

# Queer Futures: Correlations between queer identity and imagination literacy

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**Abstract:** Futures thinking, and doing, has been the domain of the privileged majority for centuries. The very idea of ‘the future’ (singular) was fundamental to the creation and maintenance of imperial domination and technological modernity. To this day, mainstream media readily emits the narrow and repetitive science fiction tropes void of (realistic, fair) representation of a wider inclusive society, specifically absent of queerness. This paper builds on the work of Alexis Lothian’s ‘Old Futures: speculative fiction and queer possibility’ in which she explores the forces queer people (and other marginalised communities) invoke when they dream up alternative futures as a way of transforming the present. To do so, the author presents findings from an anonymized global study of the correlations between queer identity and imagination literacy. Addressing the questions - how does identity inform our ability to imagine the future and the content of those imagined futures?

**Keywords:** queer; imagination literacy; futures; speculative design

## Context

Historically, mainstream projections of the future have been conceived, told, and sold by those who hold the power and privilege. The privilege of education and acceptance, the privilege to tell a story, the privilege to have your voice heard. The privilege to speculate and dictate are visibly evident through narratives, characterization, plotlines, and cinematography. To this day, mainstream media - created, powered, funded, and delivered largely by the privileged majority – readily emits the same science fiction tropes void of (realistic, fair) representation of a wider inclusive society. While the narrative act of imagining the future receives little attention in queer scholarship, queerness in design and speculative futures is gaining traction. Alexis Lothian’s ‘Old Futures: speculative fiction and queer possibility’ sets about asking “what imagined futures mean for those away from whom futurity is distributed: oppressed populations and deviant individuals, who are denied access to the future by



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dominant imaginaries, but who work against oppression by dreaming of new possibility” (Lothian, 2018). This paper provides first-person reflective experiences and insights into relationships between individual identity, ability to imagine the future, and the content of those visions.

“If you are trans or non-binary, or identify as female, two-spirited, Black or Africana, a person of colour, Indigenous, disabled, queer, pansexual, bisexual, homosexual, asexual, intersex, non-monogamous, neurodiverse or other, there is an exceedingly high chance that you do not see your image reflected back. This cavernous lack of diverse representation is not only a clear and yet devastating reflection of society, but its decades of absence is wreaking havoc with the collective ability to be (and feel) heard, valued, relevant and, ultimately, to imagine futures in which we exist, let alone in an equitable or desirable fashion. To put it more succinctly, if you identify more deeply with the liminal spaces of human existence, or have ever felt ‘othered’, you’re most likely not represented in a conception of the future meant to represent a more widely accepted, falsely classified as ‘mainstream’, depiction of the future (Barton, 2022).”

Queer can be read through adjective, verb, and noun. Queer as *adjective* – a non-conventional positionality, *other*. Queer as *verb* - to look at things at their core, to question, explore limits, biases and boundaries, elasticities – to examine assumptions. Queer as *noun* – an individual who is otherwise, not heterosexual. Queer identifying people are in the minority around the world, a marginalized community, whose existence was historically denied, and whose rights are minimal and continue to be eroded daily. Jason Tester in his research ‘Queer the Future’ is a leading voice in preparing LGBTQ+ people to survive and thrive in the next decades and beyond. His important work focuses on anticipating the future forces that will disproportionately impact LGBTQ+ people and creating future narratives that centre thriving queer and transgender lives (Tester, Feb 2021).

We are often told that ‘*you cannot be, what you cannot see*’ - this statement is both powerful and true. But apply some pressure, sprinkle some criticality, and dig a little deeper. Define ‘see’ in this context... see in your workplace? See in society? See on the internet? See in the movies? OR see in your dreams? See in your in mind? See in your imagination? See in your future? See in your creations? Beyond visibility in society, this ability to conjure up visions of difference, of progress, of outright rebellion, this ‘imagination literacy’ and ‘scenario visioning’ is, queer hope, is and has been a lifeline for many. It can be said to be the evolutionary survival instinct of an historically and systematically marginalized community.

Defining Imagination Literacy is complex as it the (re)creational aspects of imagining have obvious theoretical alignments with queer-ing practices, contributing to its resistance to definition! You'll find the odd reference to imagination literacy on podcasts, social media channels and panel discussion recordings with largely similar interpretations. Imagination Literacy is not to be confused with Futures Literacy, which UNESCO describes as “understanding why and how we use the future to prepare, plan, and interact with the complexity and novelty of our societies”(https://www.unesco.org/en/futures-literacy). Imagination Literacy is the ability to form new ideas, sensations, feelings, thoughts, images or concepts not currently present to the senses. Typically exercised for enjoyment, creativity, critique, hope or

survival this often involves the re-reading, re-creating, hacking, de-constructing, re-construction, other-ing of previous and existing experiences into new scenarios and visions as yet not wholly perceived in reality.

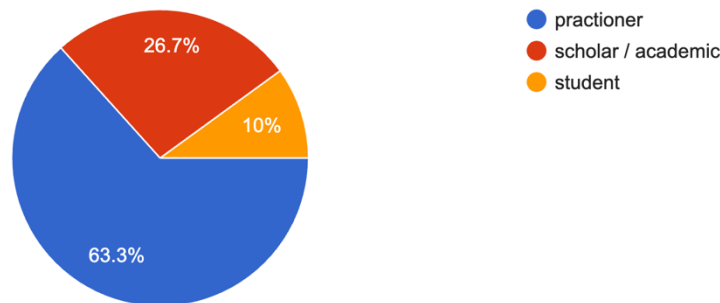
The narrative act of imagining the future is one that the majority of queer identifying people have (l)earned, a self-referential activity undertaken, largely, alone. After growing up not seeing oneself represented, queer people HAD to imagine a future in which we existed, one where we live, have families, are successful, are respected, are...alive, are... happy. "Queer theory doesn't argue for a reversal of privilege or a revolution that puts what was subordinate on top; instead, it insists on other possibilities, refusing to be trapped or limited by an oppositional stance" (Greene, 1996, p.325-339). Thus, facilitating futures thinking and imaginative fiction that doesn't mimic an existing non-queer/heteronormative world but rather invokes 'other ways of being'.

A general knowledge of the industry will tell you that futures scholars and practitioners need; to be open-minded, patient, and comfortable with change, be able to see through the noise, to evaluate and process information, danger, and risk readily, be able to approach societies problems from different perspectives and with often disruptive thinking and unusual practices. These attributes, while they can be learned and practiced in an educational setting, are mass intrinsic qualities that many individuals within marginalized communities possess. Does queerness and its cultural evolutionary skills of survival and resilience offer an advantage in an uncertain future, and more specifically in the field of futures studies? Jason Tester defines questioning prevailing systems, rejecting binary thinking, connecting across intersections, embracing pleasure and joy and hustling between worlds as the mindsets and practices that will confer success in the future.

Le Guin reminds us "Imaginative fiction trains people to be aware that there are other ways to do things, other ways to be; that there is not just one civilization, and it is good, and it is the way we have to be" (Curry, 2018). Imagining futures requires vision, ideas, thoughts, opinions, questions, plus an openness and willingness to/for change. In short, to engage in futures thinking one needs the ability to speculate. "Speculation is the contemplation or consideration of something, an individual and intuitive process/response rather than a fixed and measurable outcome" (Barton, 2022). It cannot therefore be separated from one's individual identity. Futures thinking and imagination literacy is inherently queer in its plurality and multiplicity so to substantiate this thinking and to add color and detail I reached out to the futures community by way of an (ongoing) anonymized global study. The online survey titled 'Research into individual identity and futures practice/scholarship' asks that those who consider themselves a futures scholar/practitioner to anonymously complete the short study (5 questions). The survey was generated in the hope of identifying key insights that will help us to better understand the intersections and relationships between who we are, how and why we imagine. A simple set of closed questions followed by open-ended questions allowing for personal stories to be shared. Participants were asked to confirm their identity via a long-form free text field that allowed the respondent to share their potentially multi-hyphenated identities in their own way, and according to their own priorities and positionality.

The access to these anonymously submitted stories, and the time spent reading and processing them has been a truly joyous and privileged endeavor, one that will forever influence my work in the futures space, as a queer woman, a mother, and as an academic. Insights were generated from the 60 responses to the question “Do you believe your individual identity has informed your ability to imagine the future in any way? If so, how? What forces drive you?”. As the survey data was collected anonymously, for context, respondents and their identities are referred to by a number and letter system. For example, 11/Qu would be respondent number 11 who identifies as queer, 33/NQu would be respondent number 33 who identifies as non-queer, 22/GF would be respondent number 22 who identifies as gender fluid.

Please select the term below that best defines your work in the futures field  
60 responses



Please select the term below that best defines your individual identity  
60 responses

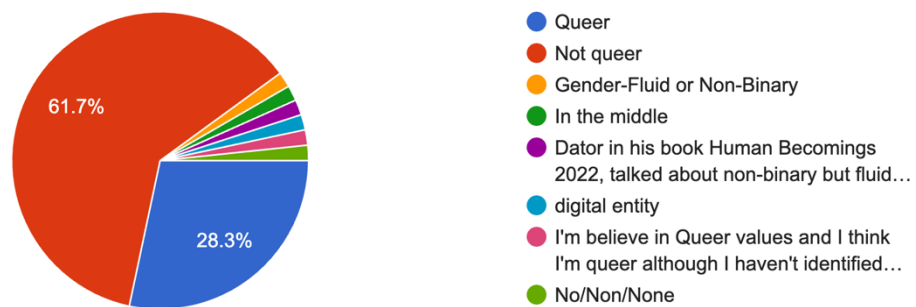


Figure 1: Raw statistics from the global anonymized survey conducted in 2023-4

Figure 2 shows an emerging diagram-mapping structure locating the synthesis of my findings in proximity to Greene’s (1996) three differential ‘readings’ of queer theory; adjective, verb,

noun, and Morris’s (1998) three “types” of queer theory: subject position, politic, and aesthetic sensibility. The responses were intuitively evaluated for commonalities and keywords and simultaneously cross-referenced with Greene and Morris - in doing so patterns emerged. Establishing, in this instance that Imagination Literacy could be presented in three groupings or “aspects” [1] intersectional identities, [2] lived experiences, and [3] application practices. Cutting across these aspects are the dual informative strands of imagination – ability to imagine the future and why it is important, and scenario visioning - the content, detail, and image of the imagined future.

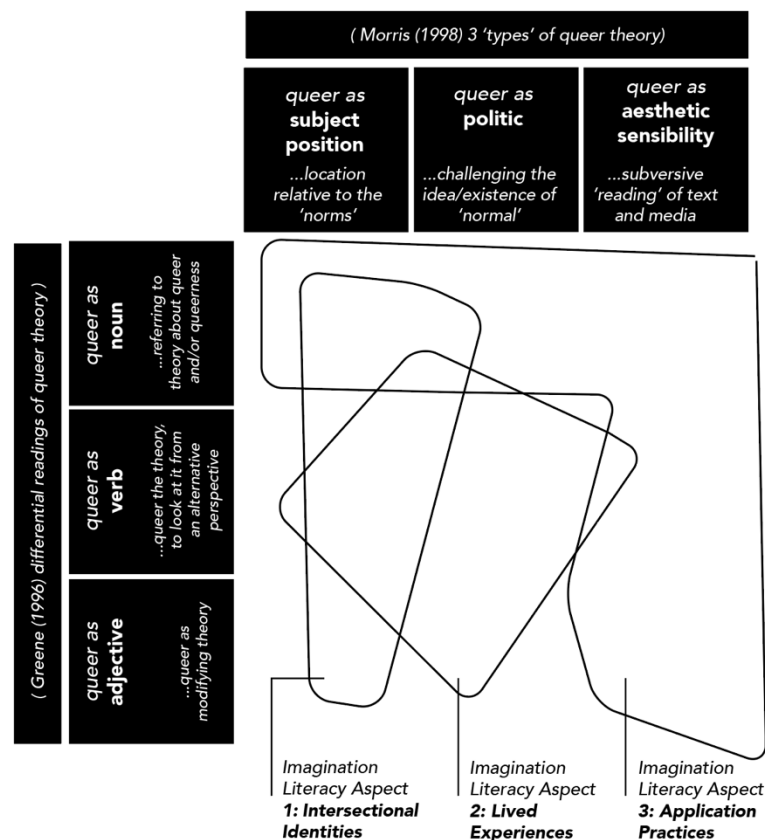


Figure 2: Queer Theory x Imagination Literacy - Greene (1996), Morris (1998,) Barton (2024) - early concept development, an assimilation by the author from global anonymized survey responses

## [1] Intersectional identities

“I believe my individual identity has informed my ability to imagine the future as the futures I imagine are always situated in impact of environment on people, specifically how futures impact environments and people in different degrees. My identity means I’m very interested in imagining futures without the constraints of present rigid political and institutional binaries” [15/Qu].

Individual identity is shaped by many conditions and largely shifts throughout our lives. Our identity relates to biology, history, physiology, psychology and more, informed through our

interactions with the world outside of the individual, expanding our horizons of what is possible. Our individual identity informs our biases, our embodied knowledge, and our networks. "It's a starting point for identifying my knowledge gaps and a departure point for adventures into the unknown" [6/NQu]. In the survey respondents were asked to select the term that best defines their individual identity from three options: queer, non-queer or other and then in a follow-up question asked to provide a further description of that identity. These elaborations provided incredibly personal and valuable insights. Respondents shared details of race, gender identity, gender presentation, religion, (a)sexuality, relationship status, out-ness, living situations, family make-up, education, geography, political beliefs, finances – the contextual factors necessary to navigate their wider intersectional identity and its impact on their ability to imagine the future, and the content of those imaginings. Including difficulties faced in defining identity at all.

"Identity conformity and lack of true representation inevitably produce dystopian visions of the future. Any diversity in representation immediately surfaces the importance of showing what the world is really made of today to understand how to drive towards preferable futures. As such, the greatest impact is easily made by including perspectives that are systematically erased. Queer, BIPOC, Neurodiverse, Disabled..." [38/NQu].

Respondents were then asked the following open-ended question - *Do you believe your individual identity has informed your ability to imagine the future in any way? If so, how? What forces drive you?* In the generosity of answers, ready associations were made. I evaluated commonalities - there were reflections on female identity, its expectation as/of motherhood, safety and the female gaze, and inherent attributes such as empathy and resilience. "As a woman and single mother, I think there is a kind of resilience, openness and empathy that allows me to consider other possible solutions and a drive and desire to create better potential futures. Acceptance or apathy have never been viable options for me" [3/NQu]. Observations surrounding class, economic (in)affordances, culture, race and religious or spiritual identity, were less common but clear and powerful.

"I believe that my identity as a straight man, lower middle social class, millennial, highly educated and deeply spiritual shapes how I can imagine the future, for example, I have a tendency to think about what new, radical, more fairer and equal economic systems could emerge post-capitalism and how societal transformation will come about not only through technological change but through new ways of living driven by widespread spiritual awakenings" [58/NQu].

"Yes - specifically my lens as a Black American. While we as a people have been leaders and innovators within the cultural landscape, there's a sense of catch up due to systemic racism. Understanding the struggle and liberation of Black people extends throughout the diaspora and globally against marginalized groups of people. I tend to use empathy and compassion to understand audiences within and outside of my own to create authentic solutions and recommendations" [52/NQu].

You will note here that responses from non-queer individuals offered up multiple instances of understanding and empathy demonstrating how one experience of marginalization can predispose you to a greater understanding of compound marginalizations that other people

may face – an augmented empathy. Equally a recognition from allies of their inability to understand certain struggles and the recognition that operating as a facilitator may be a more suitable role. “My identity influences what kinds of futures I imagine, and what details I focus on within those. Due to awareness of this, I am often now more interested in helping others imagine their own futures (playing the role of facilitator more myself)” [33/NQu]. And expressing a desire to be able to employ a greater expansion of ideas and imagination - “I believe that any individual identity would inform our ability to imagine. I guess in being in what I’d considered dominant in terms of gender identity I’m not able to truly expand my visions as a queer person can. I’d like to exercise that” [43/NQu]. In the same way that existing in a ‘comphet’ or compulsory heterosexual environment limits our ability to understand our own sexuality, equally existing in a capitalistic, patriarchal society can limit our ability to understand the realities of the present as well as the future. These frameworks are powerful inhibitors, filters, and mediators.

“In coming up with future visions, I realize I still have many biases towards the future that are a product of my limited ability to visualize futures outside of this framework. The “future” (and thus our imagination) is already populated with so many homogenized images created by mostly cis straight white men, that it’s surprisingly hard to think past and through it” [9/Qu].

## **[2] Lived experience(s): flux, love, expansion, privilege recognition**

“I feel like being queer somehow makes you inherently more open to change and makes you realise the fluidity/transience of all that exists. My queer identity has also helped me imagine and accept pluralities and differences” [12/Qu]. Whilst every individual has distinct and discrete lived experiences, there were some clear commonalities amongst the respondent reflections and associated knowledge and insight gained from such experiences. Most commonly, the profound experience of living a life in flux, being adept and familiar with cycles of iterative change and plurality.

“My relationship with my identity has grown stronger with every shift, change, realization, mutation, and moments of dismantling. I feel like I have a strong guttural relationship to ‘living in change’ as this fluidity is a core part of who I am. A design practice can never be objective or separated from the designer, I am proud of how my queerness affects my practice and this includes ability to work with and imagine futures” [10/Qu].

The consideration of one’s formative years and childhood environment in relation to the scope and limits of lived experience was another common thread. For those who received unconditional love, support and security, found the time, freedom, and agency to imagine the future (realized with hindsight), whilst those who did not receive such unconditional support developed (a different kind of) agency through oppression and necessity. Those who lack safe space in childhood or in the present are reminded to leave space and consideration for vulnerable groups and intersectionality in their practice.

“In a series of foresight workshops around the topic of proactive policymaking in the metaverse, we explicitly highlighted aspects of that digital world that might be discriminatory to minors or the LGBTQ community. While my identity might not be the reason why I imagine futures differently, it certainly changes the "how" or the process of imagining futures” [49/Qu].

Lived experiences will always have a dominant effect on the way we perceive, relate and assess the world around us, and in turn influence our capabilities, nuances and tangents of imagination. While it is hard to override our lived experiences and perceptions it is possible to radically expand our notions of self and the world and get close to challenging - and in rare cases, break - the thresholds that our lived experiences conjure. This is possible by connecting, discussing, collaborating, co-learning and communicating with those different to us.

“My experience with individuals whose identities were highly diverse helped me in challenging the notions and limitations of my own lived experiences-led approaches to imagination. In other words, it helped me to go beyond my own set of perceptions in deciphering the world, which has to a very large extent shaped my ability and drive approach futures and design thinking through a holistic lens” [39/NQu].

One straight male respondent described his lived experiences as having ‘gentrified his imagination’ powerfully suggesting that his ‘normalcy’ has prevented him from feeling able to explore a more exciting present/reality. “While I don't know if it has limited my ability to imagine alternate realities, scenarios and experiences, I am certain that it has limited my opportunities to explore the same” [40/NQu]. The thread of privilege recognition continues.

“As a queer person I am always switched on to my own internal and external oppressions and privileges as much as I can, and I am always learning, and so this affects a perception of what needs to change in the present and the possible alternatives in the future. As a white person, I live with a lot of privilege, and this hinders my ability to imagine. I am learning and unlearning - but this will always project onto and affect my ability to imagine as it will come from a white Eurocentric lens” [10/Qu].

### [3] Application practice(s): worldbuilding, internal imaging, personas

There are fundamental dualities in the practices and methodologies utilized in futures and foresight and those deployed in personal development, enlightenment, and acceptance - often used as a way of understanding ones shifting self, expectations from others, speculating upon different narratives, scenarios. Specifically, the practice of world-building was mentioned by several respondents. Worldbuilding is the practice of developing detailed and plausible fictional worlds through various creative methodologies, typically for a novel or story, especially in science fiction, fantasy, and video games but seemingly a very valuable part of the queer arsenal for generating alternative presents and future scenarios for oneself.

“As I have grown more comfortable with who I am, my worldbuilding has been similarly impacted. In fact, the systemic process of worldbuilding helped me process who I



want to be. I always look for grey areas within futures - constantly in flux with shifting paradigms and causalities that do not stick to binaries. Choice and consequence become major factors that define the scenarios I come up with because I lead my life like that on an everyday basis" [1/GF].

Many find it easier to imagine themselves without a future, realizing that their identity and identification are oppressed in "all of the times". One respondent referenced their own internal imaging – "I feel like as a queer person I have strong sense of internal imagining, safe places inside myself that I have built to protect, and therefore as I grow a more nuanced understanding of this, I can project this practice of imagining into the outside world" [10/Qu]. Other methodologies such as developing characters or 'personas' in worldbuilding is referenced also, as a way of exploring alternative perspectives, personalities and pseudonyms, the creative freedom to explore parts of oneself both inwardly and outwardly.

## Bright Queer Future(s)

As Jason Tester states and this research paper clearly evidences, queer culture, precisely because of its marginality, is particularly well-suited for futurism. "Queer people make some of the best futurists because for most of our lives, we've had to hope that tomorrow, will be better for us than today. That we will be more respected, more welcomed, more accepted in the world of tomorrow" (Tester, March 2021).

Ipsos, a market-research company, surveyed 22,000+ participants in 30 countries in the Americas, Europe and Asia in February and March 2023, and found that 9% of adults identify as LGBTQ. Respondents in Gen Z (born after 1997) were two times as likely as millennials (born in 1981 to 1996) to identify as bisexual, pansexual, omnisexual or asexual, and four times as likely as those in Generation X (1965 to 1980) or baby boomers (1948 to 1964). As this continues to grow will the percentage of people engaging in futures thoughts, thinking, practices continue to grow above the curve? Can we hope for exponential improvements in imagination literacy, and subsequent ripple effects – will we learn from and this make fewer mistakes in the future? Will there be more queer representation in the mainstream media? Will there be more futures in which we exist?

Whilst a much more modest sample of 60 (at the time of writing) completed the survey centered in this research paper, 30% of the futures scholars, practitioners and students identified as queer, indicating three times higher than average presence of queer identifying people operating within the futures industry. I recognize the early stages and small initial sample size of the research – however the respondents' deep capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness has enabled the start of genuine and authentic discussion of the correlations of identity and imagination literacy, which of course goes far beyond queerness. This research opens the way for establishing a 'coordinate system' or 'matrix mapping' of imagination literacy and intersectional identity that warrants further study – to fully understand potential impacts and contributions to design theory and practice and pedagogy.

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