiative combined scientific, philosophical, and cultural approaches, involving experts in agrobiodiversity, ethology, anthropology, genetics, and cultural heritage. Participants were organized into the four fictional diplomatic bodies of the Interspecies Diplomacies, each dedicated to a specific aspect of interspecies relationship management. Interestingly, the group I joined was called *Leguin*, directly referencing the author Ursula K. Le Guin. Our motto was “*May the dream unite what wakefulness divides*,” and our goal was to explore the impact of imagining otherwise in the management of interspecies relations. The *Ritiro Diplomatico* was a truly surprising and enriching experience. It allowed me to reflect both on the themes themselves and on the role MUSE was playing at that moment, hosting the retreat through participatory methods and engaging a diverse range of participants – from academics to professionals from other sectors – always keeping discussion and dialogue at the center of the experience.

spaces. On their journey to Madrid, they come across the abandoned St. Juan station, which the author describes as follows:

«Il cielo appariva azzurro intenso, la terra odorava di umido e di foglie. I due amici sbaraccarono in pochi minuti. Erano in marcia da un paio d'ore quando i binari vennero fuori da una lunga curva. Henry e Tim rimasero incantati nell'aria calda, imbambolati a osservare il panorama: lì la valle si allargava un poco e diveniva un catino, fra le montagne, e ospitava prati e pini e abeti e nel mezzo... - Non è possibile - esclamò Henry battendo le mani. Tim rimase silenzioso, fissò i binari che correivano lucenti in un intrico di scambi, rotaie, traversine. Due grandi locomotori erano fermi, sotto il sole. Gridò Tim: - Travca L 9202! - Sembravano nuovi: Tim li vide nella notte piena di stelle lanciati contro il vento a duecentocinquanta chilometri orari con la lunga coda di carrozze dai finestrini accesi, e il mare che saliva sulle scogliere buie sotto la ferrovia. Su due lunghi binari morti sostavano carrozze che sembravano verniciate di fresco, con tutti i vetri intatti. C'erano delle mucche brune che pascolavano tra i binari. E sul lato destro sonnecchiava la stazioncina di campagna dall'intonaco giallo cotto dal sole, dove ancora stava appeso un cartello bianco con il nome, S. Juan, scritto in nero. Sembrava che l'ultimo treno fosse transitato da pochi minuti e la stazioncina attendesse nella calura il passaggio di chissà quale convoglio. Gli occhi di Tim fissarono il binario invaso dai rovi, attorno ai suoi piedi e alle scarpe verdi di Henry: le erbacce scomparivano all'altezza dei primi scambi e lasciavano il posto al grigio dei sassi e del metallo lucente delle rotaie¹⁵³» (Aresi, 2010, pp. 83-84)

The railway tracks followed by Tim e Harry symbolize the path toward hope and a better future, but they are also traces of the past, reminders of the world before the catastrophe. When the two boys see the trains left at the station, they are comforted by the

¹⁵³ «The sky appeared a deep blue, and the earth smelled of dampness and leaves. The two friends struck camp in a few minutes. They had been on the march for a couple of hours when the tracks emerged from a long curve. Henry and Tim stood spellbound in the warm air, gaping as they took in the landscape: there the valley widened slightly and became a basin among the mountains, sheltering meadows and pines and firs, and in the middle... "It's not possible," Henry exclaimed, clapping his hands. Tim remained silent. He stared at the tracks, which ran gleaming through a tangle of switches, rails, and sleepers. Two large locomotives stood motionless under the sun. Tim shouted, "Travca L 9202!" They looked brand new: Tim saw them in a star-filled night, hurtling into the wind at two hundred and fifty kilometers an hour, with a long tail of carriages whose windows were lit, and the sea rising against the dark cliffs beneath the railway. On two long dead-end tracks stood carriages that seemed freshly painted, with every pane of glass intact. Brown cows grazed among the rails. And on the right-hand side dozed the little country station, its yellow plaster baked by the sun, where a white sign still hung bearing the name S. Juan, written in black. It seemed as though the last train had passed only minutes earlier and the little station was waiting in the heat for the passage of some unknown convoy. Tim's eyes fixed on the track overrun by brambles around his feet and Henry's green shoes: the weeds disappeared at the level of the first switches, giving way to the gray of the stones and the shining metal of the rails» (Aresi, 2010, pp. 83-84, translation mine).

presence of something familiar – a link to the world they once knew. At the same time, they understand that the tracks lead to change, a new chapter in their lives, and a hope to look toward in the future. In the same way, the railway tracks we saw before us standing on the bridge in Via Cambiano are traces of the past of Borgo Vittoria, while the *Stazione delle Associazioni* represents the future of the neighborhood – an aim to work toward, a goal that shapes what we do in the present, drawing strength from a connection to the past that is not lost (Appadurai, 2013; Bryant & Knight, 2019; see section 5.1.1). The passage was particularly evocative, creating a sense of familiarity and an empathetic connection between our experience of the neighborhood in that moment and the story told in the book. It also prompted reflection on other themes of the novel, such as change, travel, uprootedness, migration, and adaptation within the context of the Anthropocene (Meschiari, 2020).

Stop 4: SNOS shopping gallery (Figure 31)

Theme: Community, accessibility, and inclusion

Reading from: *Ecotopia* – Ernest Callenbach (1977)

The last stop of the guided tour was SNOS Shopping Gallery (see footnote 57). This stop was an exception, as instead of linking the reading strictly to the place itself, we chose to conclude with a passage that could summarize the project as a whole. I referenced *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach (1977), a utopian-ecological novel that has become a classic of environmental literature. Set in the near future (the 1990s, as imagined in 1975), it tells the story of an independent, sustainable nation formed on the U.S. West Coast in 1980, when California, Oregon, and Washington secede from the United States. After twenty years of near-total isolation, William Weston, an American journalist for the *Times-Post*, visits the country. The novel unfolds through his personal diary and journalistic reports. *Ecotopia* is built on radical ecological principles: renewable energy, green cities, local production, sustainable transport, and near-zero waste. Society is decentralized and self-managed by autonomous local communities. Women play a central role, and the culture promotes contact with nature, mental health, sexual freedom, art, and play. Major American cities, like San Francisco, have been transformed with green spaces, urban gardens, and a drastic reduction in private cars. The novel presents a positive vision of an ecologically

sustainable and radically different future. It has influenced environmental movements, architects, urban planners, and activists. In the selected passage Weston describes the functioning of one of *Ecotopia*'s autonomous communities:

«Since Americans may be skeptical of how a woman-dominated political system actually operates, I have attended several meetings of Survivalist Party groups. Judging by these, the Party is unlike any other I have ever observed. A meeting has no formal agenda; instead, it opens with a voicing of "concerns" by many participants. As these are discussed (often amid friendly laughter, as well as a few angry outbursts) general issues begin to take shape. But there are no Robert's Rules of Order, no motions, no votes—instead, a gradual ventilation of feelings, some personal antagonisms worked through, and a gradual consensual focusing on what needs to be done. Once this consensus is achieved, people take pains to assuage the feelings of those members who have had to give ground in order to achieve the consensus. Only after this healing process takes place is there formal ratification of the decisions taken—the only action during three hours or so that has the feeling or ordinary political business as we know it. And yet I must admit that, in those three hours, a great deal gets done: a political problem is indeed faced, defined, and a decision made about it, though only along with a great amount of attention to things that would be considered, among us, as more in the realm of social life than politics. On the other hand, it must also be admitted that people enjoy such meetings, and we might conceivably learn some lessons from them» (Callenbach, 1977, ch. 14).

The way Weston describes the community assembly in *Ecotopia* strongly reminded me of how meetings at the *Tavolo* are conducted and how the participatory design work was organized. The amused reactions of the members of the *Tavolo* participating in the guided tour confirmed my impression. Ending in this way served to bring the interpretation of the project back to its core and to the principles that guided it, re-establishing a sense of familiarity and closeness with the specific context of Borgo Vittoria. Moreover, the narrative voice in the passage – reminiscent of an ethnographer in the field – echoed my role in the process and my presence at the *Tavolo*, and provided an example of how meetings similar to those we were all familiar with can be interpreted through an anthropological lens.

The feedback from participants – a heterogeneous group comprising residents, members of the participatory design working group and the *Tavolo*, representatives of city institutions, architects, and other professionals – was very positive. Many noted that linking the factual information about the project to works of fantastic fiction allowed them to see the places we visited through a new lens, whether they were already familiar with these spaces or not, and to imagine their potential future transformations. Ultimately, this is the

outcome I had envisioned, and it aligns with my observations during fieldwork in Canada as well as the views of most of my interviewees, who emphasized that the goal of community engagement efforts and cultural programs should be to introduce people to new perspectives and provide them with the conceptual tools and input to form their own. Drawing from their experience in art education, C. D. M. explained:

«I think ultimately what we're looking for is for people to contemplate their relationship to the world and ideas and challenge maybe the way that we all see things, or see things from a different angle or perspective or different context» (P20CDM, personal communication, July 25, 2024).

The guided tours, as I conceived them together with the respective working teams, were designed to introduce the audience to a new way of seeing Borgo Vittoria – from a different perspective. Rather than portraying it as a degraded, unsafe peripheral neighborhood with no prospects for the future or cultural activities, the tours aimed to reveal its richness, potential, and overlooked narratives. On the one hand, the organization of the tour made it possible to open the neighborhood to the outside, revealing a side that goes beyond stereotypes or the generic representation of peripheral areas. On the other, it became a moment of reflection both for and with local residents. This is an approach that Vancouver Moving Theatre has been adopting for decades in the Downtown Eastside, a particularly challenging area of the city marked by multiple social issues. Although the socio-cultural context is very different from that of Borgo Vittoria, the two neighborhoods share the burden of a negative reputation – one that tends to emphasize problems while overlooking positive aspects. As a result, external perceptions of these places often fail to align with the experiences and perspectives of those who live in or actively engage with the territory. This is something that emerged several times in conversations with people from the *Tavolo* and something that I noticed firsthand. Personally, when I visited Borgo Vittoria and began to familiarize myself with it, despite clearly recognizing the presence of issues – some more evident and serious than others – I felt far safer and more at ease than the narratives surrounding these places, as well as the explicit or implicit warnings about them, had led me to expect. I had an analogous experience in the Downtown Eastside, and I discussed my impressions with both the people in Borgo Vittoria and Savannah Walling during our interview. In both cases, I received confirmation that this disconnect is clearly perceived by residents and has a significant impact, particularly on the attitudes of outsiders – and even public institutions – toward these territories. Through its work, Vancouver

Moving Theatre seeks to transform this narrative, allowing residents to feel represented in a different way and to recognize the potential and beauty of the place in which they live, while neither forgetting nor ignoring its problems. At the same time, perceptions from the outside can also shift. Savannah identified this as one of the main social roles played by the projects she has been co-leading at Vancouver Moving Theatre for many years. In our interview she shared:

«No place is a place of perfect safety, but Downtown Eastside is a place where people have lived for many years, where most of the time people are looking out for each other. And there's always the kind of media stigmatizing that likes to focus on the darker or the dysfunctional or the people in difficulty, forgetting that it's part of a whole larger fabric of community that doesn't deny that there are things that need to be addressed and taken care of. [...] Some of what we've been doing is we're showcasing talents, stories, concerns and cultural practices of this neighborhood, and we are honoring the cultural communities and some of the heroes and the lived wisdom of the neighborhood and shining a positive light so at least the media some times of the year are hearing stories of the strengths, creativity and, again, wisdom of the neighborhood. It's been a way of countering the stigmatization of this complex, culturally rich community» (S. Walling, personal communication, October 22, 2024).

Projects of this kind have the potential to generate very concrete outcomes for the territory itself, such as increased funding opportunities and more proactive engagement from public institutions. These institutions may come to view the areas in which such projects are realized not merely as problems to be managed, but as places of potential where meaningful and valuable initiatives can take shape. Moreover, the inclusion of forms of expression such as performative arts and the use of the fantastic – moving beyond purely factual narration to engage emotional dimensions like empathy and introspection – adds an additional layer to the representation of the territory integrating elements such as hope for the future, pride in the successful realization of an ambitious project, and inspiration to take part in meaningful change.

Borgo Vittoria is certainly not the first place in Turin that comes to mind when looking for opportunities for leisure, cultural enrichment, innovation, or social gathering spaces. Yet the reality I encountered – and engaged with – was very different than what I had been led to expect, particularly thanks to the presence of the *Tavolo*, which drives initiatives and represents a locally rooted, volunteer-based community that is active and impactful in ways I had never seen elsewhere. The guided tour at *Stazione Dora* and future *Giardino Ettore Valli*, showcased and highlighted this side of Borgo Vittoria, portraying it

as a neighborhood in transformation – one that aligns with some of the most innovative strategies in participatory urban development, attentive to both the social and ecological dimensions of the territory, as well as to sustainability. The readings from fantastic fiction that I selected following Paolo and Francesco’s suggestions, not only enabled the audience to connect more deeply with the spaces and enhance their understanding of the sites, but also sparked curiosity in the books themselves and in the fantastic more broadly. Several participants even asked me for recommendations and references to explore the texts further. This contributed not only to MUFANT’s goals in terms of community engagement – enhancing its presence in the neighborhood and strengthening local relationships – but also to promoting the cultural heritage of the fantastic that the museum represents, fostering interest in the potential of its languages.

Overall, the event achieved its goals, generating the kinds of reflective and imaginative reactions we as a team had hoped for. By combining storytelling with a conventional guided tour, the experience added a creative twist, transforming the act of walking through the neighborhood into a participatory exploration of both place and possibility. This experience constituted an interesting experiment in collaborative community engagement, combining elements of both co-development and consultation. The entire process was carried out through the active contribution of each participating organisation, each bringing its own expertise and personal networks into play. Throughout the project, actors remained in constant communication and coordination with one another, fostering mutual engagement and accountability, and mobilising both internal and external relationships. As S. G. observed during our interview, collaboration works effectively because it is grounded in reciprocal interest:

«Just like you want to work with someone who can help further your mission, they want to work with someone who can help further their mission. That's why it works out well, I think» (P32SG, personal communication, September 11, 2024).

In fact, the collaboration with AIAPP originated from a request by Ferruccio, but it was not a service provided by MUFANT or CDS: it was an exchange of favors based on mutual support. He had helped Glauco and I with *AnthroDay*, and we returned the favor by supporting him with the *GePA Days*.

Those involved in the organization were satisfied with the outcome of the event, willing to repeat the experience, and enthusiastic about the many possible applications of

the method, as well as the opportunities that the fantastic offers for creating conceptual connections between symbols, narratives, and lived experiences.

In fact, Roberto and I adopted the same structure in developing another event organized at the CDS Library as part of *Archivissima*, Italy's festival dedicated to archives. The 2025 edition focused on the theme of possible futures – including those imagined and envisioned in the past – and on archives as spaces for envisioning multiple inclusive and sustainable paths forward, grounded in knowledge shaped by history and memory. The theme of the 2025 edition aligned with some of the most familiar and well-known tropes of the fantastic, particularly those of science fiction. So when Roberto Orlandini asked me to co-propose an event on behalf of CDS and MUFANT, it seemed like a perfectly fitting opportunity. Our proposal – titled *Dall'altra parte dei binari: un percorso attraverso archivi cartacei e archivi immateriali sul filo delle strade ferrate, stazioni e territorio tra passato e futuro*¹⁵⁴ – focused on the history of the railways and stations that once crossed the area now known as District 5, connecting both to the theme of the events for *GePA* and to the project at *Stazione Dora*. Roberto's and my presentation was complemented by documentary and archival sources – including both direct and indirect testimonies – that are part of the immaterial archive gradually developed by various institutions and local associations at CDS. These materials trace a continuous movement between past, present, and future, reflecting the interweaving of diverse presences that once inhabited the stations, train and tram stops, and the emerging industries of the area. The discussion focused on three main topics: the social role of archives as repositories of memory and collective identity, and the responsibilities of those who curate and preserve them; the history of Borgo Vittoria in relation to the steel industry; and the ways in which trains and railways shaped and influenced the development of the territory. In connection with these topics, and after consulting once again with MUFANT, I selected passages to read from, respectively: *The Telling*, by Ursula K. Le Guin (2000); *The Caves of Steel* by Isaac Asimov (1954); and *La Maison à vapeur* by Jules Verne (1880). In this case as well, the audience's response was very positive, and the readings sparked both curiosity and interest, fostering a discussion of the event's themes in a creative, innovative, and imaginative way.

¹⁵⁴<https://www.archivissima.it/2025/it/oggetti/5130-dallaltra-parte-dei-binari-un-percorso-attraverso-archivi-cartacei-e-archivi-immateriali-sul-filo-delle-strade-ferrate-stazioni-e-territorio-tra-passato-e-futuro>, accessed November 2025).

6.4. Neighborhood Narratives: RPGs and community engagement

Within the framework of *GePA Days*, the guided tour was followed the next day, May 25th, by a second, closely related event organized in collaboration with *La Pentola del Drago*. Founded in January 2015 by a group of board game and role-playing game enthusiasts, this cultural gaming association operates at local, regional, and national levels. It promotes analog gaming –encompassing board games, role-playing games, and card games – as well as fantasy culture through events, presentations, educational partnerships, and open play sessions. Its mission is centered on two main objectives: expanding the reach of tabletop and role-playing games through festivals, fairs, and collaborations with public institutions and other gaming associations; and fostering the fantastic as a tool for cultural enrichment, social inclusion, and education.

I first got in contact with *La Pentola del Drago* during *AnthroDay 2024*, when – under the guidance of Caterina Agus, a member of the association and colleague anthropologist – they organized an event focused on the use of role-playing games as a tool for engaging with and processing eco-anxiety and climate-change-related fears, increasingly impactful, particularly among younger generations. In the morning, following an introductory framework on the anthropological dimensions of the Anthropocene presented by Caterina, a presentation was held outlining how role-playing games function and highlighting the differences among various forms of analog, collaborative games. There was also an intervention by a psychologist who presented the potential use of role-playing games (RPGs) in contexts of psychological care. He explained that the aim is to help individuals process ecological anxieties through alternative expressive means. Even if such practices are not yet fully integrated into rehabilitative settings, they can serve as a valuable starting point for recognizing these issues, reducing their emotional weight, and encouraging reflection on possible responses and solutions. These theoretical presentations allowed the audience to become familiar with these themes and to begin reflecting on them in a more structured and informed way, providing a basis for the subsequent gaming sessions that took place in the afternoon.

The scenarios the masters proposed drew on elements of dystopian science fiction and solarpunk narratives. As explained by Caterina, the adventures were designed to preserve a playful dimension while also fostering reflection through identification and immersion. Based on the feedback collected at the end of the activity during a debriefing

with the participants, the objectives were achieved. One of the participants from the *Associazione Amici dell'Educatore della Provvidenza* was particularly struck by the idea of using role-playing games as a tool and asked *La Pentola* to initiate a collaboration with their organization. The experience was also very meaningful for me and proved inspiring for the subsequent stages of my research.

La Pentola del Drago was already part of MUFANT's heritage community, having previously collaborated on joint cultural activities – particularly with *La Pentola* hosting role-playing game sessions at the museum. So, when the opportunity arose to apply my theoretical reflections on the fantastic as an alternative, accessible, and engaging means of eliciting emotional responses within community engagement projects in Borgo Vittoria, a collaboration with *La Pentola* appeared particularly appropriate and promising. This was also due to the existing connection with anthropology through Caterina, as well as the fact that the group was already familiar with its basic concepts. Drawing directly on their *AnthroDay* experience, I thought it might be interesting to propose something similar, structured in the same way, for our second *GePA Days* event, to offer a different perspective on the themes presented during the guided tour. I contacted Caterina and shared my idea. She was enthusiastic and promptly asked the association's board and the other members, who agreed to contribute. In collaboration with the same team that had organized the guided tour in Borgo Vittoria, we began working on this part of the project as well, meeting a couple of times to coordinate. The themes selected as the focus of the guided tour were shared and discussed with Caterina and Luca Navone, another member of *La Pentola del Drago* and game master. These themes were explained within the context of the project, accompanied by a request to develop a couple of role-playing stories based on them. The result was *Trame di quartiere. Spazi di gioco e scenari di immaginazione a Stazione Dora: Un pomeriggio di giochi di ruolo per riflettere sulle tematiche emerse nella progettazione partecipata*¹⁵⁵.

The event was held at *Stazione Dora* on a sunny spring afternoon and offered a wonderful opportunity to use the space in a completely new way – something that had never been done before there (Figure 32) It was a moment of reclaiming the station and starting to envision a concrete new life and role for it within the neighborhood. The audience

¹⁵⁵ Translation: Neighborhood Narratives: Play Spaces and Imaginary Scenarios at *Stazione Dora*: An Afternoon of Role-Playing Games to Reflect on Themes Emerging from Participatory Design.

included both members of the *Tavolo* and people from outside the group. The story I played, created by gamemaster Filippo, focused on the theme of coexistence between human and non-human beings, linking directly to the conversation we had the previous day at the future *Giardino Ettore Valli*. Filippo was also very skilled at integrating the space of *Stazione Dora* into the story, setting events in locations that shared many visual and sensory features with the place where we were playing, which further enhanced the sense of immersion. The adventure was set in a dystopian future world devoid of technology but infused with magic, where humans and elemental creatures lived together while navigating prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination. The group I was in, together with Ferruccio and Roberto, played as a mixed team of humans and elementals tasked with finding a magical flower at risk of exploding, an event that would result in the disappearance of all elementals. Throughout the story, we had to navigate our relationships with the natural environment, with the individuals we encountered, with our own characters' biases, and with difficult choices regarding how to act and whose interests to prioritize. For the duration of the game, we were our characters, focused on completing our mission. Once the adventure was completed, together with the other participants, we had a debriefing moment reflecting on some of the dynamics that emerged during the session and on our responses to them: sometimes we players remained aligned with our personal values, while at other times we were fully immersed in the story world, and acted in ways we might never have considered in real life. Everyone involved expressed satisfaction with the outcome, and the members of the *Tavolo* described RPG as a novel and surprising activity – a stimulating environment in which interaction and collaboration were central. The representatives of *La Pentola del Drago* also valued the experience, enjoyed engaging with the themes we provided, and suggested that there was potential both to expand on them and to develop new ones in future activities.

The event fulfilled its goal of presenting the project of renovation of *Stazione Dora* and *Giardino Ettore Valli*, its role in the neighborhood and the aspirations it carried for the future, by exploring the same themes addressed the day before, but in an alternative way. The fact that the guided tour and the RPG event were held back-to-back allowed me to draw a direct parallel between two ways of exploring these topics, introducing the *Tavolo* to this alternative method of dissemination and engagement. This approach combined factual and technical aspects with the theoretical insights of anthropology and the empathetic responses elicited by fantastic literature that we had explored the day before,

while also adding additional layers of complexity and enhancing the experience of engaging personally and emotionally with the themes addressed. Indeed, fantastic literature, while creating a certain level of connection, still maintains some distance between the audience's experience and the story and its associated themes – reflecting the balance between familiarity and estrangement discussed in Chapter 3 (see section 3.1) – since the audience plays a more passive role. In RPGs, by contrast, participants fully identify with their characters, embodying them and becoming, on both an emotional and experiential level, the character for the duration of the game. Another key difference between the two forms of expression is that, while literature – even when experienced collectively, as in the guided tour – primarily prompts individual reflection, which may later be shared but is not co-constructed, RPGs are relational by nature, requiring social engagement and collaboration with other players to create the collective storytelling that defines the game. During the conversation I had with Caterina when I interviewed her while we were preparing the event, she emphasized this aspect:

«L'altro punto di forza grandissimo che del GDR è che non è il videogioco, quindi non sto attaccata al computer, alla tv o al cellulare, non sono dissociata dal mondo in senso fisico, concreto, perché il gioco di ruolo prevede proprio che ci si metta intorno a un tavolo con altre persone. Non sei solo, costruisci insieme agli altri. Perciò ha anche un aspetto di socializzazione che è molto importante e che, soprattutto al giorno d'oggi, nella società contemporanea sta proprio venendo a mancare, soprattutto con i ragazzi¹⁵⁶» (C. Agus, personal communication, May 22, 2025).

The relational dimension allows participants to engage with the emotions of others, which in turn influences – among other things – the players' gameplay. In less interactive gaming contexts, this dimension is largely absent. As a result, role-playing games become a powerful tool with applications across many fields, including education, psychological care, social inclusion and community building, socio-emotional learning, and collaborative problem-solving (Garcia-Soriano et al., 2025; Sekhavat et al., 2022). Using RPG as a communicative medium offered a novel way of presenting the initiative – immersing

¹⁵⁶ «Another very great strength of role-playing games is that they are *not* video games, so I'm not glued to the computer, the TV, or my phone; I'm not dissociated from the world in a physical, concrete sense, because role-playing games specifically involve sitting around a table with other people. You're not alone—you build things together with others. Therefore, they also have a socialization aspect that is very important and that, especially nowadays in contemporary society, is really starting to be lost, particularly among young people» (C. Agus, personal communication, May 22, 2025, translation mine).

participants in situations where the project's guiding principles were tangible, influential, and decisive to the unfolding of the story and the resolution of the quests.

Given the mutual interest of the *Tavolo* and *La Pentola* in continuing the collaboration, the organizing team decided to repeat the activity and were able to do so in December 2025 in the context of *Atlante SIAA*¹⁵⁷, a project of the *Società Italiana di Antropologia Applicata* (Italian Society for Applied Anthropology) aimed at supporting and promoting cultural initiatives developed by its members within specific territorial contexts. The project seeks to foster public awareness and understanding of applied and public anthropology, highlighting their social relevance and impact beyond academic settings. Through the co-funding of locally grounded initiatives, *Atlante SIAA* encourages the translation of anthropological knowledge into concrete cultural practices that engage communities, address social issues, and contribute to informed public dialogue¹⁵⁸.

When I contacted Caterina to organize the initiative, she told me that *La Pentola del Drago* was collaborating with other organizations on a new and promising program focused on the use of RPGs in education, *Donne Exempla*®¹⁵⁹. Conceived by the association *Amici dell'Educatore della Provvidenza*¹⁶⁰, in collaboration with *La Pentola* and another recreational and educational association in Turin, *La Compagnia della Fenice*, the project is part of the *Cultura che Cura*® format – a registered initiative that positions culture as a key element in fostering a more equitable and inclusive society. It aims to educate students and citizens in values such as respect, tolerance, and active participation through the medium of role-playing games, (thereby contributing to the fight against all forms of discrimination. Indeed, recent studies highlight the significance of game-based learning, particularly within educational contexts, in promoting students' understanding of and engagement with social issues, while also supporting the development of critical thinking skills and empathy toward others' struggles (Garcia-Soriano et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2024; Sekhavat et al., 2022).

¹⁵⁷ <http://www.antropologiaapplicata.com/2025/12/02/atlane-siaa-gli-eventi-di-novembre-e-dicembre/>, accessed in November 2025.

¹⁵⁸ I would like to take this opportunity to thank SIAA for their contribution and support of the initiative.

¹⁵⁹ <https://www.italiacircolare.it/it-it/donne-exempla-il-gioco-di-ruolo-che-promuove-il-riscatto-sociale-femminile.aspx>, accessed December 2025

¹⁶⁰ <https://www.amiciedp.it/>, accessed in November 2025.

The *Donne Exempla*® Role-Playing Game is centered on true stories of women who have challenged gender prejudice and fought for culture and the right to education – often at great personal risk to their freedom and safety. The game, through its ludic structure, encourages deep reflection on women’s fundamental rights, and challenges the norms and systems that sustain gender-based inequalities. Drawing on an anthropological approach, the game frames these issues across diverse historical and geographical contexts. Its narratives highlight the everyday challenges women face in different cultures, while prompting critical reflection on societal roles, expectations, and forms of oppression and inviting players to confront complex emotions, social tensions, and personal dilemmas. The *Tavolo* has consistently been attentive to gender dynamics and discussions on violence against women – having previously organized events specifically dedicated to these issues, especially through *Il Laboratorio delle Donne* – and when I proposed to once again collaborate on a RPG session, they accepted gladly. We conceived the event both as an opportunity to strengthen the collaboration between the *Tavolo* and *La Pentola del Drago*, exploring new and distinct themes from those addressed previously, and as a chance for them to test their game before introducing it in schools during the second phase of the project, beginning in February 2026.

Donne Exempla®. *Storie di emancipazione femminile tra gioco di ruolo e antropologia pubblica*¹⁶¹ took place on December 13th in Borgo Vittoria, with two groups playing through different stories (Figure 33). One focused on the events surrounding *Boko Haram* and the abduction of hundreds of schoolgirls in Nigeria in 2014. The other scenario, which I chose, was based on the story of Mahsa Amini, a young woman who died in Tehran in 2022 while in the custody of the moral police. Her death sparked widespread civil unrest and protests known globally by the slogan *Woman, Life, Freedom* against the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, highlighting issues of gender-based oppression, state violence, and the struggle for human rights.

In this project, my role was primarily that of a mediator, connecting the heritage community of MUFANT – represented in this case by *La Pentola del Drago* – with the *Tavolo*. Unlike the previous event, I did not work directly on the themes themselves. The somewhat distant positionality I assumed in relation to the game allowed me to experience

¹⁶¹ Translation: *Donne Exempla*®. Stories of Women’s Emancipation between Role-Playing and Public Anthropology.

it from a more external perspective and to witness firsthand the communicative potential of role-playing as a medium. For me personally, it was a deeply emotional and at times disconcerting experience – highly effective, in my view, in creating the opportunity to empathize with a situation that feels completely alien, something I can hardly even conceive of, so far removed from my own personal experience, and that the images in videos or the words in newspapers cannot fully convey. The feedback from the other participants echoed my own reflections. Other positive aspects highlighted included the skill of the game masters in conducting the sessions, the sense of conviviality and active participation that emerged within the play groups, and the potential of using role-playing games as a tool, particularly in educational and school contexts. These aspects also emerged during the interview with Caterina. Reflecting on her experience with *La Pentola del Drago* and RPGs, she told me:

«La potenzialità che ha il gioco di ruolo è che ti aiuta a costruire, a immaginare dei mondi, con una libertà che normalmente non avresti. Hai tantissime potenzialità, quindi ti puoi immaginare veramente di tutto. Ad esempio, quando devi costruire un personaggio, puoi immaginarti una cosa completamente diversa da te. Ed è molto interessante immedesimarsi perché in qualche modo c'è uno sdoppiamento. È un po' come nel teatro, quello nella commedia dell'arte: hai un canovaccio, poi improvvisi, però effettivamente tu interpreti dei ruoli, costruisci dei mondi completi di tutto, perché se vuoi ci metti la geografia, la storia, la società, le religioni, l'economia, i linguaggi. Ti puoi veramente inventare la qualunque. Il gioco di ruolo attraverso questa interpretazione di ruoli ti permette anche di esplorare delle identità diverse, perché tu puoi essere nel gioco un uomo, una donna, puoi essere fluido, puoi essere quello che vuoi, oppure puoi essere un essere non-umano, puoi essere un ibrido: ci sono tantissime possibilità. Quindi ti permette di esplorare relazioni sociali differenti, valori diversi. Ovviamente se costruisci un mondo completamente diverso dal tuo (immaginati i giochi di ruolo a tema distopico) i valori, i sistemi di potere, le relazioni sociali sono completamente diversi. Però secondo me la cosa fighissima è che è un mondo fittizio, quindi tu sei in un contesto protetto: qualsiasi cosa tu faccia lì dentro non avrà nessuna influenza su te stessa o sulle persone che sono intorno al tuo tavolo; quindi, tu hai una libertà di espressione che nel mondo reale e nel mondo primario non hai. Ti dissocia da te, ti permette quindi di metterti delle lenti diverse con cui guardare il mondo. [...] Secondo me il gioco di ruolo lo puoi utilizzare dentro una casa di riposo come in una comunità psichiatrica, come in una comunità per donne vittime di violenza, come in una scuola, come in un centro estivo. È polifunzionale, è molto elastico come strumento, perché

poi puoi utilizzare diversi sistemi di gioco, li puoi adattare in base a quello che vuoi andare a fare¹⁶²» (C. Agus, personal communication, May 22, 2025).

Role Playing Games are one of the many forms of expression of the fantastic, closely connected to this mode from the outset and firmly embedded in the collective imagination through games that are quintessentially fantastic, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. In my analysis so far, although the focus has been more on the conceptual aspects of the fantastic than on the forms it takes, I have drawn my examples mainly from literature, art, and film or television. However, RPGs are also particularly interesting, as they bring together many of the aspects discussed in the previous chapters. Caterina mentioned some of these aspects including: the mechanisms that enable immersion, the adoption of alternative perspectives encouraged by identification with fantastic creatures and characters, and the dynamics of worldbuilding and their connections with anthropology. (Chapter 3); the distancing that allows RPGs to function as a safe space for discussing sensitive issues providing a protected environment in which to experience strong emotions without real-life consequences, to experiment with roles or attitudes that may not belong to us in everyday life and to exercise the ability to imagine otherwise and envision change (Chapter 5); and the high degree of accessibility of RPGs which are designed to be

¹⁶² «The potential of role-playing games lies in the fact that they help you build and imagine worlds with a freedom you normally wouldn't have. You have so many possibilities that you can truly imagine anything at all. For example, when you have to create a character, you can imagine something completely different from yourself. And it's very interesting to step into that role, because in some way there's a kind of doubling. It's a bit like theater like *commedia dell'arte*: you have a rough outline, and then you improvise, but you are effectively playing roles, building entire worlds complete with everything, because if you want you can include geography, history, society, religions, economics, languages. You can really invent absolutely anything. Through this role interpretation, role-playing games also allow you to explore different identities, because in the game you can be a man, a woman, you can be fluid, you can be whatever you want, or you can be a non-human being, you can be a hybrid there are so many possibilities. So it allows you to explore different social relationships and different values. Obviously, if you build a world that is completely different from your own (think of dystopian-themed role-playing games), the values, power systems, and social relationships are completely different. But in my opinion, the really amazing thing is that it's a fictional world, so you're in a protected context: anything you do inside it will have no impact on yourself or on the people sitting around your table. So you have a freedom of expression that you don't have in the real world, in the primary world. It distances you from yourself and therefore allows you to put on different lenses through which to look at the world. [...] In my opinion, role-playing games can be used in a nursing home just as much as in a psychiatric community, in a community for women who are victims of violence, in a school, or in a summer camp. They are multifunctional, very flexible as a tool, because you can then use different game systems and adapt them according to what you want to do» (C. Agus, personal communication, May 22, 2025, translation mine).

inclusive, open to everyone and democratic since every player is called to contribute equally to the game (Chapter 4). In addition, as discussed in relation to the two events we organized, RPGs highlight the communicative potential of the fantastic as an alternative to more conventional languages. They represent a particularly interesting tool in socio-cultural innovation projects, as they allow information and concepts to be disseminated and communicated primarily on an emotional and experiential level, rather than on a purely intellectual one. In this way, RPGs foster empathy and deeper engagement with the themes addressed (Chapter 4). There is also a strong connection to the concept of fun and its role in engaging with complex themes (section 5.2.1). Indeed, fun is a central component of RPGs: even in sessions focused on serious topics, such as those in *Donne Exempla*®, there remains an element of playfulness in embodying a character and exploring a role. No prior acting skills are required, and there is no performative judgment of participants' contributions – there is no “right” or “wrong.” As the game masters emphasized while presenting the project, this educational method intentionally avoids performativity, making it accessible and low-barrier. In short, everyone can participate and benefit from the experience. During our interview Caterina also highlighted an aspect of RPGs that relates directly to anthropology, particularly in games that are socially engaged and designed to educate audiences about socio-cultural phenomena which require careful research to accurately represent the contexts the game master seeks to portray. As she explained:

«Non avendo solo l'aspetto ludico, questi eventi li devi proprio un po' costruire e questo richiede una preparazione di un certo tipo. Io parlavo con Luca Navone, che preparava l'avventura per *Donne Exempla* e mi diceva: “Eh, io mi sono dovuto fare una ricerca storica di un certo tipo perché, uno, dovevo trovare delle biografie per costruire personaggi che fossero reali e avessero degli aspetti reali. Due, dovevo capire come funziona l'Afghanistan o l'Iran o il Pakistan, quindi ti devi documentare. Tre, ti devi immaginare che può succedere di tutto perché magari chi arriva a giocare non ne sa niente e quindi potrebbe dirti delle cose improponibili, e ovviamente devi riuscire a mediare e costruire una roba che abbia un senso”. Quindi un esercizio molto, molto bello¹⁶³» (C. Agus, personal communication, May 22, 2025).

¹⁶³ «Since these events don't have only a ludic aspect, you really have to build them carefully, and that requires a certain kind of preparation. I was talking with Luca Navone, who was preparing the adventure for *Donne Exempla*, and he was telling me: ‘Well, I had to do a fairly in-depth historical research because, first, I had to find biographies to create characters that were real and had realistic traits. Second, I had to understand how Afghanistan or Iran or Pakistan work, so you have to study and document yourself. Third, you have to imagine

In the case of *La Pentola del Drago*, Caterina's presence and anthropological background is strategic in this sense.

The two RPG events and the collaboration between the *Tavolo* and *La Pentola* represented compelling examples of how MUFANT can play an active role within their neighborhoods through dedicated community engagement initiatives, connecting diverse realities that together form part of their heritage community. The pool of contacts provided by MUFANT's community offered me a strong starting point for establishing potentially fruitful relationships, positioning the museum as an important contact zone and relational hub with the capacity to connect different realities that could work well together (Clifford, 1997; Morse, 2020; O'Neill & Hooper, 2020). Nevertheless, merely providing the potential for connections is not sufficient and must be complemented by targeted institutional efforts, often involving the employment of a dedicated broker or mediator – myself in this case – to effectively manage community engagement. A specific figure within the staff that can act on behalf of the museum on the territory is most of the time necessary because it is a task that requires a lot of time and effort. As community librarian S. G. explained during our interview:

«It's a lot of work and it takes a very long time and one of the things that are so important to think about is it's not that it takes a lot of time at once, it's not that you have to spend 8 hours in one day to connect with groups, but you may need to e-mail them eight times or try and call them 18 times. Some of my best partnerships have taken 18 months to make» (P32SG, personal communication, September 11, 2024).

The first step is to establish connections both with and among the different realities operating within the territory, as well as those that may be interested in engaging in it in the future. This can be achieved through various approaches: during my collaboration with MUFANT I did it by identifying opportunities for collaboration based on the assets that the realities within the museum's pool of contacts, as well as my personal ones, could offer one another, and that were compatible with the specific projects the *Tavolo* was working on. I also welcomed and facilitated direct collaboration requests from Ferruccio and Roberto,

that anything can happen, because maybe the people who come to play know nothing about it, and so they might say completely unworkable things, and obviously you have to be able to mediate and build something that makes sense.' So it's a very, very beautiful exercise» (C. Agus, personal communication, May 22, 2025, translation mine).

connecting realities already working together within the *Tavolo* with others that provided support or added value through their expertise, such as MUFANT and *La Pentola*; building on existing connections, expanding them, and contributing additional resources or perspectives. I implemented a combination of these strategies at different stages, which aligned with what my interlocutors in Canada highlighted during our interviews as essential in their professional experience:

«For some of the initiatives, like with the “Heart of the City” festival, we're meeting with new partners and long-standing partners by invitation: sometimes it comes from us, sometimes we hear what they're doing or we start from a request from them of something that they're interested in doing» (S. Walling, personal communication, October 22, 2024).

«When it comes to approaching the people I work with, I like to engage in all different kinds of communities, so, just out of curiosity, I join or volunteer or go to the certain meetings and make connections. There are plenty of communities that I'm in contact with, and sometimes the projects come to me: “Keiko, I'd like to collaborate”» (K. Honda, personal communication, August 18, 2024).

«To connect with different groups we sometimes piggyback off other organizations and we partner and we work to make those reciprocal, but then we get to know the people» (P32SG, personal communication, September 11, 2024).

Once these relationships are established, the next phase of a broker's work involves deeply understanding the subjects they are working with – their needs, potential, and what they can offer to possible partners. Getting to know the realities that MUFANT aimed to connect with on the territory was essential, as it allowed me to select the most suitable matches within its network of contacts based on the *Tavolo*'s interests and needs. This was arguably the most important aspect of the work, as it formed the foundation for determining how the partnership could proceed effectively. Only after this knowledge was sufficiently consolidated was I able to begin weaving relationships and establishing collaborations. This is reflected in what Keiko Honda explained when I interviewed her:

«I will try to find the skills and passions of the community members and try to match them with a project or pairing with those of others that are looking for something. If we look at the community from a distance, it seems to be really hard to approach, but when you start having a conversation, that's number one, then you will find that everyone has a story, everyone has certain aspirations, creativities, so I try to, not necessarily categorized, but keep in mind everybody's strengths. It's called a BCD, asset-based community development and it works by categorizing who has this skill, who

has this question, who's looking for opportunities» (K. Honda, personal communication, August 18, 2024).

In the case of the events in collaboration with *La Pentola* and the *Tavolo*, after getting to know both realities, I began to try to identify and seize the best opportunity to create a connection and develop a joint initiative, combining the methods, focuses, and objectives of the two distinct communities, united by their prior connection to MUFANT. This opportunity arose on the occasion of *GePA Days*, as the themes we were working on, the potential use of the *Stazione Dora* space, and the willingness of the people involved to try a co-developed experience all aligned. For the event, we as a team used a format that *La Pentola* already knew and used regularly, adapting it to the specific context of Borgo Vittoria. By drawing directly on each other's knowledge and combining them through my mediation, we were able to leverage the assets of both sides and create a rich experience, building on the prior expertise and know-how contributed by both parties and shared collectively. Once the initial connection was established and the first collaboration proved successful, both communities expressed interest in working together again.

A couple of months passed before we could find the right opportunity for a second joint event. In the meantime, I maintained contact with both *La Pentola* and the *Tavolo*, and we even held a catch-up meeting to share our post-event impressions and start brainstorming ideas for the next collaboration. The maintenance of these relationships by the broker is, in fact, a central aspect of community engagement strategies. As discussed in Chapter 2, the connections established between different entities remain meaningful only as long as collaboration continues in practice; without ongoing engagement, the relationship – though it may exist on paper – effectively ceases to be active, and the entities involved can no longer, *de facto*, be considered a community of practice. This maintenance work is an ongoing process that must continue even when no active collaborative projects are in place, in anticipation of the right opportunity to work together, leveraging the connections that have been established and maintained. In our case, this occurred in November 2025, when it was time to work on the activity for *Atlante SIAA*, which I identified as the ideal opportunity to reaffirm our collaboration. I reached out to *La Pentola* and the *Tavolo*, and together we began planning the *Donne Exempla*® event.

Ultimately community engagement practices are based on connections, on establishing them, building them and maintaining them. As explained during our interview

by Zoe Dill, manager of the “Dialogue & Expression” team at Hart House at the University of Toronto:

«My role revolves a lot around making those connections: either nurturing community relationships or maintaining the ones that we have or finding out how we can serve community and how students can make that connection. And then other larger scale initiatives that the university is undertaking. A lot of times when we're working with students, it's about what their interests are and how best to facilitate and amplify their interests with the connections that we could make or already have made. So, we might have those connections or help with some of the research or bring in organizations that do that kind of work. And then, at least at the management level in my team, we all come with our own set of networks and connections, our own interests, our own sort of database of people» (D. Zoe, personal communication, September 19, 2024).

This process of connection-making requires a significant investment of time and is neither automatic nor mechanical. It does not follow a rigid scheme; rather, it is as fluid and adaptable as the relationships it seeks to nurture. Each relationship demands a tailored approach, with adjustments to the language, strategies, and methods employed. In the words shared by Savannah Walling in our interview:

«The kind of research that's needed varies with each project, but every single project involves a lot of depth, of time preparing. Some of the projects end up seeding or feeding other projects along the way» (S. Walling, personal communication, October 22, 2024).

This must be done not only with a single entity but with all the ones one aims to connect, which entails building relationships with a diverse range of stakeholders. This is also a reciprocal activity, one that all the entities involved are engaged in themselves, which in turn further expands the possibilities for establishing relationships. The *Tavolo*, for example, operates by facilitating communication among its members and the associations they represent, as well as with the local territory, residents, and institutions. In this context, I became involved through my connection to MUFANT, bringing with me all the contacts that are part of its heritage community. Networks can grow quite large, making them sometimes challenging to manage, but also exceptionally rich in potential. Furthermore, as with the *Tavolo* and *La Pentola*, a single connection can lead to multiple collaborations.

Overall, the more connections a museum is able to cultivate, and the more continuous these relationships are, the greater the opportunities to identify ideal occasions for collaboration.



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30



Figure 31



Figure 32

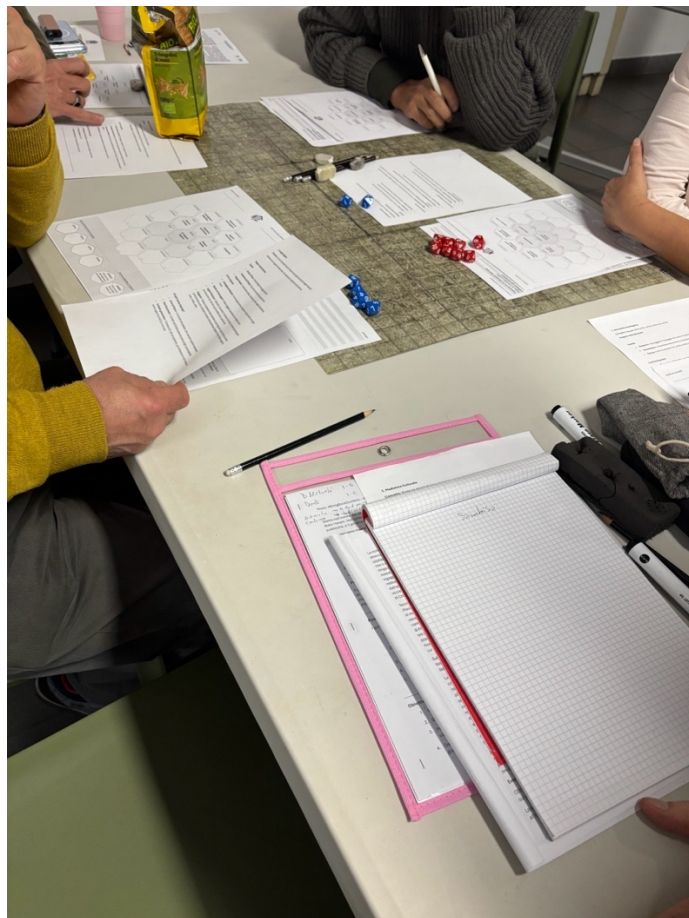


Figure 33

Conclusions

In concluding this dissertation, I return to its guiding questions: whether the intangible heritage of the fantastic can be understood as a tool for socio-cultural innovation when viewed through an anthropological lens, and how this understanding can be translated into practice within the context of MUFANT.

Throughout this research, I have addressed these questions by considering multiple nuances and levels of analysis, ranging from theoretical reflections on the nature of the fantastic and its relationship with anthropology, to an examination of its languages and the characteristics that make them effective both for communicating academic knowledge and for engaging with social issues and questions of representation, especially in the context of postcolonial fantastic fiction. Finally, the research has explored the potential of the fantastic when integrated into community engagement practices.

I considered several forms of expression and cultural traditions, focusing on how they perceive, interpret, and mobilize the intangible heritage of the fantastic. By foregrounding postcolonial experiences, I aimed to broaden the analytical frame and include perspectives that more accurately reflect the complexity of this field. Within these contexts, the fantastic emerges as a space in which creativity and imagination intersect with questions of social justice, representation, and self-determination. It operates not only as a form of entertainment, but also as a means of critique, social connection, and collective meaning-making, offering ways to negotiate inequalities, articulate experiences of the past and present, and imagine alternative futures within and through community.

I observed these phenomena across different contexts, starting with MUFANT, taking advantage of some opportunities for engagement in Europe through exhibitions and conferences, and then engaging with the perspectives of experts I met in Canada, as well as with the cultural and institutional realities I encountered there. I carried out this research by combining different approaches and methods, learning through direct observation and participation alongside other forms of inquiry, such as conversations, question-based exchanges, and interviews.

At MUFANT, I engaged with experts and enthusiasts, attended presentations, events, lectures, and debates, and followed the museum's work closely, contributing whenever and however I could. This included helping with laboratories and informational panels, assisting in the setup of exhibitions – most notably the *Hic sunt Dracones*.

*L'irresistibile ascesa della fantascienza cinese*¹⁶⁴ exhibition, for which I assembled two Lego models – and managing interactions with the many guests passing through the museum, whom I was able to meet and, in some cases, bombard with questions. I also took part in organizing events, especially for *AnthroDay*.

In Canada, I met authors, artists, and scholars, talking and interviewing them to learn about their perspectives on the fantastic, what it means to them, and how they work with it. I visited museums, art galleries, libraries, and other cultural institutions that dedicate significant effort to engaging with people and communities. Through these experiences, I learned how they address some of the most pressing social issues in Canadian society, including reconciliation between the government and First Nations, socio-economic inequalities among minorities and marginalized groups, and urgent challenges such as housing and health concerns like addiction, and how they use the cultural heritage they represent to engage with these issues. I also developed relationships with professionals in the field who supported me through suggestions, guidance, and simply by listening when I shared my work at MUFANT and Borgo Vittoria and my research goals. Jill Weaving and Keiko Honda were especially important in this regard. Keiko, in particular, offered me the opportunity to share my research with her community, receiving feedback and experimenting with formats that I later adapted and used in Turin.

Alongside this empirical work, I read a substantial body of fantastic fiction – primarily by non-Western authors, as well as key contributions by mostly women writers within the canon – which helped shape and refine my understanding of the fantastic. I also collected reading suggestions along the way, including works recommended by many of the authors I interviewed, which allowed me to engage more directly with the perspectives of the people I met in the field. Although this mode has long been part of my personal and intellectual path, these encounters, together with the discovery of new subgenres, writers, and artists, deepened and broadened my perspective in significant ways.

Finally, I translated the knowledge I had acquired into practice in Borgo Vittoria. This phase was especially prominent in the latter part of the research, when I put myself to the test by collaborating with the *Tavolo* and some of the association related to it to create something new – hopefully innovative. Overall, we achieved the results we had hoped for,

¹⁶⁴ Translation: *Hic Sunt Dracones: The Unstoppable Rise of Chinese Science Fiction* <https://www.mufant.it/2023/12/01/hic-sunt-dracones/>, accessed in November 2025.

showing through practice that MUFANT can strengthen its presence in Borgo Vittoria and play a meaningful role within its community. The process was often challenging, but also enjoyable and ultimately very rewarding.

Indeed, I faced some issues that I could not address in any way other than acknowledging them and “staying with the trouble,” as Donna Haraway would say. One of these challenges was participation: the events we organized in Borgo Vittoria consistently attracted a certain number of attendees, and while my goal was never simply to count heads, it must be acknowledged that the audience was far from diverse. Most of the time, participants were the same people already active in the community life of Borgo Vittoria, particularly through the *Tavolo*, or individuals connected to them. Only rarely did people from outside these circles attend or become involved. Engaging people who are not already interested in this type of activity is challenging, especially in contemporary society, where time and energy for non-obligatory pursuits are limited. While community engagement practices must remain attentive to this reality, I firmly believe that, as professionals and cultural institutions, the most we can do is provide opportunities for participation. Creating something for people to engage with is the first step in offering them the chance to participate in ways that feel meaningful and comfortable. The value of these efforts does not lie in the final outcome, in the number of participants, or in the extent of their contributions – but in the process that leads to the moment when people are able to engage. Take *CarnevAlien*, for example: the success of the initiative was not measured by the complexity of the costumes created by the children and by us, the spectacle of the parade, or the number of attendees. It’s true value lay in the encounters, reflections, collaborations, creativity, and relationships that unfolded throughout the process. An aspect that emerged repeatedly through this research is how community engagement is much more process-oriented than result-oriented. Of course, this may sound abstract and does not fully satisfy the quantitative criteria of evaluation often applied to such activities, which tend to operate with a production-like mindset – treating cultural engagement as if it were equivalent to the production of material goods or economic growth. But the point is precisely this: community engagement is not the same. The processes, objectives, methods, and impacts on people and communities are fundamentally different. Engaging with people takes time, and there is no standard approach that can be applied blindly or universally. Citing Zoe Dille: «There's no sort of hard science to this, there's no formula to it, because it's about relationships, which are complicated and change» (D. Zoe, personal communication,

September 19, 2024). People are the focus, and because they are diverse, the methods and strategies to involve them must be adapted to the specific context of intervention and adjusted as the context evolves, or depending on the type of event or initiative being developed. This requires time, consistency, adaptability, and commitment.

As a relational activity grounded in qualitative principles, community engagement cannot be driven by the same interests that guide other activities within cultural institutions – or production enterprises more broadly. The outcome will likely not yield direct economic benefits. It may bring some prestige or the opportunity to be recognized as relevant within the cultural landscape, but ultimately, the justification for dedicating resources and effort to community engagement lies in the desire to provide people with a space—both physical and figurative – where they can contribute to the collective life of their communities. Furthermore, this engagement can serve as a first step toward involving people in other activities of the institution. Once a relationship between the institution and its communities is established, it can become the foundation for any type of engagement, provided that the work of maintaining it continues. Museums, in particular, should aspire to this.

In practical terms, this requires someone willing and capable of establishing, developing, and maintaining relationships with the local territory – someone tasked with continuously assessing the community's needs and determining how the museum can respond, seizing opportunities for collaboration by building on existing projects, responding to the requests of local actors, or creating new opportunities when possible, all while keeping in mind what is feasible at a given time and aligned with the institution's mission.

While I firmly believe that the presence of someone in this position at MUFANT might positively contribute to its community engagement outcomes, some potentially problematic dynamics may arise and need to be addressed. In relation to my experience while performing the role of broker for the museum during my collaboration and fieldwork, I often found myself confronting discrepancies between the role I was expected to perform, the one I was effectively performing, and the way I was perceived by the actors involved. In Borgo Vittoria, I believe I ultimately remained perceived more as an anthropologist who gradually introduced the discipline to the neighborhood, rather than as a collaborator of MUFANT. In practice, the work we carried out with the *Tavolo* involved a significant input from museum staff; however, in the perception of the people involved in the projects, I believe it was not as present as it actually was, despite being always credited. The fact that

MUFANT is generally closely associated with its directors – who could not, of course, be present at every stage and often needed to delegate – contributed to a perception of discontinuity between the museum and the activities being developed. This dynamic is likely linked to the strong personal imprint of Davide and Silvia, which, although fundamental, can also hinder the broader perception of MUFANT as a collective of people and a consistently present actor in the territory, particularly when they are not able to participate directly in activities. Overall, though, we achieved the results we had hoped for, showing through practice that MUFANT can strengthen its presence in Borgo Vittoria and play a meaningful role within its community.

In conclusion, implementing community engagement strategies within MUFANT's activities would allow the museum to align with the growing expectations for cultural institutions to enhance their social role within their territories and have a meaningful impact on the communities they serve. Such strategies would enable the museum to shape how it is perceived in the neighborhood, bringing it closer to and integrating it within the local social fabric, while also facilitating the participation of Borgo Vittoria's residents and organizations in the heritage community of the fantastic that has formed around MUFANT – a community to which they could contribute actively. We demonstrated that this is possible, but also that it requires significant work and commitment, and that the museum must carefully consider if, when, through whom, and how it can offer such engagement. I believe that through the experiences of my practice-based research, the seeds that MUFANT had already planted in Borgo Vittoria in previous years have begun to sprout, and I also see potential to continue nurturing these relationships. I look forward to seeing how they develop, and I hope that my contribution has helped to support this process.

But did I find, through all of this, an answer to my question – can the intangible heritage of the fantastic foster socio-cultural innovation? In the most typical anthropological fashion, I would say: partially.

I do believe that the fantastic can be a powerful and innovative tool, with unique characteristics that distinguish it from more established means. In my view, it has the potential to align the communication of knowledge and the inspiration of change with the languages that people understand, seek out, and enjoy – languages that can set things into motion, mobilize people, and make change happen. It is a means that may encourage critical thinking, foster new perspectives, and cultivate a sense of empathy even for what is different, new, or alien – an empathy that contemporary society, dominated by the logics

of capitalism, exploitation, oppression, and division, so desperately needs. And what better way to reconnect people with their empathy, their humanity, than through something as inherently human as imagination?

Yes, the fantastic can inspire socio-cultural innovation, but it is not sufficient on its own. I do not claim that it provides a universal solution or that everyone's life could be improved through this approach. Rather, I believe it can contribute meaningfully by shaping, sustaining, and giving expression to processes of transformation. Like museum exhibitions, art, music, and every other form of creative expression, the fantastic does not create change in isolation; rather, it can act as a catalyst within broader social dynamics that are already in motion. Meaningful change rarely occurs suddenly or as the result of a single intervention – it emerges over time through the interaction of multiple forces. In this sense, the fantastic can give form to ideas and experiences that are otherwise difficult to articulate – fears, traumas, hopes, as well as human connection, community, and relationships. It can help highlight marginalized voices and push existing ideas, tensions, or desires just beyond a threshold, participating in broader societal efforts rather than replacing them. Without engagement from the larger community and supportive social structures, its impact remains limited. But when embedded within these contexts, it can play a significant and valuable role.

The last question I would like to address is: what's next?

I do not consider this dissertation as the conclusion of my exploration of the anthropology of the fantastic, nor of its possible practical applications within museums and cultural institutions. Rather, I see it as a starting point – a first mapping of the potential of this medium and the opportunities it opens up. What I have uncovered is not so much definitive answers as a new set of questions: What more can be done? What remains to be explored? In how many directions can this path lead? What new connections can it help establish? Indeed, throughout these three years, I encountered many topics and experiences that, while I didn't have the chance to explore fully, nonetheless enriched my understanding of this research. For example, the dynamics within fandoms and groups of enthusiasts of fantastic fiction fascinated me. Each form – whether videogames, board games, theatre, dance, music, comics, cosplay, or craftsmanship – offers unique ways of seeing, expressing, and representing the fantastic, each with countless stories waiting to be uncovered.

Furthermore, the intersections between anthropology and the fantastic open up a vast landscape of themes that invite deeper exploration – from nature and time to climate,

diversity, conflict, and hope. Pop culture, in all its dimensions, also emerged as a powerful force shaping both individual and collective understandings, and I found myself drawn to the evolving dynamics of representation within the fantastic and popular media over time.

Equally compelling was witnessing the growing presence and influence of women, BIPOC, and marginalized groups within these fields. Their unique contributions are not only reshaping the landscape of fantastic fiction but also transforming social dynamics more broadly. A further theme of research might focus on the specific context of movements like Afrofuturism and Indigenous futurisms, and their role in shaping cultural expression, social innovation, and visions of alternative futures. I was also intrigued by the relationship between creative innovation and technological advancement – how technology and fantastic fiction influence and inspire each other in an ongoing dialogue.

Beyond these thematic reflections, I found the potential of using the fantastic as a practical tool within museums and cultural institutions to be especially compelling and promising – and it was also well received by the audience.

This journey also led me to explore methodologies I hope to delve into further – such as art-based research, a/r/tography (Irwin et al., 2024; R. L. Irwin, personal communication, December 19, 2024), and practice-based research, the latter becoming a vital part of my project and marking my first engagement with applied anthropology. At the heart of all this is the theme of participation – the ways in which museums can become places where people feel genuinely welcome and motivated to engage. I kept coming back to the idea that museums should be integral parts of the communities they serve, spaces that belong to everyone, not just those who “understand” the heritage on display. The challenge, then, is to foster environments where diverse voices can connect, contribute, and feel truly at home.

In the case of MUFANT and its relationship with the *Tavolo* and Borgo Vittoria, there are countless possibilities for action, starting from the potential offered by a deeper exploration of the relationship between the fantastic and the urban setting in which both are situated. This context is rich in potential connections and sources of inspiration, which in turn may open the way to further collaborations and projects. Another area worth exploring in the future is the relationship with minority groups within the neighborhood – an interaction that currently tends to be distant and sometimes marked by suspicion and even conflict, but which could transform into something truly enriching for the entire community. I believe that the languages of the fantastic could help bridge this gap, and that

MUFANT might play a pivotal role in facilitating this connection. Indeed, the groundwork for initiatives in this direction already exists, and the exhibition on Chinese science fiction was a notable first step, offering a compelling representation of Chinese culture through the evolution of its science fiction. Nevertheless, as I discussed during our interview with Xin Wang, who contributed to the exhibition with an artwork, further progress could be made by including more diverse voices and the perspectives of the people represented. Xin commented:

«Secondo me il modo in cui è stata rappresentata la cultura cinese, dal punto di vista dell'allestimento, è giusto e anche dal punto di vista dei discorsi dei professori che sono venuti per parlare di diverse informazioni su questo campo. Però secondo me sono mancate delle persone che venissero dall'Asia per presentare la propria cultura. Mi è piaciuto molto il discorso di Ai-Lian però per esempio si poteva fare un approfondire tra diversi professionisti, tra diverse persone esperte su questa cultura, su questo studio. Può essere una situazione più interessante¹⁶⁵» (X. Wang, personal communication, February 28, 2024).

The museum itself is constantly evolving and changing; it's a matter of observing which extraterrestrial or infratemporal dimensions it will explore next – perhaps continuing to reserve space for anthropological reflection.

What I take from this experience, more than anything, is the power and importance of connections.

Connections between an academic discipline like anthropology and a mode like the fantastic – one largely unknown to most people, the other so deeply embedded in everyday life that it is sometimes invisible. Yet one can help make the other visible.

Connections between people and stories: how individuals relate their own experiences to those of characters, and how these narratives allow them to connect with

¹⁶⁵ «In my opinion, the way Chinese culture was represented, from the perspective of the exhibition setup, is appropriate, and also from the perspective of the lectures given by the professors, who shared various information about this field. However, I think there was a lack of people from Asia presenting their own culture. I really liked Ai-Lian's talk, but for example, it would have been possible to go more in-depth with different professionals, with various experts on this culture and this field of study. That could make for a more interesting experience» (X. Wang, personal communication, February 28, 2024, translation mine).

others. How such connections can teach readers and observers to see the world from different perspectives, shaping real socio-cultural dynamics and relationships.

Connections across temporal dimensions – past, present, and future – that continuously communicate and influence one another, forming part of the lived experience of both individuals and collectives.

Connections between institutions and the territories in which they operate: the relationships they create, facilitate, struggle to establish, or successfully maintain; the links that emerge between different realities sharing a space – whether physical or virtual. These connections are both the goal and the challenge of community engagement, and they are precisely what museums can catalyze.

And finally – but by no means least – connections between people. Connections that range from the formal to the playful, from antipathy and division to friendship, from the need to come together to face challenges to the desire to share a goal and build something collaboratively. Some connections have always existed, waiting simply to be recognized; others must be cultivated and nurtured. Some arrive as expected, others as surprises. In the context of MUFANT and Borgo Vittoria, these connections are tangible: the relationships that existed, those we built together, those within the *Tavolo*, and those internal to the museum itself.

Equally meaningful to me are the connections with my PhD colleagues and friends in Italy, the bonds forged in Canada, and the inspiring professional and personal experiences I encountered along the way – relationships I deeply cherish. In a sense, all of these threads trace back to the *Parco del Fantastico* in November 2022, where many of them began to take shape.

These connections have given me much, and I am certain they still have more to offer. Sometimes, they require a little imagination to be seen – but once uncovered, they can open countless opportunities for growth, collaboration, and shared experience.

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Appendix I: List of interviews

- Interview 1, Marco Tursi, March 1, 2023, Torino.
- Interview 2, Davide Monopoli, April 1, 2023, Torino.
- Interview 3, Davide Monopoli, May 3, 2023, Torino.
- Interview 4, Antonello Raciti, May 12, 2023, Torino.
- Interview 5, Cristina Viano, September 19, 2023, Torino.
- Interview 6, Antonello Raciti, October 19, 2023, Torino.
- Interview 7, Gianfranco Roselli, November 9, 2023, Torino.
- Interview 8, Roberto Orlandini, November 29, 2023, Torino.
- Interview 9, Roberto Orlandini e Giorgio Faccenda, December 20, 2023, Torino.
- Interview 10, Paola Berzano, January 23, 2024, Torino.
- Interview 11, Valentina Poli, February 1, 2024, Torino.
- Interview 12, Giuseppe Ciconga, February 12, 2024, Torino.
- Interview 13, Giorgio Faccenda, February 23, 2024 Torino.
- Interview 14, Sihuxin Wang, February 28, 2024, Torino.
- Interview 15, Davide Monopoli and Silvia Casolari, March 14, 2024, Torino.
- Interview 16, Paola Ravizzotti and Silvio di Nunzio, March 20, 2024, Torino.
- Interview 17, Kyle Poli, March 21, 2024, Torino.
- Interview 18, Martina Galasso, April 5, 2024, Torino.
- Interview 19, Paola Concadoro, April 9, 2024, Torino.
- Interview 20, Hana Amani, July 9, 2024, Vancouver.
- Interview 21, Rhys Edwards, July 23, 2024, Surrey.
- Interview 22, P20CDM, July 25, 2024, Surrey.
- Interview 23, Nalo Hopkinson, August 9, 2024, Vancouver.
- Interview 24, jil p. weaving, August 14, 2024, Vancouver.
- Interview 25, Keiko Honda, August 18, 2024, Vancouver.
- Interview 26, Andy Everson, August 22, 2024, Comox (online).
- Interview 27, jil p. weaving, August 23, 2024, Vancouver.
- Interview 28, Drew Hayden Taylor, August 26, 2024, Toronto (online).
- Interview 29, Daniel Heath Justice, August 27, 2024, Vancouver.
- Interview 30, Shelly Roseblum and Naomi Sawada, August 28, 2024, Vancouver.
- Interview 31, Rory Wakemup, August 29, 2024, Saint Paul, Minnesota (online).

Interview 32, Shirish Rao, August 30, 2024, Vancouver.

Interview 33, Sonny Assu, September 2, 2024, Campbell River (online).

Interview 34, P32SG, September 11, 2024, Vancouver.

Interview 35, Bernie Perley, September 12, 2024, Vancouver.

Interview 36, Saks Afridi, September 16, 2024, New York (online).

Interview 37, Biz Nijdam, September 17, 2024, Vancouver.

Interview 38, Zoe Dille, September 19, 2024, Toronto (online).

Interview 39, Biz Nijdam, October 9, 2024, Vancouver.

Interview 40, Quentin VerCetty , October 14, 2024, Toronto (online).

Interview 41, David Gaertner, October 15, 2024, Vancouver.

Interview 42, Jennifer Kramer, October 17, 2024, Vancouver.

Interview 43, P40SR, October 21, 2024, Toronto (online).

Interview 44, Savannah Walling, October 22, 2024, Vancouver.

Interview 45, Adeerya Johnson, October 23, 2024, Seattle (online).

Interview 46, Rita Irwin, December 19, 2024, Vancouver (online).

Interview 47, Caterina Agus, May 22, 2025, Torino.

Interview 48, Chiara Saroglia, May 28, 2025, Torino.

Appendix II: CarnevAlien Laboratory guide



Laboratory "CarnevAlien"

Directions:

The proposed activity aims to encourage children to reflect on the theme of diversity in its many forms through the example of certain characters typical of fantasy narratives. For each type we have associated a brief reflection on the kind of diversity it represents, while trying to leave room for the interpretation and imagination of the children. Each child will be able to choose the character that inspires her the most, that she admires the most, or with whom she feels she shares her own experience of diversity. Ideally, we imagine leaving as much space as possible for the children's free interpretation, allowing them to rework the categories as they see fit, blending the characteristics of one with those of another to give life to their own unique characters. We would then very much like the girls and boys to tell us about their work, explaining how they used and interpreted the suggested examples and the motivations that guided them in their choices.

Carnevale is a special time of the year when we can be whoever we want. We can transform ourselves into our favorite characters—those who inspire us, those we admire, but also those who resemble us the most. It's the right moment to put ourselves in other people's shoes and have fun with our masks, but Carnevale is also an opportunity to reflect on diversity by asking ourselves: what does it mean to be different, and how does it make us feel? In what ways are we different, and from whom? What are the beautiful aspects of diversity, and which are the more difficult ones? We can try to answer these questions by putting ourselves in the shoes of the fantastic characters we like the most or in whom we recognize ourselves. Here are some examples that we can find at the Museum of Fantasy and Science Fiction in Turin.

Alien

The alien is the best example when it comes to the otherness: it comes from far away and explores deep space, eventually arriving on our planet. What does it want from us? Will it be good or evil? Some aliens are different from us, but they are curious to understand what we are like and to find common



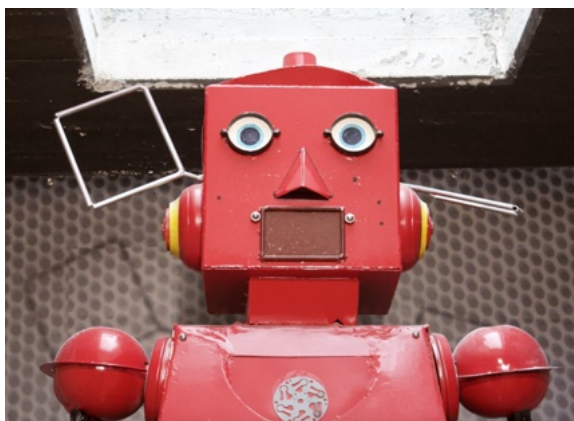
Monster

The monster represents the frightening kind of “different,” one that scares us because of its appearance, but that sometimes turns out to be more misunderstood than truly dangerous.



Robot

The robot is different because it is not human; it is a machine created by humans and is thought not to have feelings—but is that always really the case?



Superheroine and Superhero

The superheroine and the superhero represent a powerful and beloved form of difference. Everyone would like to be as strong as superheroines and superheroes and protect those who need it, but they too have weaknesses and sometimes need help.



Witch and Wizard

It would be wonderful to change the world with a magical touch. Witches and wizards can do this, and that makes them different from us: is their magic the result of a mysterious gift or of long apprenticeship? In any case, magical power requires great responsibility and sometimes gets out of hand.



Dragon

It looks like an ancient dinosaur, or a great serpent. The dragon frightens us because it is a different and ferocious beast; yet in some countries, such as China, it is a symbol of wisdom, a benevolent creature that brings good fortune and wealth.



Werewolf

Some animals are wild and different from us, but deep down it is precisely for this reason that we would like to be like them. Putting ourselves in the wolf's shoes allows us to bring out the anger that we sometimes feel in our hearts and to vent it, so that we can then return to being calmer.



Cyborg

The cyborg is different because not all of its parts are made of flesh; some are mechanical or electronic. By modifying its own body, it gains new strengths or abilities that it did not have before: is it



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