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Gender and Sexuality in Australian Speculative Fiction

Edited by
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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of *gender forum*.

Submissions

Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (9th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to gender-forum@uni-koeln.de.

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in Gender Studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (9th edition), and should be between 750 and 1,000 words in length. Please note that the reviewed releases ought to be no older than 24 months.

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Editorial

Beate Neumeier, University of Cologne, Germany

gender forum started out almost 20 years ago. Since then, it has turned into a vibrant medium of excellent research and expanded its scope in innovative ways. At its launch in 2002 *gender forum* was the first English-language academic e-journal in gender studies in Germany. Founded and based at the University of Cologne our peer-reviewed open-access journal has been dedicated to the international and interdisciplinary discussion of gender issues, with a strong focus on literature/media and cultural studies in the anglophone world, and on theoretical perspectives in the field. Throughout our mission always aimed at widening the scope to explore transdisciplinary intersections highlighting gender issues in a wide range of areas from politics to social and religious institutions, from criminal justice to health care systems.

By 2021 *gender forum* has published 80 quarterly issues, including various special editions in response to urgent topical matters. A substantial number of issues has been guest-edited by international colleagues from different disciplines within the humanities, social sciences, and performance studies. I would like to thank all those dedicated colleagues who put their time and expertise into these issues, contributing to the continued success of the journal which registers 5000 monthly readers on average.

I would also like to thank the members of our editorial board, Mita Banerjee (University of Mainz), Nilufer E. Bharucha (University of Mumbai), Carmen Birkle (University of Marburg), Ingrid Hotz-Davies, (Tübingen University), Ralph Poole (University of Salzburg), and Chris Weedon (Cardiff University) for their relentless support and dedication and for their willingness to continue to shape the progress of the journal in the future.

In 2014 we introduced the new format of an annual early career researchers issue to promote young colleagues in the field. I am particularly grateful to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Cologne which has financially supported this addition to *gender forum*.

In relation to these efforts we have offered internships at *gender forum* for students dedicated to gender and queer studies and welcomed local as well as international students and early career researchers who have immensely enriched our work. My thanks go to all of them.

Most gratitude I owe to the amazing teams of editorial assistants and student assistants without whose enthusiasm, creativity and hard work *gender forum* would not have become such a success story. Their input in terms of choosing issue topics and titles, formulating calls for papers, reading proposals, communicating with authors, proof-reading and solving technical problems along the way has been tremendous. In chronological order my thanks go to Dirk Schulz (thank you for so many ingenious issue titles!), Jonas Recker, Christina Wald, Johanna Schorn, Sarah Youssef, and Laura Schnitzler (initiator of and responsible for the early career researcher issues). The longevity prize for service goes to Dirk Schulz (2002-2012) and Sarah Youssef (2012-2021). It is gratifying to see that the engagement with *gender forum* contributed to the advance of so many professional careers.

At this moment of passing the task of editing the journal on to a new team of editors and a number of new editorial board members, we see a disturbing rise of homophobia, sexism, racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance in many parts of the world. At the same time the recognition and impact of movements such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter reinforce the belief in the potential and power for change. My best wishes go to the new team in charge of *gender forum*, the recently appointed professor of American Studies, Judith Rauscher, the newly hired tenured assistant professor, Johanna Pitetti-Heil, and my soon to be appointed successor in English literature. I am convinced that they will steer *gender forum* to new horizons.

Beate Neumeier
Founding Editor of *gender forum*

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.

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Aboriginal Speculations: Queer Rhetoric, Disability, and Interspecies Conviviality in *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*

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Abstract

The Anthropocene looms large in the 21st century, and queer and disabled people continue to be exposed to harassment and discrimination. What do these issues have in common, though? In Ambelin Kwaymullina's speculative fiction novel *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* (2012), queer discourse collaborates with, promotes, and diversifies a non-anthropocentric world order, simultaneously implicating a dis-/ability dialectic. This article brings together queer, disability, interspecies studies and literary analysis to explore how Kwaymullina's young adult novel creates links between queerness and interspecies relations and how disability comes into play. The rhetoric used against children with so-called special abilities in the novel, who come to occupy the structural position of the queer in Kwaymullina's narrative at the expense of those living with disabilities, as well as the role interspecies conviviality plays for future community construction are focal points of the article. For the latter part, in particular, this article draws on Aboriginal knowledge systems to explore how *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* weaves these marginalised epistemologies into literature and thus changes the field of speculative fiction.¹

¹ I would like to thank Bettina Burger for suggesting that I might like *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*—you were right, it was right up my alley! Further, I thank the editors of the special issue for including me in this exciting and innovative project and for helping me to mold this article into the shape it now has. Lastly, I would like to thank the reviewers for *Gender Forum* for their constructive input.

Introduction: A Greater Pattern of Life

I am conscious, always, of the many ways in which the Indigenous peoples of this planet continue to be pushed to the edges, those dangerous places where it is easy to fall out of the world.
— Ambelin Kwaymullina, “Edges, Centres and Futures” (n.p.)

Ambelin Kwaymullina’s *The Tribe* series (2012; 2013; 2015), young adult speculative fiction heavily influenced by Kwaymullina’s position as a Palyku writer, claims space for marginalised Aboriginal epistemologies and makes a potent case for their capacity to answer pending queries of the contemporary. The series begins with the riveting first volume, *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*². Following its eponymous protagonist on her quest to transform society, the novel takes place in a non-specified future in a space partially resembling Australia that has seen the collapse of the world as we know it. In this future world, new communities have formed, which are critical of the old ways, wary of the ambivalence of technology, and warier still of the consequences of anthropocentrism.

Projecting the exigencies of our real-life present into a speculative future, *Ashala Wolf* is simultaneously rooted in Aboriginal memory and history. This confluence of different times concurs “with Aboriginal world views that do not recognise clear separation of past, present and future” (Herb, Collins-Gearing and Huijser 122).³ Fittingly, in the author’s note at the end of *Ashala Wolf*, Ambelin Kwaymullina reminisces:

My great-grandmother once described Australia as a place where everything lives and nothing dies. She was talking about a way of understanding the world as a web of living, interconnected beings; where everything is born from, and eventually goes back to, the greater pattern of life itself. (2012, n.p.)

² *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* will hereafter be referred to as *Ashala Wolf*.

³ Interestingly, this multilateral continuity between future, past and present frequently finds its way into fiction. Mykaela Saunders has theorised an Indigenous Australian version of non-linear, speculative futurism: “Goori Futurism” grapples with long-term consequences of colonialism Goori people and the land still bear—and, true to Aboriginal concerns with land and nature, Goori Futurism “practis[es] creative, sustainable and ancestrally-approved ways of living with climate change” (Saunders, n.p.). Since Kwaymullina is not a member of the Goori people, Goori Futurism is an approximation of a concept that would capture the futurism in *Ashala Wolf*. On a related note, Afrofuturism is a probably better-known companion to Goori Futurism which takes up concerns and experiences germane to Black, African and African-descended people (see Womack).

Ancestral memory and knowledge systems are pivotal to how Aboriginal cultures, among them the Palyku, understand themselves and their communities (see Kwaymullina 2008, 6, 10). Readers of *Ashala Wolf* will recognise this “web of living, interconnected beings” and the notion of a “greater pattern of life”: The novel depicts how the very few human survivors of near-total environmental destruction attempt to establish harmonious relations with their environment and meet it on equal terms, aiming to respect and protect nature.⁴ Evidently, *Ashala Wolf* takes its cue from Aboriginal knowledge systems to respond to the pressing needs of a present that has witnessed environmental destruction of Indigenous land at the hands of the British, but also as a consequence of exploitation for economic reasons after Australia’s independence in 1901 (see Kwaymullina 2008, 14), and that is coming face to face with anthropocentrism in the twenty-first century.

Putting humans at the centre of everything, an anthropocentric worldview relies on norms, hierarchies and boundaries which sustain the privileged position of the human.⁵ As climate change, large-scale extinction of species, and environmental destruction make crystal clear, anthropocentrism is detrimental. But how can it be overcome? In a seminal contribution to the environmental humanities, *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Donna Haraway formulates an answer: “The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response [...] The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present” (1). She imagines *interspecies* conviviality that straddles normative boundaries *between* species and could create a world where more than the human can thrive.

Haraway’s rallying cry echoes what US-American queer scholar José Muñoz has said with regard to queerness: quite unexpectedly, he argues that (human) “[q]ueerness is not yet here” (1). Hailed as a deconstructive force in the ambit of sex, gender and sexuality, queerness seems to

⁴ Here, the term ‘human’ is not unambiguous. Rigid ontological distinctions between humans and more-than-humans do not really have any grip in the world of *Ashala Wolf*—to name but one example, Jaz, one of the children with special abilities, morphs into a reptile-like human after recognising his affinity with the saurs, reptile beings in *Ashala Wolf*. Regardless of the degree of their humanness, ‘humans’ in the society of *Ashala Wolf*, to varying extents, have come to consider the environment not as mere *environ*-ment, surrounding, but as agent and matter (see Alaimo 2010, 10).

⁵ As much of critical scholarship has exposed, this ‘human’ at the centre of anthropocentrism is a normative, white and male ideal, itself concurrent with ideas about hierarchies between cultural affiliations, phenotypes, etc. (see Braidotti 26, a.o.).

transcend all boundaries. Upon closer inspection, though, it turns out that even queerness is predicated upon some sense of sameness. Although queerness beyond the human as a species has in recent decades become the subject of heightened scholarly attention (see Alaimo 2016; Bagemihl 1999 and Chen 2012), queer discourse remains centred on the human and thus perpetuates regulative boundaries between species. The question that arises is: shouldn't queerness be more involved with the more-than-human?

This article explores how *Ashala Wolf* brings together discourses of queerness and the more-than-human and how the novel simultaneously reinforces dis-/ability dialects. Kwaymullina's novel has been explored with an eye to how Aboriginal epistemologies are woven into the novel's fabric (see Herb, Collins-Gearing and Huijser 112) as well as for its configurations of "animism" ("Animism and the Ecocritical Imagination"). In a recent contribution, Bettina Burger (2021) stresses *Ashala Wolf's* ecocritical impetus for young readers. Where Haraway speaks of "a thick present," (1) *Ashala Wolf* imagines a thick future more attuned to the needs of different species, speculating about the possibility of a Balance between all forms of life. However, this "Balance", which in the novel functions as a political ideology and is problematised by the narrative for its dogmatism, does not account for people with special abilities, which are perceived as different and therefore as a potential threat to communal life. In my analysis of *Ashala Wolf*, I argue that Kwaymullina's novel queers hegemonic gender roles and that humans with special abilities in the novel are structurally analogous to queer people in today's heteronormative societies. This dynamic both comments on the omnipresent heteronormative marginalisation of queerness and brings to the fore similarities between queerness and interspecies conviviality. Furthermore, as *Ashala Wolf* integrates queerness into its speculative imaginings of a better, more conscious future, the novel braids together queerness and interspecies conviviality and shows that both heteronormativity and anthropocentrism need to be deconstructed for this better future to come into being. Yet, as the novel normalises queerness and celebrates super-ability, it still implicates a dis-/ability dialectic. This article asks how, within the logic of the novel, people with special abilities come to stand in for queer people in discourses around and against (hetero-)normativity. Another central question is which position interspecies conviviality occupies in the novel's speculations about environmentally balanced futures, both as a speculative concept and as a "building block [...] of community" (Keller 265). At the same time, I analyse how this confluence between fictional characters with special abilities and non-fictional queer people works at the expense of people with disabilities.

Born this Way – Queer Rhetoric in *Ashala Wolf*

The plot of *Ashala Wolf* takes place in the trenches of a bitter dispute between the government of a newly formed society and dissenters, who object to the political system and its dogmatic adherence to the so-called “Balance” because it perceives people with extraordinary abilities as a threat to the system’s stability and therefore seeks to limit their power by closely monitoring and secluding them. Flight and control of fire, to name but two examples, feature among these extraordinary powers. Protagonist Ashala Wolf has special abilities too: She can ‘sleepwalk’, traversing immense distances in her sleep by entering an astral dream world in which she can access more than her normal powers. Together with her friend Georgie, Ashala ran away from home when her special-ability sister was killed in an incident with the government. More children have joined her, and now she is the head of a community of specially-abled children living in the so-called “Firstwood”, who are planning to overthrow the government. Narrated from Ashala’s point of view, the novel makes sure to incur sympathy for her, a relatable and highly likeable teenage girl who feels protective of both humans and more-than-human others and does not discriminate against any species. Framed by Ashala as a first-person narrator and spokesperson, the narrative touchingly portrays the persecution and discrimination which those with special abilities endure. Moreover, as those persecuted in the novel are the ones most in tune with more-than-human species and matter, 21st-century readers (hopefully) aware of the need for a much more sustainable treatment of our planet are doubly motivated to side with Ashala and her tribe.

One important factor in how *Ashala Wolf* performs queerness is that the novel queers normative gender roles. While some feminists see an advantage in underscoring proximities of women and nature (Rich 13), others consider such moves as “universalising, totalising and essentialising women’s relationship with nature” (4). This dynamic is complicated in *Ashala Wolf*. Granted, Ashala Wolf, protagonist and leader of the group of children with special abilities who have pledged to protect the more-than-human, is a young woman. Therefore, one might argue that Kwaymullina’s novel reproduces tropes of women as especially attuned to and thus responsible for nature. Importantly, though, Ashala *leads* a mixed-gender group of children and young adults who are assuming equal ecological responsibility. It is not only her as a lone woman caring for nature. As a matter of fact, she is a woman in power and thus unsettles established gender roles.⁶ In this context, Ashala’s age

⁶ On a related note, Neville Rose, Ashala’s antagonist and figurehead of the group that ostracises and persecutes specially abled children in the novel, has a female accomplice, who collaborates with him in bending and breaking the rules as they strive

is also important: Alice Curry ascribes particular potency to young adult characters, which are, she argues, “position[ed] on the cusp of social and political responsibility and interpellated by the ethics and epistemologies of the feminist present” (*Environmental Crisis* 7). As a young adult woman in charge, Ashala undoes rigidly binarised gender roles and relations, thus queering them by the power obtained through her age and her liminal position (6).

As this article further aims to show that *Ashala Wolf* invokes queer rhetoric in the context of characters with special abilities, I want to briefly sketch the concept of queerness I am working with: precisely by not pinning it down, Annamarie Jagose comes close to (not) defining queerness: “Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire” (3). Nevertheless, she stresses its “definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity” (1) and avoids “fixing it in ways that queer theory resists fixing itself” (2). Queerness breaks up boundaries because it goes against what is normativised, what is “sanctioned” (98). In concordance with Jagose and the claims to non-normativity so central to queerness, this article does not analyse instances of sexuality- and gender-related queerness in *Ashala Wolf* (they are almost entirely absent in this first of the three volumes of Kwaymullina’s series, but manifest in later instalments), but instead looks at how an analogy of queerness is generated by means of queer rhetoric revolving around children with special abilities.

The line of argumentation employed to exclude people with special abilities from the community imagined in the novel bears a close resemblance to biblical discourse, which links special abilities in *Ashala Wolf* to queerness in the text-external world. The government legitimises oppressing children with special abilities by invoking the notion of a balanced life, which these children allegedly disturb. Laying down clear rules on how society ought to behave and treat everything and everybody (every matter, so to speak), supposedly to protect nature and the planet, official policy paradoxically calls Ashala and other children with special abilities “Illegals” and frames them as a threat to the system. It does so by claiming that these children are unnatural and thus endanger the newly gained stability in a world that has seen total destruction from environmental catastrophes. Using special powers is criminalised by the so-called “Citizenship Accords” (*Ashala Wolf* 23), the society’s main legislative documents, which supposedly serve “to prevent Illegals from

for power. Evidently, diverse women characters populate the world of *Ashala Wolf* and women have agency, regardless of whether they decide to use it for better or for worse.

upsetting the Balance” (27). Their rhetoric appeals to the human community’s fear of causing more damage to Nature. It mobilises civic power in pursuit of the “Balance,” with a capital ‘B’, which is the ideal of harmonious relations between entities of all kinds and, like its initial letter, is writ large within the communal framework.⁷ The government further refers to the community’s founding text, “Alexander Hoffman[’s] *Letter to Those Who Survive*,” (22; original emphasis), which addresses “anyone who lived through the *Reckoning*” (22; emphasis added). This “Reckoning,” which describes the period of an unprecedented and irreversible environmental catastrophe which destroyed most of the world and only left a few human survivors, appears to be an ecocritically modulated version of the apocalypse and Judgment Day. This implicit Christian discourse “allows for an exploration of an artificially created religion or belief system,” (Herb, Collins-Gearing and Huijser 120) and invites readers to ponder implications for established belief systems which rely on scripture, too.

Legacies of biblical discourse, which has been interpreted as condemning and is used to condemn queerness, are taken on in *Ashala Wolf*. Ashala is quick to refute the government’s argument of an anomaly in a way that is reminiscent of how people usually take apart interpretations of the Bible as a foundational text that comments negatively on queerness. When Ashala is caught by government officials and interviewed by Neville Rose, Chief Administrator of the operation that seeks to control children with special abilities, she points out that Alexander Hoffman “never said anything about people with abilities being a threat to the Balance” (22). Ashala works the system and smugly notices that Neville Rose “hadn’t expected [her] to know that” (22). She goes to the very foundation of the society she lives in and pinpoints where it has been misinterpreted to foster binary divisions between people with and without special abilities. Ashala makes use of the society’s foundational text itself in her line of argumentation to advocate for people with special abilities and to subvert arguments used against them.

⁷ As it turns out later, key government officials have been hypocrites all along: Ashala, held hostage by Neville Rose, is interviewed and tortured with the use of a machine, like other children with abilities entrapped in the institution Rose oversees. Computers are strictly forbidden, and Ashala is aghast: “I mean, *everyone* knew the dangers of advanced tech. It had isolated the people of the old world from nature, shielding them from the consequences of imbalance, and yet they’d believed, right up until the very end, that it would save them” (*Ashala Wolf* 267; original emphasis).

Arguably, *Ashala Wolf* implicitly offers a different interpretation of those passages in the Bible commonly held to forbid homosexual practice.

Throughout the novel, Ashala additionally repeats a certain rhetorical move which queer people have used for a long time, in her case, in order to normalise special abilities: She maintains that “Illegals are part of the Balance” (29). Her logic is simple but persuasive: if Illegals come into being through no intervention abhorred by the system, such as “genetic modification” (27), they must be a natural variation of the human. Her argument is reminiscent of queer people’s insistence that they were ‘born this way’—the queer anthem that emphasises that queerness cannot be unnatural if it is a recurrent form of being human, not engendered by circumstances. What is more, the way in which Ashala renegotiates queerness is arguably grounded in her Aboriginal background and in ancestral knowledge: Ashala is “the last to carry the bloodline of those [the ancestral serpent, an Aboriginal forefather] created” (114).⁸ Her actions are approved by means of this tie to an ancestral authority and Ashala is hence depicted as acting in keeping with Aboriginal worldviews. With Ashala and other children’s special abilities serving as an analogy for queerness, the novel reaffirms Aboriginal epistemologies and naturalises queerness as part of a greater Balance.

Why is it important to discuss queerness in the context of *Ashala Wolf*? David Coad rightly points out that queerness in Australia “has in fact a long history” (185).⁹ For one thing, Benjamin Law, editor of the playfully marketed, but powerfully affirmative collection *Growing Up Queer in Australia* (2019), emphasises how important it is for queer people to find sites of identification, which are rarely provided by their families (see xi). Storytelling seems like a powerful site to provide this space. Besides opportunities for identification, queer people in Australia, around the time *Ashala Wolf* was published, fought for legislation to recognise and protect them.¹⁰ Fortunately, a lot has improved: Same-sex

⁸ As the novel uses bold print to bring the serpent’s telepathy into prominence, I am reproducing this type face choice to recreate the impression created by the text itself. The same goes for the quote from the saur later in this article.

⁹ I want to point out that I slightly disagree with Coad’s understanding of transgender identity, which he discusses in his article on queerness in Australia (191-193)—to closely engage with his argument would lead away from the focus of this article, though.

¹⁰ According to Cook, “[i]n 2010 in Australia gay men and lesbians [were] still fighting for equality. There [were] no Federal laws in place to protect same-sex attracted people from discrimination. In most states lesbians and gay men [could] not adopt a child and in some states lesbians and gay men [were not] even recognised as parents to the children they ha[d]” (Cook 2).

marriage was legalised in 2017, and Australia is nowadays known to be one of the world's most queer-friendly places. These developments notwithstanding, queer people continue to face discrimination and marginalisation the world over. In Aboriginal contexts, queerness is even more complexly positioned as it is entangled in a history of colonisation and the imposition of Eurocentric ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality or what Madeleine Clark calls "the underlying relationship between sexuality and the racialised white nation" (3). Implicit normalisation of queerness in *Ashala Wolf* effectively constitutes an act of anticolonial reclamation intersecting with queer activism.

So, it becomes clear that the speculative part of *Ashala Wolf* is not limited to imagining a world after climate change. By subtly alluding to queerness through the motif of special abilities, the novel drives home the point that queer relations are supported within Aboriginal knowledge systems. What is more, in the larger context of conviviality in *Ashala Wolf*, the novel's interest in special abilities not only functions as a way to allude to and normalise queerness but also to engage with disabilities.¹¹ Similarities between people with special abilities in the novel and people with disabilities are, of course, lexical. Further parallels between the novel's specially-abled characters and humans with disabilities are that both have non-normative minds and bodies and, *as a consequence*, are marginalised. For example, *Ashala Wolf* explicitly thematises panic disorders and "dissociative states" (205) but does not frame them as uncommon but simply as a manifestation of human emotion and processing. A further example is the novel's depiction of hospitalisation: European societies have institutionalised taking care of physical and psychological conditions in spaces removed from the larger community for centuries (see Foucault xxxiii). Imperialism then saw to the dissemination of this practice of removal across the globe. In *Ashala Wolf*, children with special abilities are to live on government-controlled grounds. This is reminiscent of the history of colonial boarding- and residential schools but also of the violent history of Indigenous child removal, the Stolen Generations: the children are forced to wear collars with a mineral which suppresses their powers. Exclusion, removal and 'hospitalisation' here border on imprisonment. In this context, it also is important to note that "the generic concepts of 'disability' or 'impairment' were not recognized by any Australian Indigenous community before

¹¹Of course, parallels drawn between so-called "Illegals" in the novel and the history of dispossession of Aboriginal people must not be overlooked, either (see Herb, Collins-Gearing and Huijser 113-114).

European colonization” (Gilroy and Donnelly 547). Against this backdrop, parallels between special-ability children in *Ashala Wolf* and people living with disabilities that largely remain unspoken can be interpreted as part of the novel’s decolonial speculations.

However, that *Ashala Wolf* ably and sensitively imagines a future soothing for those pained by the demise of planet Earth, now again viable habitat for a multiplicity of species, does not mean that all is well in the novel’s future society. What is commendable about how the novel implicitly discusses disability is that it thus silently includes disability in the range of human variety which it seeks to normalize.¹² Characters with special abilities can serve as a much-needed site of identification for and reflection of people with disabilities. Nonetheless, since the characters in question are precisely not *dis*-abled, but have special abilities, they can do everything ordinary humans can do *and more*. As a matter of fact, this adds to the ideology of the “normate” underlying ableist conceptions of the human: “the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings [and] step into a position of authority (Garland-Thomson 8).¹³ So, instead of carving out a space for people who, due to impairments which limit their access to a world (literally) built with non-disabled people in mind (see Davis 2), *Ashala Wolf* zooms in on the normate and moves beyond it: on to the surplus, added abilities of some humans, reinforcing the ideal of the human *able* to do everything and more. Only when Illegals are physically restrained from using their special abilities, do they actually become *dis*-abled, disability here paradoxically being tantamount to non-fictional human ability. In the same vein, *Ashala Wolf* subscribes to ableist notions of madness when it describes Neville Rose, spearheading discrimination and oppression of children with abilities, as “[*m*]ad” and his radical fervour as a “*necessary* insanity” (31; original emphasis). Discussion of discrimination against disability largely remains implicit; the novel does not partake in disability activism but instead ingrains normative ideals of the human mind and body, all the while striving to normalise queerness.¹⁴

¹² Disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson cogently points out that what we label ‘disabilities’ are “human variations *we think of* as disabilities”. She argues that so-called disabilities “are essential, inevitable aspects of human being” (141; emphasis mine).

¹³ Garland-Thomson further points to the paradox immanent to normate logics, arguing that the “profile [...] describes only a minority of actual people” (8).

¹⁴ Regrettably, such omissions of disability in queer discourse and studies are not uncommon. “Crip Theory”, represented for instance by Robert McRuer (2006), offers a timely intervention that foregrounds intersections of heteronormativity and ableism and, consequently, shared discrimination of queer and disabled people.

Interspecies Conviviality: *Ashala Wolf* and the Future after Environmental Destruction

Significantly, the novel's entire line of argumentation used to normalise either queer people or Illegals in the world of *Ashala Wolf* implicitly builds on an (Aboriginal) understanding of nature and how to be in and relate to it. According to Kwaymullina, Aboriginal knowledge systems rely upon "a deep connection to country" ("A Land of Many Countries" 6). This deep connection results in an understanding of "kinship bonds" ("Animism" 60) beyond species divisions in keeping with what this article terms 'conviviality': an idea of how to be in the world together with others that are not othered, that are not viewed as inferior. This idea of conviviality has been theorised in philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's visionary study *Being Singular Plural* (2000 [1996]). Nancy hails togetherness as essential, integral, visceral. He stipulates that "[b]eing cannot be anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence" (3; original emphasis). Running counter to Western primacy of the ego, identity in Nancy's sense is coextensive with plurality, with otherness, from the get-go. He redefines being as "*being* in a transitive sense of the verb (an unheard of, inaudible sense—the very meaning of Being)" (6; original emphasis). His nod at transitivity means that being has an object which it tacitly interpellates. In addition to the being agent, there is an addressee, an intended co-presence. "*Being singular plural* means the essence of Being is only as coessence" (30; original emphasis). Donna Haraway adds the being-with of different species to Nancy's philosophy: "*Kin* is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate. Making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible" (2; original emphasis). This understanding of oneself as part of the world and thus inclined to conviviality reverberates in Aboriginal ways of seeing the world.¹⁵

Aboriginal conceptions of conviviality and interconnectedness of species as parts of a web of ecologies are taken up in *Ashala Wolf* time and again, suturing together ancestral Aboriginal knowledges and a creatively imagined future. Ashala's origin story is put centre-stage when she encounters a big serpent in a lake, which turns out to be her "many-times grandfather" (*Ashala Wolf* 111). She learns that this serpent is "one

¹⁵ Similarly, Bettina Burger maintains "that the epistemological and spiritually infused perspective taken by Kwaymullina can be seen as originary to certain contemporary ecocritical and ecofeminist theories engaged with the nonhuman" (302). It goes to show that interspecies kinship as it is encouraged by ecocriticism has precedence in Palyku epistemologies, represented in *Ashala Wolf*.

of the creators of [her] people,” human beings in all their diversity (111).¹⁶ This snake is rooted in Aboriginal knowledge systems. For instance, the Nyungar know the “*Waakal* [as] the Creator, the keeper of freshwater sources,” who enabled the Nyungar to “weave the intricate tapestry known as the ‘web of life’” (Collard 62). This means that Kwaymullina’s novel further roots the children’s special abilities in Aboriginal ontologies and continues to braid together ecologically sustainable Aboriginal ways of approaching the world and a future that could be a response to the uncertainties of a 21st-century present that can no longer avert its eyes from the dire consequences of the Anthropocene.

Within the context of future interspecies conviviality in *Ashala Wolf*, trees play a prominent role. Trees are significant across cultures: Eurocentric thinking is notably organised around top-down hierarchies mirroring “arborescent descent” (Deleuze and Guattari 10); they can thus be regarded as formative structures in European thought. Importantly, Caribbean scholar Odile Ferly points out that many non-Western trees, such as the mangrove, actually develop transversally and in multiple directions (see 4). Therefore, she understands this Caribbean-centric tree as a figure of interconnection beyond rigid systems. In addition to what are but two examples of the roles trees may play in many cultures, Aboriginal epistemologies regard trees as highly significant, too. They recognise trees as sentient and cognisant and hold that trees can impart their knowledge to (Aboriginal) people willing to listen (see Murray and Murray 22). Concordantly, when Ashala runs away from home and wants to build a community for children like her in the woods, tellingly called the “Firstwood” (*Ashala Wolf* 176), a saur—a reptile that can talk to her telepathically—declares:

You wish to live with trees, so it is they who must determine your fate [...] You will make your plea to the forest. Perhaps the trees will let you stay. But be warned: whatever bargain you make with them, the saurs will ensure you keep it. And if the forest decides that you must go, then we will finish you. (174-175)

Clearly, the saur accords agency and even authority to the trees. Far from pertaining to an insensate *environment*, the Firstwood holds all the power. The saurs respect the trees so much that they act as their executive power, making sure the trees’ legislation is heeded by all. This emphasis on the trees’ sentience and wisdom is what Alice Curry might call “a discursive readjusting of epistemic privilege,” (*Environmental Crisis* 194),

¹⁶ The serpent’s capacity to give life is invoked once more when Ashala’s boyfriend dies at the end of the novel and she conjures the serpent’s spiritual powers to resuscitate him (see 356-357).

which further interrogates preconceived ideas about sentience and agency, the human and the more-than-human. Ashala, too, recognises that trees are special and powerful, and she is hesitant to talk to them: “Those old trees that remembered how humans had caused the end of the world. They seemed to stare right back at me. I wasn’t sure they liked what they saw” (*Ashala Wolf* 175). Trees are understood as bearers of memory—in the light of human-made environmental destruction both in colonial times and in what the novel calls the Reckoning, they have every reason to reject Ashala, as she is well-aware. It goes to show that trees function as literal pillars of the budding community built around ancestral knowledge systems.

The trees, and thus *Ashala Wolf*, are adamant that interspecies conviviality is only possible if nature is not ever again made to bear the brunt of human violence. To make their point, they send Ashala a message: “Images poured into my mind, nightmarish pictures of things I’d never seen before. Strange vehicles with metal jaws, weird saws with teeth that roared, and humans, always more humans, cutting and hacking and slashing and killing” (178). Though Ashala defends herself, internally screaming, “*It wasn’t me who did that!*,” (178; original emphasis), she cannot undo what happened (see Burger 305-306). Willing to do her part for a much more just form of conviviality, Ashala is keen to set herself apart from human perpetrators. The humans the trees remember are characterised as exceedingly violent, e.g. by means of the enumeration of progressive verb forms used to communicate the havoc they have wrought on the environment (see 307). A harbinger of change, Ashala steps up and tells the trees that she regards them as equals and promises that she will protect them: “And if anyone ever comes for you with machines or saws or axes or anything, they’ll have to get through me first” (*Ashala Wolf* 179). The trees and Ashala commiserate together, sharing their pain as among kin, Ashala grieving for her sister and the trees mourning the violence nature has had to suffer. As a means of consolation, the trees project another image into Ashala’s mind, one of harmonious conviviality between thriving species, remembering the time when the woods were the first thing to grow after the Reckoning (see 179-180). Excitedly announcing: “I live! We live! We survive!,” (180), Ashala “establish[es] a respectful and reciprocal relationship with her natural environment,” (“Animism” 60) and embraces the possibility of true interspecies *conviviality*.¹⁷

¹⁷ Although other instances of interspecies solidarity testify to the paradigm of conviviality, too, the first encounter of Ashala and the trees is pivotal as it opens the way for future being-with of species.

However, absolute equality of human and more-than-human actors alike in *Ashala Wolf* may be called into question on the grounds of the novel's underlying anthropocentric mode of narration, a testament to what Monika Fludernik terms "[t]he anthropomorphic bias of narratives" (13).¹⁸ *Ashala* is "the most frequent autodiegetic focaliser," (Burger 301), and the reader thus mainly experiences the world from her situated perspective anchored in her largely human body and consciousness.¹⁹ Is the future as it is imagined in *Ashala Wolf* really that far away from perpetuating anthropocentrism, then? A passage from *The Foretelling of Georgie Spider*, the last volume of the series, may serve as an answer to this question and once more affirms the centrality of Aboriginal knowledge:

Animals, plants, trees, wind, rock—they all have language, culture, and law. Human beings cannot know all of this language, culture, and law, because we can't see the world from the perspective of every other form of life. Only rock truly knows what it is to be a rock. But just because we can't experience it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. (*Georgie Spider* 421-422)

Following Kwaymullina's line of argumentation, we might say that, far from perpetuating anthropocentrism, near-human narration in *Ashala Wolf*, in fact, expresses deep-seated respect for more-than-human experiences, as the novel resists appropriating them into a human frame of consciousness. Certainly, *Ashala Wolf* makes "multiple references to the entanglements between humans and nonhumans—indicated by the animal-surnames of its protagonists from a start" (Burger 299). As Bettina Burger puts it, "Kwaymullina manages to decentre the human while still making nonhuman voices heard to human readers" (300).²⁰ By taking up Aboriginal ideas of non-anthropocentric conviviality, *Ashala Wolf* both

¹⁸ Alice Curry, too, concedes that fiction written by humans for humans, in modes comprehensible to humans, "cannot do otherwise but" surrender to circumstantial anthropocentrism (*Environmental Crisis* 197).

¹⁹ More and more pieces of contemporary fiction chip away at the preponderance of anthropocentric narration. An intriguing example is Nnedi Okorafor's speculative fiction novel *Lagoon* (2014), which not only deconstructs unified concepts of the human but also turns the spotlight on more-than-human agency, having more-than-human characters narrate individual sections of the novel.

²⁰ Bettina Burger offers yet another interesting insight in their article on *Ashala Wolf*, suggesting that the anthropocentric "framing" I discuss with an eye to the narrative situation "is undoubtedly due to the demands of the generic conventions of Young Adult Fiction" (303).

reaffirms Aboriginal knowledges and, on these grounds, develops a possible solution to the ongoing destruction of our planet.

Conclusion: *Ashala Wolf*, Queer Aboriginal Australian Speculative Fiction, and the Dis-/Ability Dialectic

Both queerness and interspecies connections in *Ashala Wolf* contribute to a better, less boundary-ridden world, which Kwaymullina's novel depicts as the only way out of our current planetary crisis. It incorporates Aboriginal epistemologies and ways of being in the world into the far-reaching realm of speculative fiction and diversifies the genre by adding to it Aboriginal epistemes. This is powerfully illustrated by the way in which *Ashala Wolf* takes up the trope of the apocalypse. Looking at young adult dystopian novels, Alice Curry notes that "post-apocalyptic" scenarios set in Western regions have pertinence within the genre. A related but unique form "with ideologies rooted not in western environmentalism but in indigenous and animist belief systems" is coming into its own ("Animism" 57). Upon reading *Ashala Wolf*, Curry identifies "a pre-modern understanding of spirit as deeply embedded in human relations with the environment [which] renders the ontological separation of human and nonhuman reductive" (57). Far from intending to frame this "pre-modern" understanding as outdated, Curry draws attention to how it "provides a *transformative* response to environmental estrangement," and constitutes "a future-facing animist ontology" (57 my emphasis, 64 my emphasis). Evidently, *Ashala Wolf* draws on Aboriginal knowledge systems to suggest a solution to contemporary, global and planetary problems.

Moreover, there are many elements of speculative fiction *Ashala Wolf* mobilises and expands to make space for Aboriginal epistemologies. While more-than-humans speaking human idioms are commonplace in fantasy and speculative fiction, "Kwaymullina's nonhumans are not mere fantasy tropes. [T]he speculative element lies not in the fact that animals and trees *can* speak but more in the way in which these voices" are solidly placed within the framework of Aboriginal epistemologies (Burger 314; original emphasis). Gladys and Jill Murray reaffirm Aboriginal knowledges and ways of obtaining them: "Aboriginal people have different ways of knowing. One of the ways we know and make sense of the world around us is through stories given to us from the Dreaming. Stories tell us about the spirit of the world" (22).²¹ In the context of how *Ashala Wolf* speculates

²¹ Importantly, Murray and Murray harshly criticise the privileged position of "Western knowledge [which] is increasingly problematic because of its dominance over other people's world knowledge and learning systems, its innate belief in its superiority over *all* other forms of 'knowing', and its claims to universality when it is only a 'particular' way of knowing" (23; original emphasis).

about the future, it is important to note that the Aboriginal ways depicted in the novel cannot be pinned down to just one of the manifold Aboriginal cultures. These plural affiliations are representative of relations between diverse Aboriginal groups: “Aboriginal people are culturally and linguistically diverse, but share a holistic, animate, interconnected system of knowledge that knows the stories for country, the spirit in the land and the relationships between all living things” (Murray and Murray 40). So, as well as unsettling division between species, *Ashala Wolf* mobilises a repository of diverse Aboriginal knowledges, defying boundaries and performing conviviality.

Kwaymullina’s novel also takes important steps toward autonomous and agential Indigenous self-representation. As the prolific science fiction writer and theorist Brian Attebery pertinently notes: “As [sf, i.e., science and speculative fiction, is] the genre within which concepts of the future are formulated and negotiated, sf can imply, by omitting a particular group from its representations, that the days of that group are numbered”.²² Drawing our attention to “Australian sf writers”, he remarks that they “have long struggled to incorporate native peoples and their traditional stories and ways of life into distinctively Australian futures” (385). What is even more worrisome, when non-Aboriginal writers pick up Aboriginal themes in their writings, “[t]he indigenous Other becomes part of the textual unconscious—always present but silent and often transmuted into symbolic form” (387). Ambelin Kwaymullina is vocal about this misrepresentation:

We have been written about as though non-Indigenous people are entitled to define our identities, our histories, and our ultimate destinies. I find all such works to be works of fantasy. And yet I would not find these writings in the speculative fiction section of a bookstore; in fact, I wouldn’t even find them in the fiction section. These stories have been presented as history, as academic analysis, and as simple fact. (“Edges, Centres and Futures” n.p.)

²² To be sure, Brian Attebery discusses science fiction, not speculative fiction. For the sake of simplicity, I here treat the two genres alike, because to disambiguate them would exceed the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that science fiction by definition is not always open enough for multi-layered imaginings of possible futures which stray away from well-worn tropes of technology (see 386). Generally, the two genres are not easily distinguishable from one another and the points Attebery makes about science fiction can in this case be extrapolated onto *Ashala Wolf* as speculative fiction without doing a disservice to the novel.

Resisting misrepresentation and protesting non-Indigenous attempts to define Indigenous Identities, she argues that “many of the ideas which populate speculative fiction books— notions of time travel, astral projection, speaking the languages of animals or trees—are part of [the realities of] Indigenous cultures” (“Edges” n.p.). Drawing parallels between misrepresentations of Aboriginal peoples and bias inherent in delineations of literary genres, Kwaymullina calls for Aboriginal epistemologies to be taken seriously. She offers a remedy to gross misrepresentation and misunderstanding in *Ashala Wolf* and positions Indigenous knowledge systems squarely in the space of Australian speculative fiction. How *Ashala Wolf* engages with technology, one of the standard tropes of science and speculative fiction, is a good example of the novel’s self-assertive interrogation of non-Aboriginal parameters: While Attebery is right to comment on the role technology now plays in the advancement of Australia (see 386), he does not reflect critically on the flipside of technology and how it marks not only societal progress in the Western sense but also goes hand-in-glove with how nature and the organic more-than-human have been relegated to the background. I have mentioned above that the new society in *Ashala Wolf* is sceptical of technology and has even forbidden computers (see *Ashala Wolf* 267). The fact that human and more-than-human beings in *Ashala Wolf* handle technology very carefully and point to its ample capacity for damage counters technodeterminism and recenters Aboriginal ways of life in an imagined future.²³ By expanding the genre of speculative fiction to make room for what is rightfully hers, Ambelin Kwaymullina is one of the “Aboriginal writers” who, according to Attebery, aptly prove “that they too participate in contemporary world culture and have a claim on all forms of literary discourse” (402). In sum, *Ashala Wolf* “reimagines the genre to reflect an intersectional space of listening and hearing voices, stories, and knowledges that transcend a binary understanding of the organic and technological, the mainstream and the margins” (Herb, Collins-Gearing and Huijser 110).

Ashala Wolf is only the first of three young adult novels of which Kwaymullina’s *The Tribe* series is composed. This article has, apart from looking at queered gender roles, conceived of queerness in terms of

²³ Herb, Collins-Gearing and Huijser write that “[t]echnology and nature are not in oppositional disharmony” in Kwaymullina’s series (113). While this may hold true for the sequels to *Ashala Wolf*, this first volume of the series moves only very carefully towards technology instead of away from it. For more information on slowly dissolving boundaries between the organic and the digital, see Burger (311).

analogy—avid readers know that more literal instances of queer relations follow in the sequels. Likewise, the vast field of fiction in general has a lot to say about ties across “specious species taxonomies” (Slopek 2022). It will be exciting to see which directions literature and scholarship are going to take and how representations of queerness and interspecies imaginaries will shift towards one another, especially in light of how our planet is changing for the worse. To end on a hopeful note, Ambelin Kwaymullina has said something very wise, which referred to the colonisation of Aboriginal lands by the British, but which the group of characters she writes about in *Ashala Wolf* enact in the context of climate change and planetary transformation, namely the assertion that “Indigenous people lived through the end of the world, but [...] did not end” (“Edges” n.p.). *Ashala Wolf* takes up this sentiment with an eye to planetary and ecological duress. At the same time, as this article has shown, the novel carefully sutures together Indigenous knowledges, Aboriginal speculations, and discussions of queerness and dis-/ability. By doing so, it drives home the point that ecological and social matters go hand-in-hand and have a place in Indigenous-informed speculations on the future.

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Queering the Dreaming: Representations of the 'Other' in the Indigenous Australian Speculative Television Series *Cleverman*

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Abstract

This essay analyzes queer representations in the context of Indigenous Australian discourses by looking at the two-season Australian science fiction series *Cleverman* (2016-2017). *Cleverman* aims to combine the conventions of the science fiction and superhero genres with ancient Indigenous stories. *Cleverman*'s compelling introduction of the Hairypeople, an alternative humanoid species with extraordinary strength inspired by Aboriginal mythology, provides the context to explore queer identities in regards to otherness, marginality, and culturally constructed boundaries between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal'. Through the series' engagement with the subjectivity and queering of the monstrous 'other', the binary construct of good versus evil is challenged. The series' representation of boundary creatures highlights the constraints within which racially marked bodies operate, however misses the potential to equally engage with gendered bodies. While the series invites ambivalent readings of the role of community belonging and the nuclear family, the representation of female agency fails to similarly redefine discursively constituted identities and shows less potential to re-write normative codes of sex and sexuality.

Representations of queer identities open a discursive space concerned with difference and diversity, otherness, marginality, and culturally constructed boundaries between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal'. By looking at the two-season Australian science fiction series *Cleverman* (2016-2017), this essay discusses queer representations in the context of Indigenous Australian discourses and analyzes how far such a reading engages with contemporary individuals' resistance to limiting cultural tendencies. In line with Judith Butler's reading of queer as "a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, [...] never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes," this essay reads queer not exclusively in regards to a study of gender, sex and sexuality, but also as a site offering productive connections to discourses of *race* and marginalization (Butler, *Bodies* 228). By producing visibly different, unpredictable bodies—within the story world often marked as 'monstrous'—speculative fiction lends itself to "impel us to reflect upon our own understanding of 'the body' and upon the ways in which bodies are viewed and regulated in the social world" (Mitchell n.p.). *Cleverman's* compelling introduction of the Hairypeople, an alternative humanoid species with extraordinary strength inspired by an ancient Aboriginal mythology of the Gamilaraay and Bundjalung people of northern New South Wales, provides the context to explore queer representations of Indigenous identities. Especially the juxtaposition of this mythological knowledge and power with Western ideas of science foregrounds the "disparate worldviews of colonized, formerly colonized and diasporic people, for many of whom science and spirituality are intertwined and inseparable" (Langer 129). In the interpolation of mythology, spirituality and folktale with the science fiction genre, *Cleverman* presents both Western understandings of science and Aboriginal knowledge as transgressive and permeable. Further, the notion of the 'monstrous' will be discussed as liminal and transformative, thereby overturning the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject. Through the series' engagement with the subjectivity and queering of the monstrous 'other', the binary construct of good versus evil is challenged. While the series invites ambivalent readings of the role of community belonging and the nuclear family, the representations of female agency fail to similarly redefine discursively constituted identities and shows less potential to re-write normative codes of sex and sexuality.

The TV series was collectively produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Screen Australia, Goalpost Pictures, New Zealand's Pukeko Pictures and the US company Sundance TV. In addition to its release in Australia, *Cleverman* found a global audience

through distribution to the USA, UK, China, and Germany. It was the first Australian television series to premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2016 (Ndalianis and Burke n.p.). Significantly, it was the first time in Australian screen history that over 80 percent of a cast and crew were of Indigenous descent, including the showrunner Ryan Griffen, who created the original concept for the series, the directors Wayne Blair and Leah Purcell, the writers, and a majority of the cast. The production followed strict protocols in its writing, “one of the reasons the four-year development process was so long, because it was essential that they consult with communities and gain permission to tell Dreaming stories” (Bizzaca n.p.).¹

This respect for cultural heritage and Indigenous Australian cultural protocol was relevant for three distinct plotlines drawn from stories, characters, and rituals from the Dreaming: the Cleverman, the Hairypeople, and the Namorrodor monster. To briefly outline the show’s premise: The world of *Cleverman* is centred on an unnamed Australian city in the near future in which an alternative humanoid species with extraordinary strength—the Hairypeople (often called ‘Hairies’ or ‘Subbies’ for Subhumans)—who have lived alongside humans undetected for centuries—are marked as a threat to society and forcibly sectioned off into a compound space known as ‘The Zone’ or put into detention centres. The dystopian narrative, therefore, evolves around contemporary issues such as border protection, refugees and racism and is “couched squarely within Australia’s own divisive asylum-seeker situation—plus a brutal colonial past, ancient Aboriginal mythology and the science fiction genre” (Spencer n.p.). Navigating this tense political climate are the human Aboriginal half-brothers Waruu and Koen. Waruu is the self-appointed leader of the disenfranchised people of the Zone, while his estranged brother Koen in the beginning, exploits this situation to his advantage by selling out Hairies to the government in return for a lucrative reward. Waruu’s anger towards his brother fuels much of the series’ tension once he realizes that their Uncle Jimmy has passed the power of the Cleverman to his ill-suited brother. Following a monomythic hero’s journey, Koen is at first reluctant and dismissive of his new identity as an Aboriginal superhero but eventually rises to the selfless responsibility, which climaxes in the first season in the confrontation of

¹ Among the show’s many culturally sensitive approaches is its engagement with language. The Hairypeople speak Gumbaynggirr, a language, based on the mid north coast of NSW, that had almost died, but has been revived in recent years. Other Aboriginal characters in the series speak the northern NSW language of Bundjalung, another endangered language. Gary Williams, chief executive of the Muurrbay Language and Cultural Co-operative, the organisation that was established to save Gumbaynggirr, worked with the show’s team to translate the scripts and teach the cast correct pronunciation (cf. Keen; Ndalianis and Burke).

Koen with the mythological heart-stealing monster Namorrodor. “Conforming to superhero conventions, the Cleverman wields the nulla nulla, an ancient fighting stick imbued with magical spirits; he also has abilities that include healing, strength, shapeshifting, pre and postcognition and the ability to rupture an individual’s spiritual access to the ancient world” (Lomax n.p.). As creator Griffen explains, the Cleverman “is a conduit between reality and the Dreaming. He is someone who is spiritually connected to both worlds [...] and the major gift of our superhero is he can see things that others can’t” (Griffen quoted in Bizzaca n.p.).² The mythology of the Cleverman is based on the Dreaming figure of the ‘Clever Man’ who appears interchangeably in Indigenous narratives as *Mann’gur* (Medicine Man), *Kgun’diri* (Forecaster), and *Kgai’dai’chi* (Spirit Man) (Ford 27).

Cleverman aims to combine the conventions of the science fiction and superhero genres with ancient Indigenous stories to encourage more diverse representations of Aboriginality. As the series’ showrunner recounts, “the genesis of Cleverman came [...] playing dress-ups with my son. We were playing Ninja Turtles, and in that moment, I suddenly wished we had something cultural—something Aboriginal—that he could cling to with as much excitement as he did with this” (Griffen n.p.). By “blending 60,000 years of culture with the superhero world on a modern platform,” Griffen wanted to create an Aboriginal superhero that his son could connect with, “I wanted a character that would empower him to stand and fight when presented with racism” (ibid.).³

Both, the superhero and the science fiction genre, are genres inextricably linked to the realities of social and political life. Matt Norman acknowledges that “*Cleverman* never tried to hide its political streak,” finding that “its segregated society, persecuted minority, oppressive government and profit-driven media machine offer fertile ground for social commentary” (Norman n.p.).⁴ Ndalianis and Burke further argue that *Cleverman* uses the broadly appealing superhero genre—filtered through the lens of Dreaming—to address contemporary and past horrors and injustices, and therefore reinforce the important social role that the superhero genre plays in delivering powerful personal, social, and political

² The Cleverman’s ability to see across two different worlds is physically manifested in the changing of one eye colour from brown to blue.

³ In the Extras of the DVD Ryan Griffen poignantly refers to the Cleverman and his ability to spiritually connect to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews as “the pope of the Dreamtime”.

⁴ Norman, however, challenges the series’ progressive potential and argues that it fails to “transcend the boundaries of the superhero genre” because of its endorsement of violence. In the handing over of the nulla nulla—an Aboriginal weapon—to Koen, Norman reads a validation of violence as justified, common in US superhero stories.

messages disguised as metaphor or mythic typologies (Ndalianis and Burke n.p.). However, *Cleverman* also deviates from superhero genre conventions (especially known in the US-American market), to position the superhero as representative of a particular kind of nationalist pride. “Koen’s position as an Indigenous superhero is a distinct break from the figure of the white Australian that dominates in the media. If the superhero is the symbol of the nation, then Koen, as an Indigenous superhero, reminds us of white Australia’s black history” (Ford 32). To put this integrative potential of the series in the words of Mitch Know: “In the space of 52 minutes, viewers were exposed to more aspects of Indigenous culture than most non-Indigenous Australians received during 12 years of schooling (and arguably beyond)” (Knox n.p.). In his article “Not so fictional Cleverman,” Tyson Yunkaporta comments on the non-fictional reality of *Cleverman*’s dystopian and futuristic outset.

The first season explored segregation and the myths of primitivism and progress through the introduction of the “hairies” of Aboriginal lore, an ancient culture uneasily labelled by the authorities as sub-human, despite their superior strength, cultural complexity and long lifespan. This recalls similarly disingenuous narratives of racial supremacy and primitivism deployed during Australia’s colonisation. The second season boldly introduces the theme of biological genocide, referencing the many historical policies of breeding out the natives—like the Stolen Generations and the Victorian Half-Caste Act—which were the first order of business at Australia’s Federation. These efforts at extermination live today in custom if not in law, with Aboriginal people constantly being asked by settlers, ‘What percentage Aboriginal are you?’ in daily acts of micro-aggression imposing White limits on Black identity. (n.p.)

In integrating the reality of intergenerational traumas from dispossession into a science-fiction scenario, thereby foregrounding that it is not an imagined future but a lived experience of Indigenous communities, Yunkaporta sees an innovative approach to the overworked dystopian genre.⁵

Cleverman’s greatest potential in challenging Eurocentric and paternalistic normative practices unfolds in its renegotiation of (Western) science. Such renegotiations are at the heart of the decolonizing project of what Jessica Langer calls ‘postcolonial science fiction’ because science fiction itself often “is seen as aligned with colonialism and therefore anathema” (Langer 1). The critical and creative potential of postcolonial science fiction, as Jessica Langer has seminally described it, notes “the ways in which Western scientific discourse [...] has interacted

⁵ This is in line with Kyle Whyte who argues similarly on the problematic notion of ‘apocalypse’ that the disruption of life-worlds are “not new” to Indigenous Peoples around the world, suggesting that the idea of impending “apocalypse” reads like a “colonial déjà vu” from an Indigenous perspective (89). As Whyte argues, Western academic and fictional engagements with the idea of impending apocalypse endemically fail to address the issue of “ongoing, cyclical colonialism” (94).

with colonialism and the cultural production of colonized peoples” (9). Therefore, postcolonial responses to science and speculative fiction are powerful interventions which destabilize the imperial grammar of Euro-Western imaginaries of exploration and discovery. As Langer argues, “writers, film-makers and others involved in the production of postcolonial science fiction participate [...] in decolonization” as an ongoing process of reconfiguration: “utilizing the particular strengths and possibilities contained in the science fiction genre to further the project of a world not only politically but (variously) economically, culturally, intellectually and/or creatively decolonized” (8).

Cleverman engages with white, paternalistic, and exploitative attitudes of (Western) science in the shape of Jarrod Slade (played by Iain Glen), a media mogul who also operates a secret genetic laboratory on the side. In his lab, Slade seeks to understand the biological principles underpinning the Hairypeople’s strength and longevity and his experiments eventually result in the creation of two formulas: a serum that can replicate these superhuman abilities in human subjects, and another that turns Hairies into humans. In this take on science, bodies are treated as a resource; “[b]iological research is rendered malign due to the commercialisation and commodification of the body through the actions of large genetics corporations” and is incorporated into a broader narrative about *race*, for the Hairypeople are effectively farmed for what they can offer to humans (Atkinson n.p.). Slade is further interested in the superpower of the Cleverman (he therefore frequently tries to capture Koen to experiment on him but only gets hold of his hunting stick *nulla nulla*). While the Cleverman’s capacities to animate, generate, and preserve the body are, in most cases, represented as a semi-physical force attendant on the body, these capabilities can only be understood fully via transcendental explanations linked to the Dreaming. In traditional science fiction, to argue with Langer, this would be described as a manifestation of binarism, Indigenous methods of knowledge-production versus Western scientific paradigms, “usually expressed through traumatic and destructive hybridity” (Langer 127). Slade, in contrast, treats both knowledge systems as scientifically meaningful and, for his aims, equally important to exploit and weaponize to his benefit. This is shown, for example, in Slade’s kidnapping of the ancient spirit Kora, his genetic examination of the *nulla nulla*, or his biological study of the fluid of a fig tree which carries in it a type of living energy. Slade does not seem to question the powers of these Aboriginal forces and despite him only being interested in these objects and bodies as a resource through which to create technologies that could enhance human life, he nevertheless diversifies and indigenizes his research. He corrupts Uncle Jimmy into sharing some of the stories and secrets and similarly tries to ‘work’

together with Koen: “I need access to the Dreaming,” he explains, to which Koen responds: “It’s not yours to have” (S1E6 00:37:05). This consistent portrayal of Aboriginal Dreaming alongside genre-conventional representations of labs and scientific experiments, destabilizes the boundaries of colonial scientific discourses and challenges the essentialist view of Indigenous knowledge as ‘magic,’ ‘ancient,’ and ‘primitive’. Against the colonial claim that Indigenous, colonized knowledge systems exist in the past and have no place in the future, this postcolonial science fiction series utilizes generic conventions in a radically different way: to explore the ways in which Western scientific discourse, both in terms of technology and in terms of culture, interacts with colonialism and the cultural production of colonized peoples (Langer 9).

About the representation of superhuman bodies (embodied by the Cleverman and the Hairies), Paul Atkinson states that the “series knowingly reflects on race and the politics of discrimination, but owing to this superhuman premise, it also introduces arguments on how physical differences can, or indeed should, be conceptualised socially, politically and scientifically” (n.p.). He argues that *Cleverman*, in contrast to other superhero texts that celebrate the augmentation of the human body through different kinds of technologies, valorizes the natural body (represented by the energy of the Cleverman and the vital bodies of Hairypeople) over the body enhanced by technological, scientific interference (as represented, particularly, by Slade’s genetic experiments on the ‘Hairies’). While this is a convincing argument in the representation of the assimilationist Inclusion Initiative (Season 2) which will change Hairypeople into humans, I rather argue that the series associates *all* hybrid bodies (those taking knowledge from human and Hairy, human and Aboriginal etc) with strength and adaptability.

Moreover, this positive reading of fluidity and heterogeneity is further emphasized by non-linear temporalities. According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the common Western scientific understanding of the past is based upon a linear view of time, one which is closely linked to ‘progress,’ while Indigenous peoples’ cosmology is understood to be ‘pre-historic’ or ‘outside of time’ (Smith 55). By deviating from a linear conception of time, colonial modes of thinking have argued that Indigenous peoples are deprived of the possibility to ‘develop’ or ‘progress’. The notion of time traveling or temporal fluidity, popular in speculative fiction, in *Cleverman*, therefore, gains an additional layer of political significance. Whereas many speculative texts tend to operate with “untranslatable temporal otherness,” “multiple times that never quite dissolve into the code of modern time consciousness” and instead exist as “discrete temporalities incapable of attaining homogeneity with or full incorporation into a uniform

chronological present” (Lim 12), the parallel existence of past and present stories and realities of the Cleverman and the Hairies disrupt such colonial temporalities. The Dreaming is something that perpetually exists and is just always there. “[B]y collapsing real and imagined worlds, [the Cleverman’s abilities] present a contemporary Australia still haunted by a history of genocide, government control and systemic abuse of Indigenous communities. Here, the fantastic offers a subversive space in which to engage with Indigenous narratives and challenge the dominance of a white Australian history” (Ford 34).⁶

Cleverman Koen is depicted as estranged from his family and community, a fact that never gets entirely resolved throughout the series. Uncle Jimmy hands over the *nulla nulla* to Koen with the words “Time you decide which tribe you belong to,” to which Koen remains ambivalent as he immediately responds, “I’m not planning on joining any tribe” (S1E1 00:22:48). Jimmy’s “I’ll be watching,” however, suggests that positioning himself to kin past and present, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, will be impossible for Koen to avoid entirely. Herein lies a decisive shift in the effort to indigenize the superhero genre, as Cavan Gallagher argues, but also presents in Koen’s resentment and alienation from family relations a non-normative approach to concepts of family. Cavan Gallagher argues that Koen’s fate as the superhero Cleverman is intrinsically bound to the community: “Traditionally, superheroes have operated in isolation from society at large, be they cloistered groups like The Avengers or active self-exile like Batman” (40). This classic narrative, Gallagher continues, is a necessity for superheroes, “since their abilities are generally misunderstood by the public and can attract unwelcome (generally villainous) attention to their loved ones” (40). While this trope might be meaningful for individualistic Western societies, he argues, Indigenous kinship relations, in contrast, “place a strong emphasis on universal responsibility, with many communities intricately structured in ways that determine who will care for the sick and old, or orphaned children, and who can marry whom” (40). *Cleverman* does not present such unified

⁶ Congruent with this reading, showrunner Ryan Griffen has pointed to the different meanings of ‘Dreamtime’ and ‘Dreaming’, stressing that the former is associated with the past whereas the latter suggests something happening now, something still becoming. “By anchoring Indigeneity to the past, non-Indigenous Australia is able to curate a romanticized record of national history that locates the violence and dispossession as quite literally passed, and to repress some of the more uncomfortable realities of present-day race relations. In combining elements of Dreaming stories with supernatural elements of the science fiction and fantasy genres, Griffen repositions Indigenous identity as something fluid and adaptable” (Ford 33).

and structured (rather essentialist) versions of Indigenous communities. Conversely, and here Gallagher agrees, Koen is chosen by Uncle Jimmy precisely because he is largely disliked by his community in the Zone and has no interest (at first) in acting as the integral element of the community. Instead, his older brother Waruu is a much appreciated and prominent advocate in the Zone who speaks up for the Hairies and other disenfranchised community members. Interestingly, the first season ends with an inversion of the brothers' positions. Waruu becomes more and more isolated because his greed and ambition have made him agree to a lucrative deal with Slade, whereas Koen gradually connects to ancestral spirits and is slowly drawn back to family and community members in the Zone. In the final act, after fulfilling his final test by defeating the Namorrodor, Koen wins the respect of the community (of those present visually in the Zone and of those past ancestors audible in whispers in Koen's head) and joins the preparations of barricading the Zone against an expected assault by the Containment Authority (CA).

Waruu's fall and alienation from his family is further dramatized in the second season when he becomes entangled in Slade's experiments and gains more power as a government representative enforcing the assimilation policies against the Hairies. He is, however, not an "equal and binary opposite of the hero" (Gallagher 40), who is triumphantly defeated in the end. This is because, I argue, that the series does not present a spiritual world with such binary poles (as much as it refuses a nature-culture binary in the representation of science, addressed above). In terms of morality, both Clevermen, Jimmy and Koen, as well as Waruu, are shown prone to corruption, Hairies are oftentimes quick-tempered and violent towards humans as well as towards each other, ancestral spirits such as Kora are unpredictable and dubious, many family members commit adultery and criminal acts. The final confrontation between the brothers in the series' very last episode similarly shows no clear and morally entitled winner and ends abruptly with both on the ground. The brothers, in the end, are mostly isolated despite their superpowers (Waruu has gradually turned into a Hairy due to injections), stuck between two worlds and belonging to neither. In this ambivalent ending, one can read an empowering new take on the superhero genre as well as a critique of essentialist ideas about Indigenous belonging. The ending of the first season mentioned above, already suggests a destabilization of binary thinking. During the fight between Koen and the Namorrodor, in several shots, the camera, hence the spectator, takes up the point-of-view of this spiritual monster. This creates suspense, since the spectator is put into the predator's perspective, and confronts the spectator with a transgressive experience, literally exposed to the subjectivity of the 'other'. This creature is part of the Dreaming (and in

fact has been summoned by Uncle Jimmy in the first place), it is decisive for Koen's coming-of-age as a Cleverman, and therefore this experience challenges a reading of Koen as a 'typical' superhero fighting against evil. Many superheroes tend to be portrayed, literally, as white saviours pitted against external (often 'racialized') malevolent forces. In the avoidance of an objectivizing of the 'other', the monster becomes kin.

In this inclusive challenge to read the 'other' as kin, *Cleverman* is queering the monster, regarding the Namorrodor, but also in the treatment of the Hairies. Elaine Showalter sees the monstrous 'other' as offering a third alternative or, more specifically, a place/space outside, or beyond, normativity (cf. Bacon 2). In addressing the role of binary constellations in science fiction, Jessica Langer claims that

a mutual central focus of science fiction and (post)colonialism is that of otherness: how it has been conceptualized, acted upon and subverted. Politically and pragmatically, the distinction between self and other has functioned as a method of control in colonial societies, creating a power hierarchy predicated both on physical and cultural difference and on enforced Foucauldian differentials of knowledge. In science fiction, otherness is often conceptualized corporeally, as a physical difference that either signposts or causes an essential difference, in a constant echo of zero-world racialization. Although this concept of alienness does not always signify a colonial relationship, it often dovetails with the colonial discourse of the Other. (82)

Cleverman uses a number of visual signifiers to set the Hairies apart as "other-than-human": the thick body and facial hair, the sharp fingernails, the fast movement visualized by parkouring, especially when being pursued, and their strikingly blue eyes, a visual metaphor used to show the connection to the Dreaming (Musharbash 139-140). Set in a heavily surveilled urban environment, these body parts are frequently zoomed in on by surveillance cameras to identify them as 'other'.⁷ The authorities view them with paranoid suspicion and "treat them in ways reminiscent not only of Australian frontier and colonial violence but also paralleling current Australian maltreatments of refugees" (Musharbash 138). In a press conference the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection Geoff Matthews declares that "these creatures are not human. We do not share the same DNA. We don't exactly know what they are" (S1E1 03:15). The construction of the Hairies as 'monstrous' by the mainstream society results in violence against all those 'othered' by the system, but young and female Hairies in particular. In a telling dialogue between Koen and his Auntie Linda, who is wiping the blood of the corpse of a young

⁷ While some, called 'shavers', remove their hair and learn English to blend into society, there are also the 'non-shavers' who speak traditional language and are covered in hair from head to toe. The second season introduces yet another category with those who accept the authority's anti-serum, which makes them loose all their hair as well as their powers (Musharbash 143).

Hairy who was just attacked and killed by three non-Indigenous men, the construction of the alien 'other' is further exposed: "How can you kick a kid in the face?" Koen asks, to which Linda responds with, "You can if you think he is a monster" (S2E2 00:55). The brutal treatment of non-white and queer lives represented here shows, to argue with Judith Butler, that "certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized; they fit no dominant frame for the human, and their dehumanization occurs first, at this level. This level then gives rise to physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization which is already at work in the culture" (Butler, *Undoing* 25).

Paul Atkinson comments on the importance of 'hairiness' in the construction of the monstrous 'other'. "Hairiness reframes debates about racial differences without reference to skin colour and, therefore, without a direct reference to an existing race or culture. The audience is asked to confront the issue rather than the prejudice" (Atkinson n.p.). Hair has the capacity to grow and regenerate and therefore symbolizes the strength and vitality of the Hairypeoples' bodies. In *Cleverman*, "hair is the expression of a life force that resists suppression [and it is] posited as a resource with its own intrinsic power" (ibid.). The association of hairiness with monstrous vitality thereby marks a significant contrast with Eurocentric classical ideals of beauty, particularly Hellenic sculpture and neo-Classical artworks, in which beautiful and strong bodies are shown to be nude and hairless.⁸ In the character of the non-white Hairywoman Araluen, however, there is an overtly sexualized representation of the female Hairy body in addition to the racial bias in which hairiness is linked to monstrosity. Instead of imprisonment in the detention centre, she is sold to sex slavery, forced to entertain human customers who are particularly aroused by what they fear—the Hairywoman's otherness—among them the above-mentioned immigration minister Matthews.

Scholars have frequently emphasized the notion of 'monster' as "almost a queer category" (Halberstam 27). The monster's body as a "cultural body" literally incorporates certain fears, desires, anxieties, and fantasies of a certain cultural moment and thus evades "easy categorization" (Cohen 4; 6). The monster cannot be assigned to a specific classification of animals or people; their physical, psychological, or social characteristics cross the lines of specific categories (Cohen 6-7). Peter Brooks proposes that "[a] monster may also be that which

⁸ This is starkly presented in S1E4, where a topless Caucasian US-American man with a perfectly toned hairless body is injected with Slade's Hairy serum in a laboratory experiment. He is first able to achieve quite remarkable speeds on an exercise bike before he collapses and dies. His hairless human body is unable to accommodate the natural power of the Hairypeople, whose bodies are adapted to their environment rather than sculpted for appearance (cf. Atkinson).

eludes gender definition” (219). In the possibility to be ‘shavers’ and to blend in with human society, the Hairies present an adaptability in line with Cohen’s thesis that “the monster always escapes”: the monster causes anxieties because it “turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear someplace else” (4). Constructions of the monstrous are therefore concerned with bodies “that always threaten to shift; invigorated by change and escape” (6). In “not really know[ing] what they are” (S1E1 03:15), albeit knowing that they are different from humans, the Hairies present such boundary creatures and are a “harbinger of category crisis” (Cohen 6).

In contrast to the Cleverman, whose spiritual powers are associated with the Dreaming and extend beyond an earthly, physical presence, the Hairies’ abilities are strongly grounded in the body and mainly represented in physical vitality (such as fighting, hunting, and running). This alterity, Paul Atkinson criticizes, is not properly examined in the series. “[R]ather than really invoking the other, [...] the audience is presented with a benign, peace loving people who have already been subjugated by the Containment Authority—indeed any minority group could fit the profile—rather than a mythological outcast people with extraordinary powers who are willing to confront their oppressor” (n.p.). The transgressive potential in their monstrous difference is undermined in favour of the series’ social allegories: “The series effaces their distinctiveness by incorporating them into a narrative of discrimination that has obvious parallels with the detention of asylum seekers in Australia and the victimisation of Indigenous Australians in the judicial system” and therefore the series gives not enough attention to their genetic advantages and “to how they could live, think and act differently” (n.p.).

Yasmine Musharbash, in contrast, justifies the representation of the Hairies as “not ‘just’ monsters” with reference to Jack Halberstam, who argues that “monsters are on us and in us” (quoted in Musharbash 141). Musharbash reads the Hairies as powerful “*relatable* others” (ibid., original emphasis). Their relatability is particularly emphasized in the interaction with Aboriginal people: “where Aboriginal people treat Hairies as equal, familiar, and relatable, non-Indigenous people recoil in horror and fail to see what is there” (142). Musharbash suggests that this intersection proposes a decolonization of mainstream television: “It demonstrates Aboriginal identities being created in relation to other Aboriginal identities and not in relation to white people, where in this narrative, Aboriginal people have an identity other than that allowed for in colonialist terms” (142). However, many humans treat the Hairies with distrust and violence. This is in many ways no speculative fantasy, but in fact an extension of how Indigenous people have been treated. Even supposed Hairypeople allies like Waruu dream not of granting them

freedom, but of assimilating and ‘taming’ them. *Cleverman’s* transgressive potential, therefore, lies in the reconceptualization of ‘monstrous’ bodies as relatable, adaptable, and historically connected to other ‘others’. This may also be an argument for their reluctance to confront their oppressors. Injustice is not caused by a handful of supervillains; the systemic racism, violence, prejudice, and genocide is built into society and cannot be solved by one or two superheroes thwarting crimes (cf. Lever).

When it comes to representations of gender, especially the role assigned to women, the series is not as open to transgression and subversion and fails to challenge heteronormative structures. Regarding sexuality, the concept of queerness seeks to unsettle the binaries that position heterosexuality and homosexuality as differing poles. Queer representations resist essentialism by expressing sexuality as an unfixed ‘zone of possibilities’ rather than determining a fixed identity (Treagus 2). *Cleverman*, despite its enormous cast and many side plots, is marked by a striking absence: There is not a single representation of non-heterosexual relationships or desires. Queer theory argues that heteronormativity depends upon the exclusion of certain subjects to shore up its own boundaries, and *Cleverman* certainly depicts the institution of heterosexual marriage as well as the nuclear family as an exclusionary matrix. Even long after Waruu has left his wife and daughter and his family has lost all trust in him, Waruu insists that his family return to his house, giving the explanation to his wife that “we made a vow” (S2E6, 33:15). All the main female characters are introduced via their familial relationship to the main (male) protagonists: Wives, mothers (alive or dead), daughters, and aunts. Most wives and girlfriends are either betrayed by their partners or are adulterous themselves. Moreover, Hairy women are fetishized and raped as forced prostitutes. The problematic strengthening of the heterosexual marriage and heteronormative family values is most strongly explored through the character Slade and his wife, Charlotte. Slade—always in need of new bodies for experiments in the name of scientific progress—uses his wife’s body for another experiment with Hairy genes. Their incapacity to conceive naturally is solved when Slade creates a fake fertility clinic and encourages his wife—she herself being a medical doctor—to seek treatment there. She is then carrying a hairy-human hybrid which grows at an abnormal rate and causes her much pain. Once she finds out, she confronts him, but rather than leaving him, she wants “to learn about everything” and in the end pays him a visit in his lab, still hoping to talk him out of further experiments. As Butler argues, “it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings” (Butler, *Undoing* 20). Charlotte’s

body carries these normative implications, despite her potentially becoming the mother of a hybrid child (though the series ends before that).

Paul Atkinson criticizes the series' adulation of the nuclear family, especially in the representation of the Hairies: "despite their physical exceptionalism and their outcast status in Indigenous mythology, [they] are represented largely in terms of the conservative image of the family," (n.p.) which is especially evident in the disruption of the central family of Araluen, Bondee and their children, who spent most of the two seasons trying to find each other. Atkinson rightly asks: "With the significant differences in physiology, principally the ability to live four times longer than humans, why should the Hairypeople have a similar family life involving disputes between teenagers and adults? If the teenage years are such a small portion of an individual's overall life, it is unlikely that the nuclear family would be the dominant unit of social organisation, and instead Hairy culture could be highly individualistic or even collective" (n.p.).

While this criticism holds true for this Hairy family; I would nevertheless suggest that there is a more ambivalent engagement with family in *Cleverman*. Many of the protagonists live in chosen and found family structures without any blood relationship, e.g. Koen and his friends Blaire and Ash, later also hosting the spirit Kora. Waruu's wife and daughter are joined by the Hairy girl Latani and, in the second season, become a quasi-family with a non-Indigenous CA officer. The community in the Zone similarly consists of Hairies and humans, Indigenous and non-Indigenous members. Ironically, those who have explicit kinship ties, such as Koen and Waruu and his mother, are the strongest adversaries. *Cleverman*'s ambivalent engagement with family discourses opens up a space for discussing queer theory's concerns with regulative and exclusionary ideas of heteronormativity. However, the series still draws attention to the various ways in which the performative language of the family (also in found families) works to re-iterate and promote its own privileged status as the location and foundation of peace and happiness.

Jessica Langer argues that the genre of science fiction opens new dialectic possibilities to acknowledge and foreground the disparate worldviews of colonized, formerly colonized, and diasporic people (129). The role of 'science' is essential in such a discussion to address the conflict between Western scientific methods and discourses of scientific progress versus Indigenous methods of knowledge production and understanding of the world (Langer 9). Science fiction, she further argues, provides the necessary link between science and art, between the concrete and the transcendent, the cognitive and the emotional

(151). Parodying dominant norms is often not enough to displace them if science fiction represents a “reconciliation of hegemonic norms” (Butler, *Bodies* 125). Postcolonial science fiction, therefore, engages with the issue of power in processes of knowledge production. In *Cleverman*, the conflation of Indigenous Dreaming and mythology in the form of the Cleverman with scientific exploration and genetic engineering represented by Slade, assumed boundaries between such epistemologies become obsolete. Like the Cleverman, who is seen as a conduit between the Dreaming and the ‘real’ world, the Hairies’ adaptability is presented as relatable otherness, offering historical connections and social allegories of Australia’s colonial past. In reading the monster as a queer category, representations of the monstrous ‘other’, such as the Hairies and the Namorrodor, offer an alternative space beyond normativity and overcome binary constellations of the objectified ‘other’. As boundary creatures, they highlight the constraints within which racially marked bodies operate, however, their representation misses the potential to equally engage with gendered bodies. Next to the absence of queer bodies regarding sexuality, all the main female characters are introduced via their familial relationship to male protagonists; they are fetishized or victims of sexual violence or presented as bodies for reproduction. Thereby *Cleverman* reinforces the institution of heterosexual marriage as well as the nuclear family as an exclusionary heteronormative standard. By including protagonists who live in chosen and found family structures or those who stay distant to the Indigenous community, the series avoids essentialist ideas about Indigenous belonging and presents an ambivalent engagement with the heteronormative family. Nonetheless, *Cleverman*, with its bold appropriation of science fiction and superhero genre conventions, accurately and devastatingly deconstructs the treatment of Indigenous Australians and other people of colour at the hands of white Australia.

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“But you will be a girl heroes fear”: Mia Corvere’s Gender Portrayal and Queerness in Jay Kristoff’s *The Nevernight Chronicle*

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Abstract

This article argues that Australian author Jay Kristoff's *Nevernight* trilogy contests, deconstructs, and subverts gendered restrictions and stereotypes often found in fantasy literature. Protagonist Mia Corvere overcomes both tropes of toxic masculinity and a single-minded focus on revenge by facing her fears, emotions, and embracing her queerness. As this article shows, the heroine's gender performance moves beyond binary constructions and challenges narrative conventions as well as reader assumptions.

Introduction

Female protagonists of speculative fiction often fall prey to gender stereotypes and are not allowed much development apart from accumulating trauma. Authors habitually tend to let them exhibit traits of toxic masculinity portraying the often young woman or girl as a 'girlboss,' thus enforcing the patriarchal idea that stereotypically feminine traits are inferior while toxic masculinity is the only way to success. Representations embracing the idea that characters can have many attributes rather than being stereotypically limited is mirrored by studies that evaluate gender stereotypes: "Women should be communal and avoid being dominant. Men should be agentic, independent, masculine in appearance, and interested in science and technology, but avoid being weak, emotional, shy, and feminine in appearance" (Koenig 1). Fiction mirrors these stereotypical ideas and tries to subvert them—often unsuccessfully. Especially queer representation, for example of bisexual women, tends to then draw on various further stereotypes, and lack nuance.

The following article analyses Mia Corvere, the bisexual (anti)heroine of Australian author Jay Kristoff's *Nevernight* trilogy. Through this character, Kristoff deconstructs binary and stereotypical reader expectations, foregrounding—in line with Judith Butler—that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time [...] through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (*Gender Trouble* 140). In addition, Kristoff's character refuses the reproduction of toxic masculinity, e.g., by being more than just a strong 'female' character mirroring stereotypically 'male' behaviour. It will be traced how Mia develops throughout the novels, how she avoids being overcome by her anger, trauma, and need for revenge, and how she negotiates her queer identity in the later novels. It will be argued that Mia as the main character of the series challenges stereotypical notions of gender and heteronormative expectations of the fantasy genre. Problematic stereotypes such as assumed bisexual promiscuity or tropes like 'killing the gays' are also addressed.

According to Judith Butler

there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification (*Gender Trouble* 33).

This paper traces how Mia performs gender while she moves from being a dark, dangerous, and vengeful assassin to *becoming* a kind, sympathetic, queer woman. On this journey, she is presented as willing to sacrifice herself for others, experiencing (queer) love, and struggling in a patriarchal story world. Kristoff's protagonist Mia showcases how to

break free from norms and restrictions by highlighting agency, bodily autonomy, sex, and gender performance.

Gender, Stereotypes, and Queer Deconstruction

Judith Butler's emphasis on gender "requir(ing) a performance that is repeated" (*Gender Trouble* 140) enabled important conceptual revisions: that sex does not determine gender, that there are no essential feminine or masculine attributes, that heteronormativity is not natural, and that the straitjacket of socially imposed restrictive binary oppositions has to be replaced by an acknowledgment of a wide spectrum of possibilities. In this context, queerness, true to its original understanding as 'out of the norm', can be understood as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality are not made (or cannot be made)" (Sedgwick as qtd. in Flanagan 33). Queerness allows for a plethora of different identities, which can be showcased in literary texts actively promoting the potential diversity of lived experiences.

However, literature often fails to free itself from gender stereotypes, as can be seen, for example, in reproductions of heteronormativity in children's books (Taylor 307), foregrounding "normative roles for women and men, and require(ing) [...] of them different responsibilities and kinds of work" (300), thereby enforcing patriarchal divisions between genders. Subsequently, traits that are stereotypically viewed as feminine, including submissiveness, dependency, weakness, passivity, sensitivity expressed in adjectives such as "emotional", "weak" and "timid" (Macionis as qtd. in Taylor 304), contribute to the reduction of women to sex objects (especially in older speculative fiction). Stereotypically masculine traits entailing a spectrum of notions from (sexual) dominance, intelligence, rationality, independence, assertiveness, strength, bravery, activity, aggression, and competition, take their attraction from a connection to "achievement" (Macionis as qtd. in Taylor 304). Gender identity and its expression thus is intricately related to assumptions about one's personhood and character: children "may have internalized certain behaviors and attitudes" (Taylor 306) which are hard to challenge and unlearn. Yet, the binary division between supposed masculinity and femininity is nothing but a repetitive performance:

[T]here is no preexisting identity by which an act of attribute might be measured; [...] That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities of proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality (*Gender Trouble* Butler 141).

Because of imbalanced depictions of gender(s), female desire is often left unacknowledged in literature, particularly within the fantasy genre; sex is mystified or phallus-centric; female pleasure is rendered secondary.

In fantasy literature, specific roles and tropes are often connected to gender: female characters are frequently constructed as damsels in distress in need of rescuing; male characters are portrayed as brave, strong, and saving victimised, passive princesses from fiery dragons. This toxic binary construction of roles and behaviour conceptualises emotional male characters as emasculated and unattractive, while toxic masculinity is celebrated. The prevalence of the latter has been read as a response to a supposed “crisis of masculinity” (Kimmel 46) in the wake of historical movements towards female emancipation and queer rights, and a concomitant deconstruction of binaries: Masculinity as “a fragile flower” (Faludi 76) can only find reassurance through an all the more fervent insistence on exaggerated forms of hyper-masculinity as “constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (Kupers as qtd. in Zuckerberg 13). Speculative fiction can reaffirm but also contrast, deconstruct and subvert these binary constructions.

Interestingly enough, if speculative fiction authors want to emancipate their female characters, they often tend to assign them stereotypical masculine traits: women are no longer “the opposite and inferior to the masculine standard” (Hekman 103), but rather embody it. They are strong, violent, phallic gun-wielding badasses who cannot talk about their feelings. Famous examples include Ellen Ripley in the *Alien* movies, who is mostly celebrated for her tough behaviour while wielding guns, or Elizabeth Swan in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, who moves from damsel in distress to tomboyish pirate queen. N.K. Jemisin describes this as the ‘Strong Female Character Stereotype’ (SFC): “Thus people begin to believe that the SFC is the only way for a woman to be strong — and they simply stop noticing the many, many other examples of women’s strength around them” (Jemisin n.p.). In addition, this stereotype can be used to shame women with postfeminist¹ ideas:

And we put the blame for everything women endure because of sexism [...] on women, because strong women ought to be able to fix all these problems single-handedly. This absolves men of any responsibility for the system that benefits

¹ Negra and Tasker assess that neoliberal postfeminism is closely connected to its rhetoric, for example “buzzwords and slogans to express visions of energetic personal empowerment (the borrowed African American idiom “You go, girl!” the phrase “girl power,” etc.” (3). “Girlboss” can be conceptualised in exactly that way. Feminism is “constituted as an unwelcome, implicitly censorious presence, it is precisely feminist concerns that are silenced within postfeminist culture” (Negra and Tasker 3).

them. And thus the Strong Female Character ends up supporting, not subverting, sexism (Jemisin n.p.).

Nuance is often lacking, and female characters turn into 'girl bosses' (to use the infantilising, pop-culture term used in an ironical way by TikTok users these days) through this embrace of what is essentially toxic masculinity. When Butler understands the category of 'women' as fiction because "this subject is created and maintained by the actions that are dictated by the concept" (Hekman 103), deconstructing binary notions of gender is not at all what these 'badass,' strong, female characters in speculative fiction do. Thus, the "process of 'undoing' the textual construction of masculinity and femininity as inherently oppositional attributes requires more than simply altering the schemata of behavioural attributes typically associated with each category of gender" (Flanagan 26). More needs to be done than just reversing "character archetypes or story outcomes" as this still maintains "the ideological construction of femininity and masculinity as inherently oppositional, binary concepts" (Flanagan 26-27). Agency can be derived from variation according to Butler, as "signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition*" (145, original emphasis).²

Mia Corvere – The Vengeful Assassin

The story of Mia Corvere, a 16-year-old young woman seeking revenge³, can be read as a powerful example of the subversion of gender roles in revenge tragedies. Mia's narrative operates the classical motif of a desire to avenge her family's unjust demise. Forms of revenge in Western literature and culture are clearly gendered, as evident in the different methods of murder, distinguishing between female poisoners and male executors of brute force. In cultural production, inevitably "violence is intertwined with sexual and gendered themes" (Hall 282). Typically, "[r]evenge narratives represent manliness as a highly prized commodity that individuals acquire through retaliatory acts of violence [...] [that] repeat[] and reinforc[e] such oppressive gender norms" (Dawson 3). In the tradition of revenge narrative, for women as "the guardians of a

² Of course, many famous speculative fiction novels (*Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *The Wheel of Time*) still operate in a binary manner excluding trans or non-binary identities. The same is true for the *Nevernight* trilogy, which features no trans- or non-binary characters.

³ In general, Mia's thirst for revenge reminds the reader heavily of Arya Stark from George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* book series. Comparing the two characters and exploring in how far Martin might have inspired Kristoff seems a productive topic for future articles as Martin, too, subverts gender assumptions and features revenge-driven character arcs.

conservative ideal of manliness aligned with violent reprisal" (ibid.) revenge cannot be empowering. In the tradition of revenge narrative, for women as "the guardians of a conservative ideal of manliness aligned with violent reprisal" (ibid.) revenge cannot be empowering. In Renaissance revenge tragedies such as Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* or Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, revenge is "a man's right and duty" (Dawson 6). By contrast female avengers tend to be "depicted as monstrous, hybrid creatures who blur the distinction between masculine and feminine" (Dawson 8). In Kristoff's novel Mia not only takes on the task of revenge herself, but is driven by it, threatened to even be consumed by it. Her weapons are both 'traditional' physical weapons, but also her magic and her words. She merges the various roles that are usually connected to masculine revenge, yet is not perceived as 'monstrous.' Moreover, her queerness further disrupts the heteronormative binaries that are at work at the heart of the traditional revenge tragedy.

Nevernight

The very beginning of *Nevernight* already introduces the key theme of revenge and intertwining it with the motif of sexual intercourse, a connection that is revisited again and again in the novel. The paragraphs in chapter one of the book alternate between italics and normal print, italics describing Mia's first time with a male prostitute and regular print describing her first kill. The passages echo each other, foregrounding the connection between sex and violence on a verbal level: while "[t]he boy was beautiful" (*Nevernight* 5) is contrasted with "[t]he man was repugnant," (ibid.) the phrase "'Fuck me [...]' she breathed" (*Nevernight* 7) is used in the erotic context as well as evoked by the scared man she is about to murder, "'Fuck me [...]' he breathed" (*Nevernight* 8). While Mia is "trying not to cry" (*Nevernight* 9) during her hurtful rather than pleasurable intercourse with the prostitute, her victim of revenge desperately implores her to stop when she yields her power on top of him (*Nevernight* 10). From the very first pages, through this juxtaposition of sex and violence, Mia is not the female protagonist (or even heroine) readers expect her to be: Mia does not attribute anything special to her first time having sex, thereby deconstructing the patriarchal narrative that connects women's self-esteem with the preservation of sexual innocence for 'the one' worthy of this 'most valuable gift'. This episode also unobtrusively normalises sex work, when it is later revealed that Mia's sex partner is a prostitute. Overall, Mia is not presented as an 'innocent' young girl,⁴ while in addition the foreshadowing at the end of the first

⁴ The term "girl" is used throughout the text to refer to Mia even though she is a (young) woman. While the infantilisation of women has a long-standing history within patriarchal narratives, for example Beauvoir "conceptualised women as the 'eternal child'" (Laing

chapter destabilises the idea that the main protagonist must be a hero: “You’ll be a rumour [...] The last thing you will ever be in this world girl, is someone’s hero” (*Nevernight* 13). Mia will be “a girl heroes fear” (*ibid.*), as she can handle weapons and has just killed a man. Yet she is not unambiguously evil as evident in the various flashbacks which explain the protagonist’s thirst for revenge: She watched her father being branded as a traitor and killed before her eyes. Her mother telling her to “*Never flinch*” and “*Never fear*” (*Nevernight* 17)—despite her childhood trauma—has become her mantra.

The next thing the reader learns is that Mia is no beauty. Protagonists in fantasy are often described as exceptionally beautiful, in line with fairy tale conventions where beauty equals morality. Although in stories within the story world of *Nevernight*, Mia’s beauty is “described [...] otherworldly; all milk-white skin and slender curves and bow-shaped lips” (*Nevernight* 18), this is exposed as poetic convention, when the reader learns that “[m]ilk-white’ is just pretty talk for ‘pasty” and ‘[s]lender’ is a poet’s way of saying ‘starved” (*Nevernight* 18).⁵ The narrative offers a reality check with regards to hyperbolic descriptions of bodies, especially female bodies: Mia is “pale and her cheeks hollow”, “short”, “[s]tick-thin”, has “[b]arely enough arse for her britches to cling to” and a nose that shows signs of having been broken (*Nevernight* 18). She defies conventional ideas of beauty or attractiveness. This explicitly contrasts with traditional descriptions of women in poetry or narrative, Mia is not the epitome of unrealistic beauty standards, but is described as a rather scrawny girl whose appearance reflects her rough past.

Fearlessness is another factor that is often associated with traditionally male heroes. Mia has a peculiar shadow, a cat-like creature named Mister Kindly, who literally makes her fearless as he lives off her fear. Therefore, Mia is independent and unflinching, but only as long as magic protects her from her trauma and her emotions. When Mister Kindly leaves during *Nevernight*, Mia is plagued by nightmares (connecting her to the past) and has to live through all of her fears

1), calling Mia a girl is both a narrative choice as well as a subversion. Mia might be called a child within the patriarchal system of Kristoff’s storyworld, but she is a woman who is being underestimated. Focussing on this conceptualisation of the so-called woman-child, which is a “highly normative version of womanhood, tending to be young, cis-gendered, white, slender, heteronormative and able-bodied” (Laing 4) and having a character who disrupts this pattern is a challenge to patriarchal ideas, especially the aforementioned discourse on innocence which “feeds into images of the woman-child” (Laing 4). Mia is no girl and fights both the term as well as the ideas and stereotypes that go with it.

⁵ This can be read as implicit reference to Shakespeare’s meta sonnet 130: “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”.

(*Nevernight* 314). While she might seem almost emotionless, losing Mister Kindly leads to Mia becoming a less stereotypical and more nuanced, vulnerable, and relatable character. Mia is not helpless without her shadow daemon, she is a Darkin who can weave darkness and move through it: “Thread by thread, she drew the darkness to her with clever fingers, like a seamstress weaving a cloak [...], a cloak of shadows” (*Nevernight* 45). Throughout her development in the two sequels, Mia needs to learn to live with her fear, and embrace that emotions are not making her inferior.

Mia does not care about what is presumed to be ‘lady-like behaviour’; she is not silent, meek or shy. She swears (“A right cunt⁶ and no mistake” (*Nevernight* 62)) and always speaks her mind. While in traditional revenge texts, “curses are primarily the weapon of the weak against the strong,” (Dawson 12), Mia curses continuously in addition to her bodily prowess in fighting. Mia is aggressive and reacts badly to insults. Her anger issues erupt in violence, something that she reflects upon and regrets (*Nevernight* 370-372), but cannot overcome easily. Instead of being randomly submissive, dependent, weak, passive, nurturing, and timid (all characteristics that are deemed stereotypically female), Mia is dominant, independent, strong, active, brave, and not very good at dealing with emotions or accepting help at first.⁷

As established earlier, Mia is quite fearless when it comes to exploring her sexuality. At the Red Church where she trains to become a professional assassin, Mia learns to weaponise her body (quite stereotypically in the tradition of the femme fatale). She is taught how to topple empires not by blades but by identifying and exploiting weaknesses of the patriarchal system: “[T]his is a world of senators and consuls [...]—of republics and cults and institutions built and maintained almost entirely by men. And in it, love is a weapon. Sex is a weapon. Your eyes? Your body? Your smile? [...] Weapons” (*Nevernight* 171). Her outward appearance is subsequently changed to be more alluring: a weaver uses

⁶ This specific insult is very misogynistic, yet in Kristoff's books, Mia explains that this is actually a compliment: “You're implying a sense of malice there. An intent. Malevolent and self-aware. [...] Cunts have brains, Don Tric. Cunts have teeth. Someone calls you a cunt, you take it as a compliment. As a sign that folk believe you're not to be lightly fucked with” (*Nevernight* 63).

⁷ Mia is merciful and has strong sense of ethics: when she is asked to kill a boy as an initiation test, she refuses. Even though Mia is the “most feared killer in Itreya, murderess of legions, Lady of Blades, destroyer of the Republic,” (*Nevernight* 24) she has “[m]ercy, even for rapists and brutes” (ibid.), playing with the expectations of readers who want their protagonist to be a hero(ine) who has having mercy only with ‘deserving’ people. Moral ambiguity and characters meandering between good and bad are typical for Kristoff's trilogy.

magic and gives her fuller breasts, straightens her nose, fills out her lips, and fixes her complexion (*Nevernight* 175). Obviously, this goes against the initial description of Mia not being overly beautiful, falling into the make-over trope. Nevertheless, Mia still does not care much about how she looks, smells, or dresses. This foregrounds the performance of gender conventions and is contrasted with Mia's inner turmoil.

Despite her rather unsatisfying first sexual experiences, Mia gradually learns more about herself and desire. Kristoff is quite graphic in the descriptions of intercourse. Whenever Mia initiates sex with her fellow assassin Tric, she regularly is the one in power, and almost predatory in her pursuit: "He groaned as she kissed him, deep and long and warm, hands wrapped in her hair as she pushed him hard, back against the wall, muscle slapping stone," (*Nevernight* 270) connecting sex with power and violence. She no longer is a "shivering virgin on bloodstained sheets" and no "frightened maid" (*Nevernight* 271). As Mia is the focaliser, Tric becomes her sex object, and all descriptions focus on female pleasure (*Nevernight* 313), subverting the patriarchal mechanics of traditional narrative patterns. While she performs hegemonic masculinity in her sexual behaviour with Tric, this changes later on when it comes to her queer experiences, something that is only hinted at in the first book: Ashlinn kisses her goodbye "a moment too long" or "[p]erhaps not long enough" (*Nevernight* 396). Mia is on the fence about this "[w]arm and soft and honeysweet" (*Nevernight* 396) kiss; she has a "million unsaid words shining in her eyes" (*ibid.*) confronted with a "million unsaid words shining in her [Ash's] eyes" (*ibid.*). This foreshadows Mia's relationship with Ashlinn in *Godsgrave* and *Darkdawn* when her behaviour becomes less coded by binary oppositions.

Godsgrave

Binary opposites are also contested with regard to bodily strength and how certain genders are perceived. In the second book of the trilogy, Mia lets herself be captured in order to become a member of the gladiatii, as the fights in the arena give her access and proximity to those who wronged her (*Godsgrave* 21). Mia is confronted with sexist or misogynistic attitudes when undercover as a slave gladiator, as this supposedly "is no place for women" (*Godsgrave* 51). When a fellow gladiator holds back when fighting her, "[b]ecause [...] you're a girl,"

(*Godsgrave* 139), Mia is infuriated and defeats him asking him to see beyond her body and (assumed) sex (not gender, interestingly)⁸:

'Take hold of your fucking jewels,' she said. 'Maybe your mother raised you to treat us all as delicate flowers, maybe you're just thinking with your cock. But there *are* no girls on the sand [...] Only *enemies*. You spend a moment worrying about what's between your opponent's legs, you'll find your head parted from your body. And what good will your fool cock do then?' (*Godsgrave* 139).

Mia is no delicate flower, and she despises gender-specific rules. However, she is proud to be a great fighter in a patriarchal setting despite or maybe even because of her gender. This pride and the internalised idea that she is only worthy when strong are often in her way, particularly when it comes to trusting others, admitting to her trauma or dealing with her emotions. The more Mia changes, the more she overcomes toxic masculinity and reaches a more nuanced way of living.

While Mia's queerness is already hinted at in the first book, she starts questioning her sexuality in *Godsgrave*. This is a major step moving away from the conventional, heterosexual love story in the first part and towards a more nuanced understanding of sexuality as a spectrum that is not based on binary distinctions. Falling in love and coming to terms with one's queerness covers a long period of time in the narrative. Mia starts to see Ashlinn in a different light after they worked together for a long time, falling in love with her character, not only her body. The narration captures her growing desire: "Mia stared. Ashlinn's eyes. Ashlinn's hands. Ashlinn's lips. The girl simply stared back, letting the silence ask all her questions for her. Mia ignored them all" (*Godsgrave* 219). In her conceptualisation of the male (and female) gaze in Hollywood cinema, Mulvey stressed how "female viewing involve(s) an oscillation between a masculine position (identification with the 'active' male character or male spectator) and a feminine position (masochistic identification with the female character as fetishized object of the gaze)" (Laing 64). Mia's female gaze and desire translates differently narration-wise, it is gradually freeing itself from the patriarchal frame: Ash's body is described, but not with a focus on the sexualised body parts that are primarily connected to the male gaze, like breasts, hips, and crotch. Rather, Kristoff uses alliterations to emphasise Mia's queer desire: "Ash's breath coming quicker as she came fully awake, aware, awonder, the skin of her bare arms prickling. And as she parted her lips to speak, perhaps to protest, Mia leaned in and silenced her with a kiss" (*Godsgrave* 279). Parallel to Mia seducing

⁸ While this could be explained by the pseudo-historical setting of the novels, arguably the *Nevernight Chronicles* still move within the binaries of gender and sex, despite the inclusion of queer desire.

Tric, she now seduces Ash, giving and receiving pleasure “like nothing she’d ever known” (*Godsgrave* 280).

As indicated in the very first scene of the first book, sex has been related to power for Mia. When having sex with her female partner, Mia has “never felt so much power; her every movement, every flick of her tongue or touch of her lips eliciting a groan, a whispering plea, a tremor running the length of Ashlinn’s entire body” (ibid. 281). However, while it seems that Mia is the seductress and not the seduced, she is not limited to the active, ‘male’ role in their relationship: Ashlinn too makes Mia beg (for the first time in her life), reversing their roles (ibid. 283), working towards a deconstruction of binary roles through (queer) sex. The novel(s) acknowledge female desire and explicitly addresses queer sex prioritising female orgasm. Ash too can be read as a character that stands for a different form of femininity and strength. She is not as toxic as Mia (despite being an assassin herself) helping Mia to challenge her toxic masculinity and blind focus on revenge. Mia and Ash’s love story, which is not limited to stereotypes, offers a nuanced representation of queer desire and sex. While Mia feels that she has been tasked with revenge, loving Ashlinn has been Mia’s choice (ibid. 286) and “[n]othing would ever be the same again” (ibid. 287). Ashlinn believes in Mia helping her to come to terms with herself: “You’re brave. And you’re bright. And you’re beautiful” (*Godsgrave* 243). Mia’s falling in love with Ashlinn enables her to face her trauma.

Darkdawn

In the last book of the trilogy, *Darkdawn*,⁹ Mia has to deal with her younger brother who was raised as the son of her enemy under a different name. As Mia is not the caring or patient type, and has no experience with children, she initially is unable to deal with him, cannot control her anger, slapping him when he insults her mother, and regretting it instantaneously: “Mia was horrified at herself. Exhausted and frightened and aching all the way to her bones” (ibid. 42). Slowly, their sibling relationship improves, and Mia actually experiences something akin to familial love, something that she mostly had to live without. She actively has to learn how to care for her brother. The novel does not exhibit instantaneous motherly devotion on the part of Mia, but allows her to

⁹ The most interesting aspect, narration-wise, is that a meta-level is included: the two first books show up as actual books and as part of the storyline, as Mia’s former mentor and father-figure Mercurio finds them. This is not only a humorous take on some choices from earlier books like “‘*Nevernight*,’ he muttered. ‘Stupid name for a book’” (*Darkdawn* 33) to *Godsgrave*, the sequel, which is deemed better by characters of the storyworld as there is “[l]ess fucking about at the start” (ibid. 34).

develop emotions and challenge her traumatic past and loss of her parents. Being the caretaker in a non-toxic manner is difficult for Mia, but she is rewarded with a brother who loves her back.

The same development can be found with regards to her anger issues and relationships: when Mia finds out that the man who raised her is not her father and that the “rage that had sustained her through all the years and all the miles and all the sleepless nevernights” (ibid. 61) was based on misinformation, she gives in to her anger and wants to continue running away from her feelings, her friends, and family. Mia knows that anger kept her from thinking, that anger allowed her to “simply *act*” (ibid. 61) and that this is not healthy, but she needs Ashlinn to calm her down. While it may be a cliché that love heals everything, the novel suggests that a safe environment may foster the healing process and may function as a way out of toxic behaviour. Ash creates an environment in which Mia is allowed to be afraid, to feel her feeling because she does not need to perform in a toxic patriarchal world: “Tears welled in Mia’s eyes [...]. The walls loomed about her, ready to come crashing down. Her hands fluttered at her sides as if she were desperate for an embrace, but too torn to beg for one” (ibid. 62). Throughout the book, Ashlinn stays by her side, willing to “rip all three suns out of heaven to keep her safe” (ibid. 143). Even though they fight, they always make up, and Mia can draw strength from her relationship with Ashlinn: “She closed her eyes and let Ashlinn’s hands shush everything away for a moment” (ibid. 156). While both women are “driven by vengeance,” (ibid. 160) Ashlinn is more vulnerable around Mia. There “were parts of herself Ash kept just for Mia—like secrets in the dark, whispered without speaking” (ibid. 160). It also allows Mia to think about a future filled with queer love and beyond revenge (ibid. 164), which furthers her character development.

Ashlinn offers Mia an alternative to hate, death, violence, revenge as well as toxic masculine behaviour: “I know you might not see a life like that for yourself, but you can have it if you want it,” (ibid. 164). Mia could have a life with love, a life where she is not alone. “Truth was, this tiny respite, these friends and familia¹⁰ around her—it was the closest she’d had for normalcy for eight years. She wondered what her life might have been. What she might have had before it was taken away from her” (ibid. 197). She favours Ashlinn (ibid. 297) over her resurrected ex-boyfriend Tric, even though she is tempted. By choosing Ashlinn and refusing to

¹⁰ Kristoff intentionally uses mafia-vocabulary here to describe the intense relationship between Mia and her followers and friends, but also to describe the unavoidable responsibility that Mia has taken on because of her vow to avenge her family.

have sex with Tric, the reader is baited with the conventional trope of bisexual promiscuity while the expected love triangle is averted.

Another problematic trope regarding queer relationships follows shortly after, when Ash is poisoned and dies in Mia's arms. Queer representation on page, stage, or screen often ends with death, the so-called 'killing the gays' trope. Mia seems left "[f]orever and ever" (ibid. 409) alone, unable to save Ashlinn even though she tried. "Mia's chest was heaving, grief shaking her body" (ibid. 408), but "for all her power, all her gifts, this was a foe she couldn't best" (ibid. 408). Love had been intertwined with death and violence throughout the book, the elegiac tone foreshadowing this final loss threatening to unhinge Mia entirely. Tric sacrifices himself and Ash is resurrected (ibid. 495). This takes up but at the same time reverses the problematic 'queer death' trope, which then returns with Mia's later death. At the finale of the last book, Mia heroically sacrifices herself to prevent disaster. Right before her sacrifice, Mia mourns what could have been, she misses her partner, friends, and family and bitterly repeats the words that "shaped her, ruled her, ruined her" (ibid. 429), but which had fuelled her throughout the three books: "*Never flinch. Never fear. Never forget*" (429). At last, Mia realises how toxic and problematic her thirst for revenge was and how much she lost along the way. Revenge per se is shown to be useless and all-consuming. Mia also realises that "[f]ear was never my fate" (ibid. 461) and that her preoccupation with revenge, fear, and grief stood in the way of herself being happy and surrounded by friends, family and lover.

While the reader assumes that Mia is gone, in yet another twist at the very end of the third novel she returns to Ashlinn, changed: "She'd thought Mia's eyes were just empty darkness, but this close, this dangerously, wonderfully close, she could see they were filled with tiny sparks of light, like stars strewn across the curtains of night above" (ibid. 523). Mia has completed her revenge, has heroically sacrificed herself to save others, and now she is free to live her life. Against all odds and the heavy foreshadowing before, Ashlinn and Mia receive their happy ending "[f]orever and ever" (ibid. 524), fully negating the 'killing the gays' stereotype.

Conclusion

While parts of Mia's character are initially coded as toxically masculine, especially her desire for revenge that only brings her grief, she struggles with this task and with embracing love and help. In the end she is utterly disillusioned about the necessity and effect of revenge. In the end Mia completes her revenge, but mostly to save others; it is no longer her utmost desire or an end in itself. She is not punished by the narrative, but finds her happy ending with Ashlinn. The representation of Mia's agency,

convictions, and anger issues challenges notions of ideal femininity as silent, chaste, and obedient which are connected to the tradition of revenge narrative: “rather than penalizing ‘bad girls’ [...] authors reward ‘bad girls’ and [...] allow them to prevail at the end” (Chatraporn 51). However, while Mia might at first appear as a ‘strong female badass character’, she moves beyond this simplified gender role reversal and subverts assumptions of stereotypically female or stereotypically male attributes. Moreover, stereotypical tropes in connection to bisexuality are taken up, but eventually refuted in favor of a nuanced, complex queer relationship based on choice.

Breaking free from socially shaped norms and restricting gender assumptions, literature can contribute to an understanding of gender as performance and its impact on sexual desire. Jay Kristoff's trilogy *Nevernight Chronicles* foregrounds the subversion and deconstruction of binary gender assumptions through a variety of interconnected themes: Mia as ‘masculine’ avenger subverts assumptions of traditional revenge narratives about the stereotypical relation between gender and sexual desire, male bodily strength and violence and female beauty. More importantly, however, Mia's queer relationship with Ash allows her to also overcome the stereotype of toxic masculinity, to confront her traumatic past, experience love, and have healthy relationships for the first time in her adult life. Through her experiences of (especially queer) love, but also through her (found) family, Mia learns to take care of herself and her relationships in a nuanced manner. The explicit focus on female sexuality and desire prioritises female desire, female orgasm and a female gaze through which the reader witnesses the protagonist becoming a woman, finding a version of womanhood free from stereotypical attributes and embracing queerness as a vital part of her character development.

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Of Bees and Women: Femininity and Climate Change in Mireille Juchau's *The World Without Us*

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Abstract

This article investigates notions of femininity in light of contemporary debates around anthropogenic climate change in literature. Climate change fiction (cli-fi) specifically considers life in the Anthropocene and the consequence of changing climatological realities for human and nonhuman actors in ecosystems. Seemingly straight-forward dichotomies between human and nonhuman, wild and domesticated, useful and harmful subjectivities are being contested, and literary texts increasingly pick up on and reflect the instabilities of previously undisputed dualisms. Mireille Juchau's novel *The World Without Us* (2015) explores the intertwined relationships between climate, the animal world, and human subjectivity as it slowly uncovers the multifaceted narration around the Müller family's grief at the loss of their child. As the family's life is repeatedly underscored with symbolism of bees, the narration draws parallels between human life and the lives of bees. The text's elaborate play with multiperspectivity is reminiscent of insect eyes' compound nature and undulates between fragmentation and complexity. This article explores how Juchau's novel offers new ways of exploring femininity within notions of grief and suffering on the one hand and the effects of anthropogenic climate change on the other.

You could think of the weather [...] as a gateway between the earth
and the sky.

—Michelle Juchau, *The World Without Us*

The first time that we open a hive there comes over us an emotion
akin to that we might feel at profaning some unknown object,
charged perhaps with dreadful surprise, as a tomb.

—Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Life of the Bee*

Introduction

With the rise in global sealevels, increasingly frequent reports of catastrophic natural disasters, and a worrying account of the current climatic conditions by the 2021 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the realities of anthropogenic climate change are becoming progressively palpable (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). Questions of sustainability, water scarcity, and efforts to preserve a diverse environment for future generations emerge as more pressing now than ever before. It is, thus, little surprising that both literary fiction and critical scholarship have considered approaches to analyse and imagine presents and futures where the irrevocably changing climatic conditions and their effects on human and nonhuman life are tangible. Especially Australian fiction and Australian academic research have embraced questions of anthropogenic climate change. “Climate has [...] been a characteristically Australian literary preoccupation,” since at least the mid-twentieth century, attests Andrew Milner (2020). This characteristic “preoccupation” can in part be seen in correlation with Australia’s geographic, climatic, and economic conditions. With a population clustered around the coastal peripheries and a large, climatically challenging, and expanding dry landmass at its centre, Australia’s peoples are challenged by the threatening effects of rising sea levels, forest fires, and floods. The realities of the extent to which world climate impacts local regions is particularly visible in the devastating decline of biodiversity due to expansions of human habitation, disproportionate land clearing, and the aggressive sourcing of natural resources: “Species loss in Australia since 1788 has been apocalyptic, and Australia continues to have one of the highest extinction rates in the world,” remarks Helen Tiffin in 2020 and warns against new plans of industrial expansion (62). For example, one of Australia’s most well-known natural structures of unparalleled species diversity, the Great Barrier Reef, is under imminent threat from human industrial expansion.

Deborah Jordan accentuates that the “consciousness of planetary change is reflected in recent cautionary climate change narratives”, which ask for a re-examination of the role the “environmental imagination [plays] in Australian literature” (Jordan 5). In this vein, this article sets out

to investigate this new “environmental imagination” that is becoming an increasingly visible presence in contemporary Australian fiction and to examine how the lives of nonhumans and humans intersect. The points of intersection thus rethink the status of the individual as entwined with the human and nonhuman actors that surround it. By using climate-change fiction (cli-fi) as a genre of ever-growing popularity and influence as a stepping-stone, this article addresses and explores if and how far the genre in general and Mireille Juchau's novel *The World Without Us* (2015) in particular can contribute to finding solutions to pressing contemporary climatic questions. In as much as the Great Barrier Reef has become an emblem of the human impact on oceanic ecosystems, dying bee populations have become synonymous with the effects of excessive human farming, climate-related wildfires, and pesticides on life on land (Hogendoorn et al. 1). As a species dependent on nutrition from insect-pollinated plants, the reduction in the survival rate of pollinators is a tangible threat to the survival of humanity on this planet. Therefore, the significance of bees as an exceptionally social, sensitive, and endangered species inhabits a narrow yet highly significant narrative niche in literature.

Juchau's novel accentuates the precarious status of both humans and bees, as both are dependent on the survival of specialist ecosystems that provide habitats, nutrition, and ensure the survival of both species. Beate Neumeier observes that “[p]lants and particularly animals play a decisive role in the shaping of the Australian national imaginary” (Neumeier 6), so the close proximity at which bee- and human narratives intersect is not surprising. Yet, the text foregrounds the human species' evident incapacity to preserve the biodiversity that we are so dependent on. Through mapping the links between human and animal life, this novel emphasises the significant new and diverse ways in which literary texts can imagine inter-species relations. It furthermore considers the potency of ecosystems, which are portrayed as amounting to more than the sum of their parts. Thus, the novel's visualisation of Australian landscapes, wildlife, and human inhabitants creates a continuous effort to imagine all life on earth as interconnected and interdependent.

Australia and Climate Change Literature

While narratives of the imminent and destructive dangers of unpredictable nonhuman natural forces have been written and read since at least the beginnings of the modern novel in e.g., Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) etc. (Taylor *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf*; Taylor “Where Is Victorian

Ecocriticism?"), narratives of (anthropogenic) climate change and a vividly agentic nature have often been pushed to the margins of 'serious' literature and marketed as science fiction (sci-fi), horror, or fantasy (Ghosh; Craps and Crownshaw). Gerry Canavan, in his investigation of the relationship between ecology and science fiction, even calls the terms 'science' and 'fiction' an "oxymoronic combination" (Canavan ix). This sentiment may easily be transferred to the combination of 'ecology' and 'fiction' and thus implicitly questions the 'scientific value' of fictional imaginations of climatological potentialities. Amitav Ghosh famously calls this misalignment of literary reception and climatic realities the "great derangement" of our time, an age which "so congratulates itself on its self-awareness" (Ghosh 11). Humanist notions of 'self-awareness' and human singularity have dominated Western cultural and scientific thought for the longest time and have remained practically uncontested since the age of the Enlightenment. However, with the rise of new modes of inquiry into the nature and make-up of the world, cultures, and traditions, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries provide a whole new toolkit for reading, understanding, and interpreting fictional and non-fictional worlds. Theories of affect (e.g.: Massumi 2002, 2015; Sedgwick 2003), posthumanism (e.g.: Barad 2003; Braidotti 2013, 2019; Braidotti and Hlavajova 2018; Herbrechter 2013; Nayar 2014; Rosendahl Thomsen and Wamberg 2020) and actor-networks (e.g.: Latour 1993, 2005), for example, all allow for the rise of new literary and critical perspectives. Especially as postcolonial studies are growing as a field, voices from former colonial and/or marginalised backgrounds become visible and audible, the perspectival literary and critical horizon has expanded. It incorporates a focus on Western and non-Western, human and nonhuman perspectives and thus allows for the inclusion of a broad spectrum of experiences. At the same time, this multitude of (new) perspectives questions the status quo of established hierarchical dichotomies such as nature-culture, barbaric-civilised, human-nonhuman, and instead accentuates how all subjectivities are interlinked through complex mesh-like connections (Morton). Rather than supporting linear hierarchies, these multiplicities question the prevalence of existing humanist values and sustain the necessity of multiperspectival and multidirectional narratives. As Ghosh describes the magnitude of the "derangement," he particularly stresses the difficulties of establishing narratives of anthropogenic climate change as 'serious' literary endeavours, even though they imagine possible, even probable global climatic scenarios. However, since he proclaimed that "[p]robability and the modern novel are in fact twins, born at about the same time, among the same people" (Ghosh 16), notions of anthropogenic climate change have begun to emerge in greater numbers and to greater recognition in the literary world. Transcending the absolutes of the boundaries between

'scientific fact' and 'fictional text' to create contemporary and future scenarios, these texts bring to the fore the fragility of our planet.

Dan Bloom is credited with abbreviating the term climate change fiction in 2007 thus coining the term 'cli-fi', in reference to the term 'sci-fi' for science fiction. The abbreviated term thus "bridges the gap between academia and popular culture to construct a blended language" (Baysal 234). Situated at the intersection of ecological science and literary imagination, the term aptly symbolises the inherent bipartite nature of the concept, which always (and not always successfully) tries to unite two very different worlds. While research into climate change is trying to find practical solutions and long-term forecasts, the literary imagination creates scenarios that illuminate the state of the current climatic crisis. However, since climate change is a global, interconnected, and overarching phenomenon, the term indicates the need for trans- and interdisciplinary approaches to both literary fiction and academic research. In 2016, Amitav Ghosh criticised the lack of literary texts that explicitly imagine and foreground the effects of anthropogenic climate change. Now, the body of work connected to the effects of human-made climatic changes is growing continuously and has in recent years expanded to include more and more works by authors that foreground narratives from perspectives that are not primarily situated in the Global North. These include for example: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), Chang-Rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010) and *Lagoon* (2015) and Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021).

Especially the body of work produced by Australian authors is ever-growing and is slowly developing into an established genre. In the Australian literary imagination, the effects of anthropogenic climate change have been a predominant topos since the end of the last millennium and include works like: *The Sea and Summer* by George Turner (1987), *A Rainforest in Time* by Jean Vormair (1988), *Carpentaria* By Alexis Wright (2006), *Salt* by Gabrielle Lord (1990), *Sea as Mirror* by Tess Williams (1990), *No Tomorrow* by Philip Machanick (2008), *And the Waters Prevailed* by John Litchen (2010), *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright (2013) and recently James Bradley's *Ghost Species* (2020). Considering the impact and visibility of Australian climate change issues and cli-fi of Australian origin, it is somewhat surprising that only a very limited number of academic publications have engaged with the specifics of the Australian climate change novel. While current criticism on the subject is still sparse, a few elemental works have tried to map Australian fiction in their engagement with anthropogenic climate change. The most comprehensive is Deborah Jordan's overview in *Climate Change Narratives in Australian Fiction*, in which she analyses and inspects both

Adult- and Young Adult narratives and foregrounds how extreme weather is written in fiction. Her text aims to identify specifically Australian climate fiction novels and lays the foundation for future analytical texts on Australian cli-fi. However, like Ghosh, Jordan underscores that an issue as pressing as the current climatic future needs more literary renderings. Recently, Andrew Milner's article has contributed to the analysis of Australian climate change literature with "Australian Climate Fiction", in which he criticises Jordan's assessment that there is a distinct lack of cli-fi novels in Australia. He argues that the "small scale of Australian publishing when compared to the major centres of cli-fi publishing in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States" is the cause behind this seeming disparity and that, considering the size of the literary market, "Australia has actually been remarkably productive of climate fictions" (Milner n.p.). Beate Neumeier and Helen Tiffins's volume on *Ecocritical Concerns and the Australian Continent* considers the topic from a humanities point of view, although it does not apply a purely literary perspective. There has been some research on scientific and literary comparisons regarding climate change fiction in Australia (Mills, Olive and Clark; Morgan) and some work regarding ecological changes in law and the natural sciences (Rogers), but with a growing literary corpus the need for more diverse scholarship is essential. The great irony of anthropogenic climate change lies, of course, in the fact that since the industrial revolution, it has habitually been the Global North that caused the effects of global warming, while it is often in the Global South where its negative effects impact the most (Edenhofer et al. 2). Considering the vulnerability of Australia's geographical location and the precarious future of its biodiversity in the light of current anthropogenic climatic changes, the circumstances seem to demand a specifically Australian climate change fiction. As more Australian narrative texts engage with the human and nonhuman side of anthropogenic climate change and increase the repertoire of narrated biological and non-biological actors, so will academic interest and the number of academic publications on the subject.

Mireille Juchau's *The World Without Us* (2015)

One of the intriguing characteristics of climate change fiction is the almost limitless pool of potential literary voices. Mireille Juchau's intimately poetic novel *The World Without Us*, published in 2015, depicts the intertwined fates of a family with the Australian ecosystem surrounding them. At the centre of the novel is the family of Stefan and Evangeline Müller, whose youngest daughter Pip has tragically passed away. She leaves behind a family in dissolution, captured by grief and in need of recalibration after the dreadful events. There remain two sisters, Tess and Meg, their grief-stricken mother and their father, consumed by his beekeeping hobby and

his ambitions to write a book on the art of beekeeping. As the novel explores the narratives of the publicly and excessively grieving mother, a daughter who no longer speaks, and a daughter who tries to act as an interpreter for her sister and negotiator between her parents, it uncannily parallels different individual approaches to loss. While each family member grieves in their own unique ways, the novel opens with the shockingly practical approach to beekeeping: The father/Stefan carefully extracts the queen bee from each hive, killing it and later replacing it with a new queen to enhance the productivity of the hive and ensure a consistent income.

Today he'll kill the old queens. After squashing them with his boot he'll leave their crushed corpses beneath each hive so the bees can smell she's dead. *Queens produce pheromones which exert a great power over the surrounding bees. If they begin to perform poorly they should be replaced.* (*The World* 14)¹

Evangeline's grief finds form in her escape into the realm of art and spirituality, while Stefan's distanced stupefaction culminates in helpless horror at the unfolding of yet another tragedy.

Stefan, picturing everyone gone, [...] his thoughts hovered on Pip, his youngest, his little house bee. Pip, who'd looked most like his mother, Gretchen. He'd not been able to bury one, because the other was so ill. Both had died in the same month, in different hemispheres. Acute lymphoblastic leukaemia [sic]. Stroke. (*The World* 18-19)

The overarching perspective of the family story across continents and generations is aptly imagined in this devastating scenario of two deaths on either side of the world, uncannily joined through fate. The alienating otherness of both mother and daughter having died within a short window of time is repeatedly evoked in Stefan's consideration of his family in terms of a beehive. At the same time it is through Stefan's work with the bees, that the novel continuously connects human family ties to the world of the nonhuman. As Val Plumwood phrases it: "[t]he construction of nonhumans as 'Others' involves both distorted ways of seeing sameness, continuity or commonality with the colonized 'Other'" (Plumwood 53). Thus, the characters' manifold perspectives and their individual perception, interpretation, and reaction to Pip's passing—the driving force of the novel—evokes ways of "seeing sameness" in difference.

The novel received a fair amount of attention upon its publication and was, without exception, well-received by critics. It was awarded the Victorian Premier's Literary Award in 2016 and was shortlisted for numerous other awards, including the 2016 Stella Prize and the NSW Premier's Literary Awards in the same year (Juchau "About - Mireille

¹ Hereafter abbreviated *The World*.

Juchau" n.p.). Surprisingly then, the novel has to date not received similar amounts of attention in academic scholarship but has been mentioned in publications about family life (Arnold-de Simine and Leal), in connection with an overview of Australian literature and World Ecologies (Egerer), as well as in a volume about fiction and activism in the age of climate change (Rogers). The author's homepage announces, however, that the novel is scheduled to be adapted for television and it is more than likely that this will spark renewed interest in its interwoven array of subjectivities that so cleverly imagine the world in times of changing ecological and climatic conditions.

Stef Craps and Rick Crownshaw rightly acknowledge a general pessimistic bias against the novel as a form to fully imagine and process the enormous entity that is our planet's climate as well as our human role in it. He sees "concerns about pessimistic assessments, in recent literary criticism, of the novel's ability to meet the representational challenges posed by the pressing planetary problem of climate change" (Craps and Crownshaw 1). However, as Adam Trexler argues, it is the cultural texts of a time that "show complex networks of ideas" and mark the important aspects of contemporary life (Trexler 5). In that respect, the novel form is suitable, like no other form, to evoke and imagine the fears, hopes, possibilities, and lost changes that occupy contemporary literary, political, and climate change debates. In this spirit Juchau's narrative invokes Australian farm-life between small-town troubles and personal tragedy.

As the nonhuman "Others" in this novel, bees hold a distinct place in the narrative. Not only are various (female) family members addressed as "house bee" (*The World* 18-19), "worker bee" (*The World* 14) or the "virgin queen" (*The World* 180-81) respectively, but a central aspect of the text focuses on Evangeline Müller's childhood and youth at a hippie commune called 'The Hive.' Notions of femininity in Juchau's text are very closely linked to notions of the nonhuman, of otherness and marginality. Evangeline's past as a daughter and member of the commune makes her a creature between worlds. Firmly rooted in the world of humans, she is simultaneously also a member of a hive, of a matriarchal society where the survival of the community exceeds the life of the individual. As an in-between subject (one is almost tempted to call Evangeline a bee-ing), she seamlessly interlinks the two realms. The text is evocative of the resemblance between Evangeline and the queen bee of a hive, when her middle-daughter, Meg, takes the parallels between her father's apiary and her mother's commune literally and asks: "Were you a worker bee up there, Mum? Or a queen?" and the mother wearily replies that "It wasn't like that" (*The World* 14). Indeed, as a mother figure, or rather, *the* mother figure in the novel, she is depicted as the centre of the family unit, "everyone busy around her, while she sits at the heart of the hive" (*The*

World 181). Her central position is, however, also a precarious one, and she suffers physical abuse and the grief of her child's passing. While in the beginning this trauma is only hinted at, "their mother [was] blinking fast, a tic that appeared when they spoke of The Hive" (*The World* 14), the novel later reveals that Evangeline, pregnant with her first child and desperate to end the relationship with then-boyfriend Pete is brutally abducted and physically assaulted by both Pete and his friend. Pete "was homeless, shambolic, a drifter making do" (*The World* 172). In the aftermath, Evangeline is irrevocably drawn to Stefan, the surfing, bee-loving German who is fascinated by a human community modelled after a bee colony. Eventually, a fire destroys the physical evidence of the commune, leaving Evangeline with a past she cannot fully transcend. The utopian matriarchal ideals at the base of The Hive reveal themselves to be not more untainted and idyllic than any other (human) society.

Apart from Evangeline's implicit and explicit symbolic relationship with the hive-world, all her daughters are in close connection with the nonhuman world around them. While Meg feels distress at the sight of a kangaroo trapped in the toxic waste fields left behind by the local fracking industry (*The World* 73), her silent sister Tess, upon encountering a swarm of bees in the wild remarks "are these wild bees or have they swarmed from someone's apiary? You can't say if they've come from man or nature" (*The World* 162). Immediately transcending the dualistic logic of 'domesticated' and 'wild', 'colonised,' and 'coloniser', Tess's assessment that a wild bee is no different from a bee in an apiary also illuminates the innate fallibilities of Cartesian dualisms. Dualistic categorisation reaches its limits as concepts transcend binary boundaries and connect opposing ideas rather than dividing them. The bee's status as both wild and domesticated exhibits the otherness of the species and calls for non-binary ways of thinking. The novel even presents the materiality of the bee as inhabiting a realm somewhere between individual and collective being, between living and inanimate object:

As her eyes adjust Tess sees what's hanging from the ceiling and jutting like lichen in thick, creamy layers. They protrude from the walls and fan from the corners. They garland the roof beams. Great waxy chandeliers lit with yellow bees. A massive natural hive. (*The World* 162)

The bees, alternatively described as "lichen", "creamy layers", as "garland[ing]" and "chandeliers", seem to oscillate between different states of existence. While being profitable property, subject to extensive and selective breeding (*The World* 130), they also exist exclusively on their own terms. If anthropogenic ecological destruction of the bee's natural habitat does not come to an end, the bee colonies will diffuse, migrate, or go extinct. It is not in human hands to extract profitable goods from the bees' proximity but rather to discern their importance for human

survival. Their ability to foreground the ironic discord between domesticated animals and ecologically vital pollinators leaves their status as conceptually diffused. The toolkit of the Western tradition does not suffice to fully narrate, comprehend, or imagine the bee.

In contrast to the female protagonists who in one way or another, all have a deep, intuitive, and affectionate connection to the natural world in general and bees in particular, the male characters in Juchau's novel seem to have in ambition what they lack in intuition. While local teacher Jim is chronically allergic to bees (*The World* 211), Stefan is an apiarist, having inherited the knowledge and scientific interest in bees from his German grandfather, who kept bees on his balcony in Berlin during and after the war (*The World* 18-19). Stefan's approach to beekeeping, however, is imagined in polar opposition of his wife and daughters' intuitive way. Keeping his "personal bible", Maurice Maeterlinck's influential *The Life of the Bee* (1901), as a steady companion, his ambition includes studying and writing his own scientific contribution and establishing himself academically as an apiarist (*The World* 22). When first arriving in Australia, Stefan is driven less by ambition, and economic interest and aimlessly searches for opportunities for self-realisation. This utopian dream he sees almost fulfilled when he hears about The Hive.

Fifteen years since he'd left Germany and floated into Bidgalong with a backpack and a copy of Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Life of the Bee*. This had become his personal bible and so, after a dope-hazed, partying spring in Thailand, he headed for the lands to find what that Belgian writer had so loved in the bees: *passion for work, perseverance, devotion to the future*. After a week of surfing, he'd trekked up to the commune because he'd heard it was modelled on bee communities. (*The World* 17)

With only *The Life of the Bee* as a companion, Stefan strongly feels the rightness of the connection between conferring logics of bee societies to human societies; he engages with the commune to find that while structures, nomenclature, and set-up of The Hive try to resemble a beehive, the inhabitants are very much human (*The World* 66). Finally, the novel poses the question of if and to what extent the imitation of bee life in the human world can be a feasible alternative to contemporary social, economic and climatological problems, if it does not also entail a radical rethinking and reimagination of human relationships with the nonhuman world.

Bees, Femininity and Anthropogenic Climate Change

Bees are curiously present and absent in literary fiction. More and more fictional literary texts are published that explore the idea of bees, and the corpus of bee-related fiction grows almost exponentially with their physical disappearance. Despite a growing number of literary texts implicitly and explicitly addressing bees as central actors and significant

subjectivities (e.g., Laline Paull's *The Bees*, Maja Lunde's *The History of Bees*, Eileen Garvin's *The Music of Bees*, Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*), theoretical and critical texts analysing the relationship between bee and human subjectivities are few. Imagining insect life and the intricacies of life in a beehive are often literarily connected to narratives of climate change and femininity. Laline Paull's *The Bees*, for example, explores the life and structure of the population in one beehive, including its social, political, and hierarchical structures from the perspective of bees. As notoriously difficult focalisers, bees inhabit the narrative territory between the mysticism of the unknowable, the power of matriarchal societies, and the material representatives of the abstract terrors of climate change. The bee-society is thought of as a mirror and counter-image of human society, depicting social, political, and ecological structures that seem superior to patriarchal human societies. Visualising how other (nonhuman) societies depend on the stability of the climate, while human societies depend on the survival of the bees, these insects have come to represent an alternative, perhaps even superior, social model.

Interlacing issues of climate change with notions of feminism is a significant aspect of debates about global environmental futures. Feminism as a consistent staple in the history of environmental concerns contributed to coining Ecofeminism in the late 1970s and tries to provide a platform for critical thought at the intersection of feminism and climate activism (Byrne 169). It highlights what Carolyn Merchant appropriately calls the “the contradiction between production and reproduction” (Merchant 193) and what she sees women’s attempt to overturn the offences and depletion of resources within local ecosystems. She even diagnoses “assum[ed] or act[ed] connections between women and nature” (Merchant 193). Similarly, Sangita Patil argues that “women and ecology [...] seem to be intertwined” (Patil 3) so that the conjunction of ecological and feminist issues seems a logical—global—consequence. While I remain hesitant to argue for a logical unavailability and socio-biological necessity that links women, activism, and ecologies, I concur with Nicholas F. Stump’s statement that “ecofeminism posits that the same hegemonic patriarchal capitalist forces driving global ecological destruction are also responsible for subordination along lines of gender, race, class, indigenous status, [and] the Global South-North divide” (Stump 4).

In this vein, *The World Without Us* imagines a world where demarcations of subordination are overly visible. Ecofeminist perspectives rely on feminist activism to illustrate and counteract the inadequacies of patriarchal hierarchies which encourage monodirectional logics of binary opposites. The novel imagines this when the middle

daughter, Meg, observes a political protest against the local fracking industry. "This was peaceful protest – so quiet you could do it in your sleep. By refusing to move they'd halted the fracking, sometimes for a whole day" (*The World* 73). Having joined the protests earlier to have "something to do, in that year after Pip" (*The World* 73), the narration ironically distances both Evangeline and Meg from the scene by remarking: "Their mother said, you girls have helped, you've kept their energy up! So they couldn't bring themselves to tell her, *Those boys are vegan* – and that they'd frisbeed the eggs right on to the road" (*The World* 73). Megan's shame upon disposing of her mother's cooking brings to mind the distinct patriarchal gender roles that the Müller family has established, in stark contrast to the bee's matriarchic society. Meg's mild disinterest in environmental concerns acts as a criticism of socio-political activism as a fashionable, yet inconsequential, pastime. The conjunction of feminism and climate activism creates a counter-narrative that tries to oppose established norms of Western traditions. "The marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand. Loss of diversity is the price paid in the patriarchal model of progress which pushes inexorably towards monocultures, uniformity and homogeneity" (Mies and Shiva 164). As a powerful tool to foreground systemic hierarchical subordination, Ecofeminism emphasises the urgency to counter established (Western) cultural and scientific norms and advocate for more interconnected, diverse, and de-hierarchised modes of thinking. By counterposing ecofeminist action in the novel, Juchau illustrates the deep roots of hierarchical dualistic thinking in contemporary society, while circumventing easy logics of active vs. passive through highlighting the parallels between human and nonhuman actors. Instead of translating the women's aims into feminist activism, Mireille Juchau chooses to parallel issues of climate change and the loss of biodiversity with the lives of the Müller family. Bees in distress, hives that vanish, and the diminution of the family's livelihood stress the precarity of insect life. Just as much as the Müller family is in dissolution after the loss of their daughter, the nonhuman world is in danger of dissolution on a planetary scale (*The World* 162).

Conclusion

Mireille Juchau's novel *The World Without Us* challenges the limits of human perception and distinctly places logics of intuitive connectedness with the world in the feminine realm while leaving male human and nonhuman actors outside this intimate cycle of knowledge and understanding. Struggling to make sense of natural phenomena, and undeterredly attempting to penetrate the interconnectedness of human

and nonhuman forces through anthropocentric logics of West-centric scientific discovery, Juchau's narrative does not place hopes of survival in the hands of its male protagonists. Through highlighting the fallibility of traditional Western notions of hierarchical dichotomies, the narrative explores responses to global climatic change and gives insights into the lives of an unlikely, intriguing set of protagonists.

The increasingly palpable effects of anthropogenic climate change on vital parts of ecosystems on land and in the oceans have become symbolic for larger, more abstract events in a changing climate. The recognisable (narrated and visual) images of distressed bees, diminished ecosystems, and struggling oceanic life make the imminent dangers of climatic change more comprehensible. Exploring the interconnectedness of the world of the bees, the human world, and the environment, *The World Without Us* draws parallels between human and nonhuman subjectivities and becomes a multifaceted kaleidoscope that promotes the importance of multiperspectival approaches—in literature and beyond.

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The NewClear Family in Times of the Anthropocene: The Nea-Human and her Family in James Bradley's *Ghost Species*

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Abstract

In this essay, I am analysing James Bradley's 2020 novel *Ghost Species* for its generic make-up and the ways in which this interacts with questions of gender. As I will argue, *Ghost Species* is a multi-genre mix of science fiction, climate fiction, domestic novel, and coming-of-age story and thus combines realist with speculative fiction. It defies classic genre conventions because of its female focalizers and their representation within the scientific community and society more generally. As a result, a *newclear* family is constructed, with the NeaHuman and her coming of age in the centre. By bringing together the different genres and their gendered presumptions, *Ghost Species* challenges traditional ideas of mothers as caretakers as well as of the coming of age as a female.

Introduction

I was reading parts of James Bradley's 2020 novel *Ghost Species* right next to the original excavation site of the Neanderthal (and the rest only a handful of kilometres further up the hills), trying to imagine how, in deep time, they roamed the very places I roamed then. I could even have gone and said "Hello" to a Neanderthal dressed in a suit, called Mister 4%¹, if the Neanderthal Museum had not been closed due to the Covid-19 measures in force at that time, discussing the family and the coming of age of what I call the Nea-Human with him.

The Nea-Human of *Ghost Species* is a new kind of human, as much post-sapiens as it is pre-sapiens (or rather simul-sapiens, to be scientifically correct). It is a female *homo neanderthalensis* created through reverse genetic engineering and tellingly called Eve, who is supposed to provide "other perspectives" (Bradley 20) in the face of rapid climate change. Eve is part of a complex programme devised by tech billionaire Davis Hucken's (any similarities to living tech gurus are, of course, purely coincidental) Hucken Foundation to "reconstruct ecosystems all over the planet" by "resurrecting lost species," thus "entirely re-engineering our [i.e., *homo sapiens*'s] relationship with nature" (19). The biblical intertextuality is hard to miss, as is the trope of the Edenic vision of a world populated by a new species.

Considering this, we would be right in reading *Ghost Species* as a science/climate fiction hybrid, yet it defies easy genre classifications, not least through its choice of female focalizers and their representation within the scientific context and within society. The coming of age of the Nea-Human as well as her family constellations, I will argue, are inextricably linked to the different genres *Ghost Species* is constructed of, especially to their representations of women. The nexus of science fiction, the domestic, and gender is what interests me here and what sheds a new light on the ways in which gender and the family, that is, women as caretakers as opposed to (or alongside of) professionals, especially as scientists, have been represented in the past. To do so, I will first consider the genre characteristics of such disparate genres as science fiction, climate fiction, the domestic novel, and the *bildungsroman* before discussing their take on gender and how *Ghost Species* both subverts and reinforces common generic stereotypes.

¹ The name Mister 4% was chosen in 2012 because at that time it was believed that the genomes of modern humans still contain up to 4% of Neanderthal DNA (Deutsche Welle).

A Generic Hybrid

As Andrew Milner and J. R. Burgmann argue, “contemporary climate fiction is a subgenre of sf rather than a distinct and separate genre” (5). They have identified “three main tropes” within science fiction which deal with climate change: “the drowned world, the freezing world, and the warming or burning world” (6), and *Ghost Species* very clearly belongs to the last group. Yet those warming narratives, according to Milner and Burgmann, in the past hardly featured in science fiction (15), something they attribute to the fact that the actual dangers of global warming have only recently been fully identified by science (16). Rising water levels, on the other hand, have a long history in science fiction (6), and the idea that earth is approaching a new ice age has dominated much of twentieth-century science and science fiction (11). Despite its relative newness, the trope of global warming has gained some momentum and now is what, more often than not, lies at the heart of contemporary climate fiction. It is its “comparative fidelity to the findings of the relevant sciences,” write Milner and Burgmann, that makes contemporary, i.e., global warming-related, stories of climate fiction prime examples of “science fiction” (20). They mirror current debates in climate science and that sets them apart from other, earlier, examples of climate fiction such as flooding narratives or stories of the new ice age—they, it seems, truly put the science in science fiction.

The emphasis on science becomes apparent in the very first pages of *Ghost Species*: in a not-too-distant future (if not present), Kate and Jay, two world-renowned geneticists, are invited to take part in a privately run scientific project to recreate the world as it was before *homo sapiens* arrived on the scene. “We’re not at a tipping point, we’re past the tipping point. The world we knew, it’s over. Our civilization is already dead. The question now isn’t how to save what we had, it’s how we make something new,” says Davis Hucken, self-styled patron of climate science (14). His plans are described in purely scientific terms, such as “Genetic engineering,” “Synthetic biology,” “Biotech” (15), or “Geoengineering” (18), as well as by technological jargon and buzzwords: “We know it’s possible. Ecosystems are really just cycles of energy. We have computational power to model them, to understand the way energy flows through them. [...]” (19). In this vision, science completely replaces natural procreation and the family, including the traditional paths of coming of age; nothing is more than the sum of its matter and the energy which runs through it. Science is thus from the beginning characterized as diametrically opposed to nurturing, at least according to Hucken, who functions as the mad scientist-father prototype in the novel.

Genetic engineering, which has been a stock element of contemporary science fiction since the 1990s (Vint 184), no longer is wholly a fiction: in September 2021, a group of scientists announced they have received funding worth \$15m to create an elephant-mammoth hybrid in order “to make a cold-resistant elephant” (Sample). The plans of the research team surprisingly accurately resemble Hucken’s project of re-introducing megafauna to the tundra—or is it the other way round? When we read Bradley’s text alongside current news coverage, we can hardly see any difference:

‘In the case of the tundra, it’s mostly grassland, which is a relic of the last Ice Age. But the grasses only exist because large herbivores prevent the forest from taking root. Those large herbivores are now almost gone, meaning the forest is free to spread. [...] if we can reintroduce large herbivores we can re-create the conditions of the last Ice Age and keep the forest at bay.’ (Bradley 18-19)

But the scientists also believe introducing herds of elephant-mammoth hybrids to the Arctic tundra may help restore the degraded habitat and combat some of the impacts of the climate crisis. For example, by knocking down trees, the beasts might help to restore the former Arctic grasslands. (Sample)

Science, it seems, has caught up with fiction. There no longer is a “fictional *‘novum’* [...] *validated by cognitive logic*” so famously introduced by Darko Suvin (63) in his structuralist definition of science fiction and echoed in the title of the first chapter of *Ghost Species*, “Impossible Things” (Bradley 5-65). There no longer are fictional inventions, constrained only by logic, there is nothing but factual possibilities, leaving us with a generic uncertainty. To put real science into science fiction then means to reassess long-held beliefs in genre conventions and to question the representation of science and scientists in science fiction.

In a recent interview, James Bradley classifies *Ghost Species* as “a literary novel that uses science-fictional devices”. For him, there has been “a shift in the emphasis of science-fiction itself,” something he describes as a “pulling in of the horizon” (Edwards). Rather than continuing to direct its gaze towards space, contemporary science fiction turns to the world around us and that necessarily also includes an engagement with the “climate and environmental crisis” (Edwards). However, as becomes clear, *Ghost Species* does not care about rigid structuralist genre definitions and actively rejects any generic labelling altogether: the idea of (re-)creating human species other than *homo sapiens* to at least save the *planet* from climate catastrophe, though not its current inhabitants, is nothing but an introduction (Bradley 19-20). Soon after this initial setting of scenes, the focus shifts from the climate aspects of the novel and the strict emphasis on science to a relational level. At the end, the scientific has become not much more than white noise in the background. Even in those chapters of the novel the titles of which suggest a resurgence of

the climate-change subject, i.e., “Homo Genocidus” (147-74), “Meltwater” (199-229), “The Forest” (231-60), and “The Silent World” (261-69), the relations between individuals take centre stage. At this point, genre conventions of both the domestic novel and the *bildungsroman* (or, more broadly speaking, coming-of-age stories) mix with those of science fiction and climate fiction. It is at the intersections of those two genre families that issues of gender, manifested in both the coming-of-age of the Nea-Human and the representation of the scientist-cum-mother, play out.

Coming of Age as a Nea-Human

Before I can trace the ways in which gender is mapped in the novel, I need to say a few words about the generic conventions of the domestic novel and the *bildungsroman* and how they are taken up in *Ghost Species*. As Lori Merish points out, the difference between domestic fiction and the *bildungsroman* centres on the centrality of the domestic sphere. In the *bildungsroman*, the home is only the catalyst for the protagonist’s development. In the domestic novel, on the other hand, the domestic becomes the centre of the plot and does not merely feature as the background and starting point for the hero (262). In its mid-nineteenth century original, and even more so its classic mid-Victorian form, the domestic novel is an expression of the dichotomy of the private vs. the public sphere and it is women who are at the centre of the domestic novel (262). Especially chapter two of *Ghost Species*, with its title “Foundling” (Bradley 67-96) invoking the common literary motif of the orphan, focuses on the home in its traditional meaning—the home Kate has created for herself and Eve, whom she has abducted from the facility. This home, however, is “poor, threadbare, broken-down, the cheap second-hand blanket that covers the couch a desperate attempt to disguise its meanness” (100). It is a dysfunctional home, with Kate living in constant fear of being found by Hucklen and having Eve taken from her (90, 95, 99). In the chapter which follows, “Childhood” (97-145), it is still the home, albeit a different, less poor but due to its being run by the facility even more dysfunctional home, which is at the heart of the action. For Eve, the first home of her toddler, not her childhood years, nevertheless is the starting point for her to embark on her journey into the world. This development is reminiscent of the basic plot structure of the *bildungsroman*: unlike domestic fiction, the typical *bildungsroman* tells the story of an individual’s way into the world, that is, their (though most often his) successful entry into society (Slaughter 93). In the anglophone world, the term is often used synonymously with the much broader term coming-of-age (Slaughter 93), thus the emphasis on *Bildung*, which we find in the original German term, is lost. This loss of a central idea, that of *Bildung*

as both education and formation (in their particularly German understanding) (Selbmann 1-7), is as subversive as it is suppressive: on the one hand, it subverts the patriarchal mindset of *Bildung* being a male prerogative by opening up the concept, but on the other hand, by shedding this reference altogether, it completely glosses over the fact that *Bildung* has for long indeed been a male prerogative—a fact which needs to be addressed. In the remainder of the text, I will use the anglophone term coming-of-age, but in my analysis will also discuss the male-centrism of both the original term and its anglophone equivalent. Just like there are different variations of the basic model of the coming-of-age-story, the milestones of Eve's coming-of-age and their readings vary. But first, let us consider some of the guises in which the coming-of-age story may come.

As Joseph Slaughter writes, “the term [*bildungsroman*] can be capacious enough to cover any story of social initiation that may be found in any culture” (93). Such a story of initiation has been defined by Mordecai Marcus as showing “its young protagonist experiencing a significant change of knowledge about the world or himself, or a change of character, or of both, and this change must point or lead him towards an adult world” (222). The coming-of-age story may also come in the form of the novel of adolescence, “the typical pattern of [which],” writes Barbara White, “is said to be estrangement from the social environment, conflict with parents, disillusionment in love, departure from home, and encounter with different people and ideas” (3). For White, the age of the protagonist is a defining characteristic which distinguishes the initiation story from the novel of adolescence and that, in turn, from the *bildungsroman*: “while the *Bildungsroman* requires an older hero than the novel of adolescence, the initiation story might include characters of any age” and “there are stories about young children” (4). For long, the typical *bildungsroman* was considered to feature a male protagonist, yet since the 1980s, a growing body of feminist scholarship has drawn attention to the female *bildungsroman*, one which centres on the development of a female main character. However, it follows its very own rules, as Susan Fraiman criticizes in her inverted reading of the *bildungsroman*'s typical “development in emphatically masculine terms” (5). Such a model of the female *bildungsroman*, analyses Fraiman, suggests that all of the different milestones in a woman's life culminate in the marriage to her male mentor and leave no room for choice (6). For Fraiman, the irreconcilability of what society expects of women with the mastery achieved at the end of the *bildungsroman* ultimately reveals an uncertainty about “what female formation is and [...] about what it should be” (6). Similar to the novels analysed by Fraiman, the coming-of-age story of Eve in *Ghost Species* can be read as one of those “dissenting narratives that break away and stray beyond the bounds” of classic models (6).

In *Ghost Species*, we find a number of milestones which correspond to the different definitions given above, and they can be read differently according to which type of coming-of-age story the reader would assign them to: first of all, we witness the development of the Nea-Human from planning stage (Bradley 20) through birth (57-58) and childhood (67-145) to adolescence (175-97) and maturity (263-69). However, the decisive moments of entering society vary, depending on the perspective you apply: a first introduction to society is the re-introduction to the “proper” community (of scientific observers rather than general society) at the facility (96), which happens when Eve is still a toddler. Through this introduction she is re-assigned the status of object. As a teenager, Eve is told she is a Neanderthal (174), which is the very moment that makes her realize the degree of her estrangement from the social environment (in line with White’s definition): “Is this why she feels so different? So alone?” (177). At this point in the narrative, Eve also becomes the focalizer of the narration through whose eyes the reader sees the events unfolding. In the text, this initiation rite is marked by the title “I was a Teenage Neanderthal” (175-97). In this part, we are faced with a tale of adolescence characterized by a growing conflict with Kate, Eve’s surrogate mother, and a disappointing first love and sexual experience (192-95). It is not until the world collapses—“And just like that the world is over” (229)—that Eve leaves her home and eventually meets other people whom she then lives with in a commune. All the milestones mentioned so far represent particularly female introductions into the different stages of societal order and development of (a female) *homo sapiens*: Eve as what she truly is in a society full of sapients, Eve into the society of what would have been considered her peers had she not been a Neanderthal (with a focus on romantic and sexual relationships), and Eve in a post-apocalyptic new-world order (as the one tending the vegetable garden). Interestingly, her journey is not yet completed at those various points, as it still lacks her transformation into an adult who may fully participate in society, which is one of the cornerstones of the *bildungsroman* structure. This final milestone, however, leaves us questioning the idea of what constitutes society in a world falling apart due to climate catastrophes: it is Eve meeting other Neanderthals in Europe who are the result of projects similar to the one Eve was born into (269). By then, *homo sapiens* and its life cycle have been written out of the story altogether.

The Trope of the Failed Scientist-Mother

However, the white noise of science and climate change returns to haunt the seemingly easy categorization of *Ghost Species* as a coming-of-age-story-cum-domestic-novel. Although science fiction does not seem to share many characteristics with the domestic novel and the two

categories seem “diametrically opposed” to each other (Yaszek 107), there are also points of contact between them. Lisa Yaszek argues that authors from the late 19th century onward have used what she terms domestic science fiction “to assess the impact of technoscientific change on labor practices and social relations in the home” (107). According to her, domestic science fiction presents “women as domestic engineers” (108) or is concerned with “the technoscientific restructuring of women’s work” (111) as a means of addressing issues of domesticity, thus the home remains central to this subgenre. Despite the obvious parallels between Yaszek’s description of domestic science fiction and various elements in *Ghost Species*, I hesitate to think of the novel as an example of domestic science fiction. Instead, I prefer discussing the novel in terms of a genre mix of speculative fiction which deviates from common genre characteristics at crucial points, asking us to reconsider our understandings of the world as we know it. *Ghost Species* does not mix the different genres to create a homogenous hybrid genre (such as domestic science fiction), but rather creates a multi-genre mix of characteristics that partly attract and partly repel each other.

A case in point is the issue of gender in all the genres which have come up thus far. One of the most obvious angles from which to approach questions of gender in the matrix of science fiction and coming-of-age stories is the issue of representation. In her 1970 study *The Image of Women in Science Fiction*, Joanna Russ pointedly wrote “There are plenty of images of women in science fiction. There are hardly any women” (208). More than 50 years later, in 2021, even those few women seem to have completely vanished from some newspaper’s literary knowledge (see New York Times Books). What we find in speculative, and more particularly science fiction (of the more educated kind) are representations of women who, according to Russ, are modelled on the then “present-day, white, middle-class suburbia” (201)—that is, the nuclear family with a father-scientist and a child-rearing stay-at-home mother. Russ draws attention to the fact that it is especially the relational level of families, where issues of how gender roles interact or of how care responsibilities are divided, which are left out in science fiction produced by both male and female writers (204, 207). To a certain degree, this changed when the first female hero of blockbuster science fiction, Ellen Ripley, entered the screen in the 1979 movie *Alien* and challenged traditional stereotypes of science fiction (especially those Joanna Russ identifies as prevalent in space operas, cf. 202–203). Furthermore, her character has also more often than not been analysed in terms of family relationships and motherhood, most notably in Barbara Creed’s seminal *The Monstrous Feminine*: “The science-fiction horror film, *Alien*, presents a complex representation of the monstrous-feminine as archaic mother” (16). As Rachel Johnstone points out, images of “Ripley as a muscular,

gun-toting saviour cradling a frightened child” have become iconic (243), imagining the possibility of hero and mother coexisting within a single character. Unlike other critics, who read the various birth scenes in the *Alien* series “as reflecting deeply entrenched reproductive anxieties” (244), Johnstone invites us to understand the series as “treating motherhood as *one* defining characteristic among *many*,” a representational act which ultimately challenges traditionally held beliefs about motherhood (245, emphasis mine).

This focus on motherhood is both opposed to and complemented by another stock convention of science fiction, that of the mad scientist-father paired with the absent mother (Allman 125). “It is curious,” writes John Allman, “that so many of the mad scientists we find in science fiction are engaged in creating beings without the agency of a woman or of a nurturing maternal principle” (126) (which, of course, begs the question why a nurturing principle needs to be maternal). Whereas the representation of motherhood in science fiction is confirmed by the father’s denial of his own creation, the representation of fatherhood is characterized by the absence of the mother. The mad scientist-father is the epitome of the horrors of unnatural procreation, the mother that of the nurturing principle. This is a step backwards when it comes to the roles of mothers in science fiction, yet it is still useful for piecing together different types of family relations in science fiction as far as representations of the *father* in the genre are concerned. In her analysis of how science fiction either mirrors suburban middle-class life (as in high-brow science fiction) or simplifies gender roles (as in low-brow space operas), Joanna Russ also writes of the father as scientist whose “job may be to test psychedelic drugs or cultivate yeast-vats” (201) or who brings along his “beautiful daughters [...] as his research assistant” (202), respectively. She does, however, leave out the (pro-)creative capacities of the scientist-father, which almost amount to a reverse form of parthenogenesis, as in the case of Victor Frankenstein and his creation.

It is not far-fetched to read *Ghost Species* in light of these science fiction tropes, that is of motherhood and the (mad) scientist-father: on the one hand, there is Davis Hucken, whose “increasingly bizarre public appearances” (Bradley 106) are not the only signs of “something harder, closer to madness” (125). It also seems to be no coincidence that the Nea-Human is named Eve, at once implying the first female and the motherless creation of what patriarchal cultures tend to describe as a *male* God. Eve is the product of reverse genetic engineering, a purely scientific process at the hands of the mad scientist who considers himself god-like. On the other hand, there is Kate, who before she joins the team at the facility has suffered a miscarriage (48-52). What complicates matters, is the ambiguous role of Kate, who is both a world-renowned

scientist and a surrogate mother. It is tempting to read Kate's motherhood in the same ways Johnstone reads Ripley's motherhood, i.e., as one characteristic of the (successful) female protagonist among others. The way Kate is framed in opposition to her male scientist-counterparts, however, tells a different story: the assessment that her "work as a genetic programmer is without parallel" (21) may be the official reason she has been asked to join the project, but it later becomes clear that her psychological status after her miscarriage "certainly played a part" (124) in recruiting her. Even in the beginning, it is Jay, her partner, who is as fascinated by the scientific possibilities and challenges of the project as the male mastermind behind the scheme, whereas Kate is the one who is concerned about the ethical implications of the creation of Eve, thinking of her as a child rather than a project (23-24). From the perspective of the male scientists, her emphasis on the ethical dimension of the project is considered an unwelcome obstacle to their own "purely" scientific approach—a perspective which reads science and ethics as binary oppositions instead of as part of each other. In the eyes of her male counterparts, Kate's position as a scientist is not complemented by the aspect of motherhood, but rather undermined. Furthermore, Kate is also framed in terms of her (non-existent) relationship to her own mother and her troubled childhood. It is indeed a whole chapter, "Homo Genocidus" (147-74), which is devoted to Kate's own personal history, one that is characterized by its dysfunctionality—a dysfunctionality she has unconsciously reproduced in her time alone with Eve: "How has she ended up living in a repeat of her childhood after all these years?" (100).

Kate is represented as a failed mother, both because of her miscarriage and her supposed failure in mothering Eve. At the same time, she is also represented as a failed scientist. This reading, however, has its pitfalls, as it is the men Kate interacts with who all so subtly make her believe she has failed: first, when the two of them are privately discussing whether or not to join the project, it is Jay who suggests her ethical concerns are rooted in her own experience of having suffered a miscarriage and are thus closely linked to her motherly instincts (24). Later on, it is not Kate who feels contempt for the home she has created for herself and Eve, but she rather "sees the place as he [Jay] must see it" (100). When she wants to rejoin the project as scientist-cum-mother, she is constantly rejected and considered unable to fully participate in the project as a scientist by both Jay and Davis Hucken. In this way, Kate's motherhood is framed as failed because it does not conform to an idea of motherhood (or science) as devised by male expectations and as seen through the male gaze, despite Kate's focalizer status. She is less certain in her assessment of motherhood in general, which she equates with vulnerability (27), and herself as mother in particular: "Gradually, she

realised it wasn't the children themselves that frightened her, it was something deeper, less easy to articulate. Not just the loss of autonomy over her body, her life, but of being vulnerable in that way" (37). What we get is a male representation of failure for which the opposition of science and nurture is the frame of reference. This then is internalized by the female who is therefore necessarily represented as not having succeeded in either motherhood or a scientific career, let alone in both.

Quite a different take is offered by Joseph Jenner, who reads the failed mother in contemporary representations of female astronauts in terms of anthropogenic anxieties: "the *failure* of procreation is projected onto anxieties about the Earth's increasing inability to sustain life" (105-06). This ties in very well with reading *Ghost Species* as climate fiction, as the demise of the failed mother parallels Earth's (and human society's) decline. Moreover, Kate's slow death, "extinction" (212), at the hands of a brain tumour almost coincides with the sudden end of the world as we know it (225, 229). Yet the novel does not stop at this point. From a narratological perspective, Kate has long since lost her grip on the narration, before the tumour is even diagnosed, having been replaced as focalizer by Eve. The failed scientist-mother is as much gradually written out of the story as the mad scientist-father (who is last referred to as having "relocated to a safehouse in New Zealand", 212)—but only to make way for the Nea-Human. Just like Earth's development mirrors the different stages of the decline of *homo sapiens*, it also mirrors the coming-of-age of the Nea-Human: rather than being fatally connected to *our* species, Earth is entering a new phase of its life, the post-Anthropocene.

As I have shown, the different generic strands of the novel I have analysed in this article—there are more to focus on in articles to come—all tell the story of gender and of how it is nothing but a construct devised by *homo sapiens*. On the one hand, there is the development of the Nea-Human, which clearly follows classic female milestones—but only as long as she is a member of the heavily regulated society and company of sapient. On the other hand, there is the trope of the scientist-mother, who is represented as a failed mother as long as the terms of reference are that of a male-dominated understanding of science and motherhood as opposites. Once the perspective changes, the certainties of gender stereotypes crumble and fall: Eve enters the post-sapient society, and thus concludes her coming-of-age journey, not as a female member of her group, but simply as a Neanderthal who has newly arrived in a different part of the world. At the same time, it is thanks to the scientist-mother and the way in which she complemented science with nurture that Eve successfully completes her journey into adulthood. As a female Neanderthal, Eve carries a promise of procreation, a promise of caring for Earth born in science.

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Review:

Vakoch, Douglas A., editor. *Ecofeminist Science Fiction: International Perspectives on Gender, Ecology and Literature*. Routledge, 2021.¹

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"Science fiction serves to further valorize science as a tool for domination, not only of Earth but of the fictitious worlds beyond" (148), argue Lydia Rose and Teresa M. Bartoli in their contribution to *Ecofeminist Science Fiction: International Perspectives on Gender, Ecology and Literature* (2021). As Douglas A. Vakoch's edited collection proves, however, science fiction can also serve as a means to explore alternative—ecofeminist—forms of living. Mainly focusing on debates around technology, gender, and the environment, the 14 contributions to *Ecofeminist Science Fiction* examine examples of science fiction in literature and on screen. Each contribution foregrounds "alternative modes to help prevent the replication of oppressive patterns" (113) by presenting analyses whose structuring ideas can be adapted to read materials beyond those discussed in the assembled contributions. Vakoch does not claim to have collected essays that provide a definite reading- or watch-list for scholars interested in ecofeminism and science fiction; rather, the selected essays bring together established and new scholarly perspectives on gender, technology, and the nature/culture binary and offer insights into how discourses and debates surrounding this set of topics are projected into different, sometimes posthuman futures. The articles are clustered into four sections, whose titles do not

¹ Writing a review of an edited collection like this one that tries to do justice to all the contributions while also giving readers useful pointers about which essays to read for the content they are looking for was more of a challenge than I had initially expected. I would like to thank Judith Rauscher for workshoping this review with me.

always indicate precisely what the essays have in common. The essays differ in quality, some would have benefitted from more thorough editing. Still, Vakoch has delivered an intriguing volume on science fiction for the series Routledge Studies in World Literatures and the Environment.

Both the various primary works of literature and film discussed in the edited collection and the diverse approaches and concepts used to analyze the chosen works show that “no easy answers are proposed about environmental crises, interspecies ethics, or gender dynamics” (101) by science fiction. In the following, the contributions are ordered not as they appear in the collection, but according to shared themes that are not mentioned in the section titles but might be of interest to readers.

One recurring focus in the collection is that of relationality. This topic is introduced, amongst others, by Patrick D. Murphy, who discusses Karen Traviss’s multifaceted novel series *The Wess’har Wars* (2004–2008), suggesting that the author’s chosen emphasis on communities instead of individuals entails a shift towards representations of multispecies flourishing rather than remaining invested in one powerful species’ domination of other species. Furthermore, Murphy opts for the term “symbiosis” (107) in his analysis, rather than employing the often-used ecocritical concept of “entanglement,” because he considers symbiosis “the most basic form of relationality” of the world Traviss’s novels imagine.

Focusing on the environmental as well as the anti-colonial narrative of James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), Lydia Rose and Teresa M. Bartoli reflect on explorations of hegemonic masculinity in the blockbuster. Showing how pre-colonial Pandora realizes a “primary aim of ecofeminism” (152), namely social and ecological justice, the author duo reflects on Karen Warren’s “-isms of domination” (144). Evoking another recurring concept in the edited collection linked to relationality—that of vibrant matter—they analyze the visualization of relationality as vibrant matter in the film’s depiction of the culture of the Na’vi people. Sarah Bezan, in her article “*Speculative Sex: Queering Aqueous Natures and Biotechnological Futures in Larissa Lai’s Salt Fish Girl*,” offers a related argument by showing how relationality is made tangible with the help of water in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* (2002). Introducing the different levels of fluidity that come into play in the novel, Bezan adds a contribution from within the field of blue ecology to the collection and, in doing so, provides what seems to me the most thought-provoking article of the volume.

Perhaps surprising to some, the *Star Wars* movies are part of the collection’s ecofeminist assessment of science fiction as well. The canonical movie series is one of the few primary works addressed in *Ecofeminist Science Fiction* that does not itself present ecofeminist

themes, but in which feminist and environmental themes must be teased out through a feminist ecocritical reading. Başak Ağin starts her discussion of *Star Wars* with an analysis of three main female characters and, in the process, overextends a bit for my taste on a literature review of the conflicting arguments put forward by different scholars, a fact that distracts from the article's main topic, which is rather intriguing. Indeed, Ağin's take on the "Force" as vibrant and agential in a new-materialist sense and as yet another instance in sf in which relationality is made tangible resonates with several other contributions in the edited collection.

In line with the ecofeminist ideas of relationality or interconnectedness, ecofeminist concerns and the concepts employed to engage with them as they are presented in the collection appear themselves as a deeply entangled web, a circumstance illustrated by frequent cross-references. Lesley Kordecki, much like Bartoli/Rose and Değirmenci Altın, for instance, examines how one of the key aims of ecofeminism (as well as of feminist ecocriticism), that is, the critique of male dominance over both women and nature, is conveyed through narratives of meat-eating, animalization, and through the feminization of a foreign species in Mary Doria Russell's 1996 novel *The Sparrow*. As Kordecki suggests, *The Sparrow* plays with the naturalized association of certain species with one gender, imagining a world with a brutal power hierarchy between men and women with the aim of critiquing the very idea of the 'naturalness' of our binary sex-gender system. Addressing power hierarchies and processes of othering, Deidre Byrne, in turn, draws on Deleuze's and Guattari's theories of patriarchal elites to assess the work of sf-legend Ursula K. Le Guin. Reading Le Guin's early *Hainish Novels*, Byrne not only argues that "nonhuman and material elements" (201) represent Otherness in the book series, but she also highlights propositions of shared agency in the texts as a means to counter patriarchal logics of exploitation. Last but not least, she also asserts that the novels *Rocannon's World*, *Planet of Exile*, *The Word for World Is Forest*, and *Always Coming Home* build a crucial foundation for Le Guin's later works because of their introduction into her oeuvre of ecofeminist concerns.

Zahra Jannessari Ladani provides a close reading of a novel by Iranian author Iraj Fazel Bakhsheshi that links gender to the novel's literary geography. Ladani compares the phallic hierarchical construction of gender relations in *Men and Supertowers* (2006) to Foucault's theorization of the Panopticon as a "post-capitalist prison structure" (159). Unfortunately, Ladani takes up terms such as *civilization*, *man*, *primitive*, and *inferiority* in her discussion of gender representations, just as they are used in Fazel Bakhsheshi's novel, without critically reflecting on the use

of these terms. As a result, the essay reproduces what seem to be certain sexist and racist stereotypes evoked in the novel, even as it seeks to highlight those elements that may be considered ecofeminist. Besides repeatedly referencing well-known European theorists and classical ecofeminist concepts by such scholars as Karen Warren, Greta Gaard, and Donna Haraway, the contributions in Vakoch's edited collection also discuss a few lesser known, more recent concepts such as Izabel Brandao's and Ildney Cavalcanti's notion of the "ecodystopic body"—i.e. an exploited body becoming "alien when put into the natural environment" (Ladani 164). Meghna Mudaliar's article "Queering *Doctor Who* and *Supernatural*" elegantly employs a comparison of two characters to deconstruct a supposedly natural, Cartesian order opposing rationality and intuition as well as human and nonhuman beings.

Drawing on the work of different theorists that have been highly influential for ecofeminism, Imelda Martín Junquera invites readers to look at gender roles in the HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2022) with Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg. Because quotations from and comments on Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) take up a big part of Martín Junquera's article, the most interesting idea in the contribution is mentioned only at the very end: as Martín Junquera notes, notions of the posthuman are negotiated via a shared "symbolism of acquiring free will" in *Westworld* and the Mexican movie *Sleep Dealer* (2008), the other pop-cultural text briefly mentioned. In doing so, she touches on another key theme in the edited collection, that of artificial women and their relationship to technology and "nature," defined in different ways.

Analyzing visual (eco)media featuring artificial women like Martín Junquera, Katja Plemenitaš delivers a compelling reading of the US-American film *The Stepford Wives* (1975) and its 2004 remake. Discussing the historical and social factors that led to the development of those technologies that shaped U.S. land- and cityscapes during the first half of the 20th century, Plemenitaš demonstrates that the question of who should have and who has access to "natural" spaces matters for how the "categorical unification of women is imposed [...] through the destructive force of the main villains, the men of Stepford" (49) in the films' dystopian suburban spaces. These technological and environmental developments, she demonstrates, have important implications for the social role of (robot-)women in the movie, who are kept away from "natural" spaces and reduced to an "embodiment of consumerism" (56). Focusing on human-technology-nature relations and the figure of the robot in a slightly different manner, Asli Değirmenci Altın introduces Jeanette Winterson's "robo sapiens" from *The Stone Gods* (2007) as cyborg assemblages. She reads "the gendered practice of genetic fixing" (66) employed by Winterson's "robo sapiens" as suggestive of the drastic impact of humans

on nature and thus as a troubling consequence of anthropocentrism, although the novel, she notes, does not necessarily represent it as such. Moving away from the kind of anthropocentrism the novel can be said to critique, Değirmenci Altın argues, will allow humanity to move toward much needed queerer futures.

Providing the first essay in Vakoch's collection, perhaps due to the publication date of her primary text, Melissa Etzler discusses German folklore and early German science fiction. In her analysis of Hanns Heinz Ewers' gothic sf novel *Alraune* (1911), in which a female plant-monster-robot going by the name of "Alraune" raises questions about the reproductive rights of women in 1920's Berlin, Etzler makes an absorbing argument about the affinities that existed in the early 20th century—and arguably still exist—between sf and other fantastic genres such as gothic. These affinities, as her contribution proves, have led, for instance, to the crossing-over of the ecogothic trope of female-monster-plants into sf interested in breaking down gendered categories of the human, nature, and technology, making this another article in *Ecofeminist Science Fiction* that shows how sf can be used to challenge the dichotomies entailed in these categories.

Benay Blend's contribution stands out in the edited collection because it offers a compelling analysis of a work of sf from a marginalized perspective. Discussing two novels set in contested spaces between cultures, Blend explores issues of self-determination and sovereignty in different (settler-)colonial contexts. Focusing on the representation of racialized female bodies in Louise Erdrich's novel *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) as well as in Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour's collaborative graphic novel *The Novel of None! and Vowel* (2009), she discusses instances of resistance to colonial oppression by indigenous and Palestinian women respectively, highlighting the resonances between their exploitation and suffering and the dystopian landscapes both works are set in.

Peter I-min Huang, too, offers insight into non-western forms of ecofeminism, comparing the female protagonists of the Chinese novels *The Waste Tide* (2013) and *The Three-Body Problem* (2008) and their respective relation to notions of ecoterrorism. By analyzing how the *The Waste Tide*, a novel he classifies as more mainstream, depicts environmentalism as ecoterrorism and thus treats environmental concerns as "overrated" (135), if not dangerous, Huang comments on the difficulty of Chinese authors to discuss environmental matters in a political climate where such discussions are not always encouraged, or only encouraged in certain forms. An idea the article does not discuss but that may be of interest to some readers in this context is the Chinese

concept of “ecological civilization,” which describes the final stage of (communist) environmental and social reform. Peter I-min Huang, on his part, uses the second, lesser-known novel to demonstrate that ecofeminist sf can indeed be found in China, in this case, exemplified by a text that features a female environmentalist who is not represented as an ecoterrorist.

As Huang’s essay and some of the other contributions demonstrate, the editor has clearly made an effort to enrich the debates about ecofeminism and science fiction by including scholars from non-English-speaking countries and articles on non-English sources. However, these efforts at internationalization remain limited insofar as the theories and concepts used by the contributors largely remain the standard European and North American set (relationality, vibrant matter, cyborgs, etc.). While *Vakoch’s edited collection* thus provides a broad range of essays, it also highlights what is still missing from the debate.

List of Contributors

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