

Introduction: Always Australian, Often Female, and Sometimes Queer: Gender and Sexuality in Australian Speculative Fiction

Edited by Bettina Burger, David Kern, and Lucas Mattila

Australian Speculative Fiction thus far remains an underappreciated and therefore notoriously undertheorised field of cultural output. Yet its very diversity and range means that it holds great productive potential for literary scholars from a number of different theoretical orientations. Postcolonial, ecocritical, inter- and transcultural approaches to Australian Speculative Fiction offer conducive avenues for critical exploration. Scholars concerned with migration, diaspora, Asian Anglophone literature, and Indigenous Australian writing will find ample material to analyse within the broad field of Australian Speculative Fiction, consisting of such genres as fantasy, science fiction, gothic, horror, magic realism, dystopian writing and many others. Often overlooked, these genres might offer unique insights into the dynamics, constructions and representations of often marginalised gender and sexual identities—perhaps all the more so, because these genres are, by definition, open to experimentation and subversion, and lend themselves to challenging heteronormative structures. It is because of Australian Speculative Fiction's aptness for tackling these complex issues that we chose to focus on gender and queer identities within that field for this special issue of *gender forum*, especially since Australian Speculative Fiction seems to be particularly interested in exploring queerness, femininity, and other gender- and sexuality-related concepts.

The first indication that Australian Speculative Fiction provides solid ground for research guided by gender and queer theory is apparent from

even the most casual look at current publications, award entry lists, and overviews: there is, for example, a noticeable amount of prominent Australian women writers who engage with Speculative Fiction, including among others Claire G. Coleman, Juliet Marillier, Alexis Wright, Trudi Canavan, Ambelin Kwaymullina, Mireille Juchau, Kaaron Warren, Charlotte Wood, Merlinda Bobis, Evie Wyld, Lian Hearn, and Kylie Chan. To be sure, it was partly our own bias that put us in the rather unusual position of having to seek out male writers for a more diverse representation; that notwithstanding, the strong influence of women writers in the field is undeniable. Of course, women writers have always been active in Speculative Fiction, and some have been broadly acknowledged as the forerunners of modern genres such as science fiction (see Mary Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666/68) or Mary Shelley's seminal *Frankenstein* (1797)). Even zeroing in on the Australian literary sphere in particular, there are prominent examples of female Speculative Fiction writers and their works that come to mind, including early classics such as Catherine Helen Spence's utopian text *A Week in the Future* (1888-1889) or gothic ghost stories by writers such as Rosa Praed, who is particularly well-known for her short story "The Bunyip" (1891). Moreover, women's ongoing importance in contemporary Speculative Fiction publishing has been particularly visible in Australia, especially since Speculative Fiction, in general, has a (somewhat undeserved) reputation for being dominated by white male authors (and readers).

Women's contributions to the field of Australian Speculative Fiction have previously been commented on in blog posts such as Tayla Bosley's "Australian female fantasy writers, what makes them so magical?" and Cheryl Morgan's "Is Australian Fantasy Dominated by Women?". We have also been able to confirm our initial impression through our interviews with, for example, Kylie Chan, who provided us with some insider knowledge with regards to the prominence of female writers in the Speculative Fiction field in Australia: literary agents, such as Stephanie Smith and Alex Adsett, who work with Speculative Fiction, have deliberately promoted female writers and thus enabled several of them to become prominent both within Australia and internationally. It is also noticeable that women writers of colour, and especially Indigenous women writers, have become defining forces in the field, ranging from already well-known and frequently discussed writers such as Alexis Wright and, increasingly, Ambelin Kwaymullina, to newer voices, including Lisa Fuller and Mykaela Saunders. Saunders in particular has been working on establishing a new field of research centring around the

idea of “Goori Futurism”, the author’s term for a subset of Speculative Fiction “that envisions Goori sovereignty in various futures in the Tweed (Minjungbal-Nganduwal land, Bundjalung country/far northern New South Wales), using Blackfella Futurism themes and tropes” (Saunders n.p.). In her work, she also cites a number of female, non-binary and other queer writers of what Saunders calls “Blakfella Futurism”, including Alexis Wright, Ellen van Neerven, Hannah Donnelly, Claire G. Coleman, and Ambelin Kwaymullina. Last but not least, there is also considerable academic work in progress within the field, as demonstrated by Maria Takolander’s lecture about “Contemporary Women’s Speculative Fiction in Australia” as part of a series revolving around Australian Speculative Fiction held at the Heinrich-Heine-University in Dusseldorf and which will culminate in a forthcoming publication.

Of course, all these examples highlight femininity and foreground women in particular. Queer perspectives and theoretical discussions of queerness are under-represented in Australian Speculative Fiction scholarship - and to some extent, in the fiction as well. There are certainly examples of queer-identifying Australian Speculative Fiction writers, like Rivqa Rafael, Claire G. Coleman, Ellen van Neerven, Alison Evans, and Omar Sakr. And there are queer protagonists that are also central to works of Australian Speculative Fiction, such as Kaden and Larapinta in Ellen van Neerven’s “Water” (2014), Romeo in Coleman’s *The Old Lie* (2019), Takeo in Lian Hearn’s *Tales of the Otori* series as well as a noticeable amount of queer minor characters in a number of well-known Australian Speculative Fiction works such as Trudi Canavan’s *Magicians’ Guild* series, Ambelin Kwaymullina’s *The Tribe* trilogy, and Lian Hearn’s *Tales of the Otori* series. Queer storylines also take centre-stage in C.S. Pacat’s somewhat controversial *Captive Prince* series, Freya Marske’s ongoing series of queer historical fantasy, starting with 2021’s *A Marvellous Light* and which is expected to continue in 2022 with *A Restless Truth*, as well as Alison Evans’ zombie apocalypse novel *Highway Bodies*. However, when it comes to integrating queer and other marginalised perspectives, the relative explosion of growth in Australian Speculative Fiction as a whole is not answered by a comparable quantity of critical discourse. Nonetheless, that is not to say that there has been *none*, and with this special issue on gender and sexuality in Australian Speculative Fiction, we seek to contribute to this emerging field of critical scholarship.

Our special issue does not cover every interface or intersection of gender and sexuality—to do so is an impossible task. Rather, our contributors cast light on specific constellations, configurations, and

tinges within the field as they relate to gender and sexuality. While the articles chosen for our special issue do not exhaust speculative possibility, excluding, for instance, the genres of the Australian (and Aboriginal) Gothic or Horror as well as classic Science Fiction, they do cover a broader spectrum of Speculative Fiction, ranging from ‘weak’ instances of the speculative (Takolander 2022), as is the case with Mireille Juchau’s *The World Without Us* (2015), towards a full secondary world immersion in works such as Jay Kristoff’s *The Nevernight Chronicle* (2016-2019) and Ambelin Kwaymullina’s *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* (2012). In her illuminating examination of *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, Christina Slopek demonstrates that interspecies conviviality plays an important role in the formation of new forms of sociality. By bringing together the interface between notions of queerness, disability, and interspecies relation, she is able to argue that marginalised epistemologies might be a powerful speculative source, not only for fictive worlds, but also for modelling political, cultural, and social transformation in our own. Victoria Herche’s use of the term “queer” is as varied and nuanced as the term itself—she uses it not only in the well-established contexts of gender and sexuality but also in the idea of queering the monstrous body. Analysing the critically acclaimed TV show *Cleverman* (first season released 2016), Herche explores the radical possibilities of Speculative and Science Fiction to critique, as she argues, “the culturally constructed boundaries between the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal’”. It is in the idea of queering the monstrous body that her article locates an epistemic intervention to socially and discursively upheld notions of difference and otherness. Marthe-Siobhán Hecke draws on Jay Kristoff’s *The Nevernight Chronicle* to demonstrate how Speculative Fiction, and fantasy, in particular, are radically challenging and overcoming heteronormative expectations—particularly in a genre that is often considered to be catering to a primarily white, hetero- and male audience. Hecke breaks down how Kristoff’s work destabilises generic conventions by foregrounding and celebrating queer and sexually self-empowered characters. Judith Rahn clarifies the limits and possibilities of hierarchies that embrace the non-human, particularly the bee, as it relates to gendered non-patriarchal systems, suggesting alternate forms of community and gesturing towards the need for new systems in the wake of environmental disaster. Her paper unpacks how Mireille Juchau’s novel *The World Without Us* “offers new ways of exploring femininity between notions of grief and suffering on the one hand and the effects of anthropogenic climate change on the other.” Finally, Katrin Althans’s article takes issue with socially and culturally constructed narratives of

maternity, nurture, and care as ‘naturally’ female, and theorises new conceptions of motherhood and the female coming of age of the “Nea-Human” in James Bradley’s *Ghost Species*. Reading Bradley’s novel, Althans demonstrates how the confluence and mixture of genres are deeply linked to the ways that we might mediate our understandings of the climate crisis and its impact on representations of women and family constellations. All in all, our issue tackles a broad range of Speculative Fiction to demonstrate how new ways of mediating gender and queerness might emerge from otherwise marginalised literatures.

Works Cited

- Bosley, Tayla. "Australian female fantasy writers, what makes them so magical?" *Wordpress*, 23 Jan. 2018.
<<https://taylabosley.wordpress.com/2018/01/23/australian-female-fantasy-writers-what-makes-them-so-magical/>>.
- Chan, Kylie. "A Conversation with Kylie Chan Part One." *YouTube*, uploaded by Charting Australian Speculative TLE, interviewed by Bettina Burger, edited by David Kern and Lucas Mattila, 10 Jan. 2022. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbWeVG8krSA>>.
- Chan, Kylie. "A Conversation with Kylie Chan Part Two." *YouTube*, uploaded by Charting Australian Speculative TLE, interviewed by Bettina Burger, edited by David Kern and Lucas Mattila, 15 Jan. 2022. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVHR6Hs3DdQ>>.
- Dann, Jack, Jason Franks, Gillian Polack, and Rivqa Rafael. "Jewish Australian Speculative Fiction Authors in Conversation." *YouTube*, uploaded by Charting Australian Speculative TLE, chaired by Bettina Burger and Lucas Mattila, edited by Lucas Mattila, 12 Mar. 2022. <<https://youtu.be/33yn8fS4t1I>>.
- Morgan, Cheryl. "Is Australian Fantasy Dominated By Women?" *Cheryl's Mewsings*, 7 May 2012. <<https://www.cheryl-morgan.com/?p=13770>>.
- Saunders, Mykaela. "Goori-Futurism: Envisioning the sovereignty of country, community and culture in the Tweed." *Mykaela Saunders*, 2021. <<https://mykaelasaunders.com/goori-futurism/>>.
- Saunders, Mykaela. "Mykaela Saunders Goori Futurism 21st January 2022." *YouTube*, uploaded by Charting Australian Speculative TLE, 13 March 2022.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KncdMpKE5M&t=2s>>.
- Takolander, Maria. "Contemporary Women's Speculative Fiction in Australia." *YouTube*, uploaded by Charting Australian Speculative TLE, 19 Jan. 2022.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWWy_dB_P-8>.