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## Warrior Monks, Sentient Robots, and Plant People

### Queerness in Australian Speculative Fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

*Abstract:* Australian speculative fiction abounds with queer-identifying writers, queer protagonists, and queer minor characters, but so far, critical attention to this kind of literature has been small. This article highlights the inherent suitability of speculative fiction for telling queer narratives and provides a tentative overview of Australian queer speculative fiction published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The developments are traced through analytical spotlights on key texts published since the early 2000s, starting with the queerness of side characters in Australian fantasy novels in publications by Trudi Canavan and Lian Hearn. The article subsequently covers increasingly prevalent representations of gay and lesbian romance in speculative fiction, focusing especially on C.S. Pacat's Captive Prince series against the background of the author's own identification as genderqueer. A more recent trend is noted, namely the discussion of non-normative gender identities and expressions in speculative fiction. Shelley Parker-Chan's 'She Who Became the Sun' serves as a final example for a very recent case of genderqueer fantasy that has been commercially successful and award-winning. All in all, the article seeks to provide an extensive but not exhaustive overview of queer Australian speculative fiction, showcasing the vibrancy of the genre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **Introduction**

#### **Speculative Queerness**

Warrior monks, sentient robots, and plant people may seem to be an odd assortment of characters with little to nothing in common, except perhaps that the last two are firmly rooted in speculative fiction. What does connect them is their queerness, both inherently and in the context of the specific narratives in which they are placed. Warrior monks are probably the least unexpected, ill-fitting, and therefore queer of the lot, since they did historically exist in both China and Japan, yet they still tend to appear out of place to Western readers due to a firmly established conceptual connection between (European) monastic life and peacefulness. Sentient robots and plant people, however, are decidedly nonhuman, strange, and queer, even though they are staple figures in speculative fiction, as showcased by characters such as Star Trek's Data, Star Wars' C3PO, and The Lord of the Rings' Ents; they remain queer within their respective narratives and thus often prove effective focal characters for queer readers.

This is also the case for the specific warrior monk, sentient robot, and plant person referred to in the title of this article: they feature as queer characters – both in the usual sense of non-normativity relating to sexuality and gender, but also in the broader sense of resistance against normative society – in three relatively well-known texts of Australian speculative fiction, which is a first indication that at least queer side characters have a firm place in this Australian literary tradition, if not queerness in general. The characters in question – warrior monk Makoto and, to some extent, warrior lord Takeo in Lian Hearn's Tales of the Otori series, the AI (Artificial Intelligence) Leo in Ambelin Kwaymullina's The Tribe trilogy,

and Larapinta in Ellen van Neerven's 'Water' – are thus illustrative examples for the ever-increasing presence of queerness in Australian speculative fiction.

In their introduction to the recent 'gender forum' special issue, *Gender and Sexuality in Australian Speculative Fiction*, the guest editors Bettina Burger, David Kern, and Lucas Mattila observe that Australian speculative fiction abounds with queer-identifying writers, queer protagonists, and queer minor characters; and, indeed, three out of five articles in this particular issue make considerable contributions to the study of queerness within the genre.<sup>1</sup> Still, Burger, Kern, and Mattila's claim that "[q]ueer perspectives and theoretical discussions of queerness are underrepresented in Australian Speculative Fiction scholarship"<sup>2</sup> remains true.

One reason for such a lack of queer scholarship explicitly focusing on Australian Speculative Fiction may be that the genre itself has a complex relationship with queerness. There is a significant subset of people – academics and casual readers alike – who associate speculative fiction and especially fantasy literature with conservative values, even going so far as to tweet that "[t]he cultural domination of fantasy over science fiction that we are currently living through just seems to be symptomatic of the broader turn towards fascism".<sup>3</sup> This is hardly a new take, nor is it restricted to the social media sphere. In 'The Impulse of Fantasy Literature', Colin N. Manlove claims that fantasy novels'

frequent looking to the past is conservative in itself: and the order to which they look and seek to re-create is usually a medieval and hierarchic one, founded on the continuance of the status quo. Many of them portray the preservation of an existing state of things as their central subject.<sup>4</sup>

Helen Young also acknowledges the preconception that fantasy-as-a-formula is "safe, conservative, unthinking acceptance of existing order",<sup>5</sup> while Kim Wilkins remarks that "the medieval European past continues to dominate"<sup>6</sup> Australian fantasy literature in particular.

Young and Wilkins are right in pointing out that some fantasy literature is 'looking backwards' and thus has the potential of being conservative to the point of being inimical to queerness. However, while all speculative fiction, including the allegedly conservative fantasy genre as well as the more future-oriented science fiction genre, may be used to promote oppressive conservative values,<sup>7</sup> the genre also "leaves open a great deal of room for queerness in all its forms",<sup>8</sup> as Wendy Gay Pearson puts it in her Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication entry on 'Speculative Fiction and Queer Theory'. Thanks to its broad reach as "a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating

1 See Bettina Burger, David Kern, Lucas Mattila: Introduction, p. 5.

2 Ibid.

3 Jason Read: The cultural domination of fantasy, n. p.

4 Colin Manlove: The Impulse of Fantasy Literature, p. 31.

5 Helen Young: Race and Popular Fantasy Literature, p. 6.

6 Kim Wilkins: Cutting Off the Head of the King, p. 135.

7 Helen Young draws attention to the fact that "[t]here is a conservative – and often very vocal – element in any culture that views any change as inherently destructive" (190). Speculative fiction has its fair share of queerphobic authors, including dominating household names of fantasy literature, such as the openly transphobic J. K. Rowling.

8 Wendy Gay Pearson: Speculative Fiction and Queer Theory, p. 1.

'consensus reality' of everyday experience";<sup>9</sup> speculative fiction resists normativity by providing spaces for a variety of queer characters. In fact, many works of speculative fiction depict not only "possible and impossible futures speculated by and for oppressed populations and deviant individuals, who have been marked as futureless or simply left out by dominant imaginaries";<sup>10</sup> but also imaginary pasts, thus writing queerness back into the public imagination of pasts, futures, and also presents.

Queerness becomes increasingly prominent in contemporary speculative fiction, and – as previously indicated – Australian speculative fiction is no exception. Indeed, there seems to be a considerable tradition of queerness in Australian genre works, starting at least as far back as Trudi Canavan's 2001 'The Magicians' Guild' as an observable trend, though earlier examples can certainly be found. This includes Catherine Helen Spence's 'Handfasted' (1879), which, while still focused on a heteronormative society, queers the concept of marriage by (re)introducing 'handfasting,' a ceremony through which temporary marriages are officiated. Another example from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century would be Melissa Lukashenko's 1998 'Killing Darcy', which, while explicitly queer, falls on the softer side of speculative fiction, containing only some magical realist elements. A closer look at early Australian speculative fiction texts would surely reveal further instances of implicit or even explicit depictions of queerness that predate the 2000s. However, this article focuses on the 21<sup>st</sup> century and aims to provide a tentative overview of queerness in newer Australian speculative fiction, since the presence of queerness in this genre has significantly increased in the last twenty years, creating a vast and varied corpus.

Instead of in-depth analyses of individual examples of queer Australian speculative fiction, this article seeks to chart the field and to serve as a starting point for future research that investigates the directions queer Australian speculative fiction has taken in the last twenty or so years by highlighting select examples. While there are, of course, fanmade lists of LGBTQ+ speculative novels by Australian authors online,<sup>11</sup> this article differs from those cursory overviews by including short exemplary analyses of key texts, chosen both for their relative prominence amongst readers and for the way in which queerness is included. For the purpose of this article, 'speculative fiction' denotes, as previously stated, all texts that go beyond 'consensus reality', that is, texts belonging to a variety of sub-genres such as fantasy, science fiction, alternate history, zombie fiction, to name but a few.<sup>12</sup> "Queer theory is not only applicable to texts with 'queer' characters: it serves as more than a hermeneutic for reading nonnormative gender, sexuality, and sex";<sup>13</sup> but the texts covered in this article were selected for explicit inclusion of characters that can be considered queer due to their non-normative sexuality

9 Marek Oziewicz: *Speculative Fiction*, p. 1.

10 Alexis Lothian: *Old Futures*, p. 2.

11 See Nikky Lee: *Mega list of LGBTQ+ fantasy, sci-fi and horror books by Australian and New Zealand authors*, and, to a lesser extent, Michael Earp: *Australian LGBTQ YA* (misspelling in original title).

12 See Marek Oziewicz: *Speculative Fiction*, p. 1.

13 Lilith Acadia: *Queer Theory*, p. 1.

or gender expression. They serve as spotlights for various queer trends in Australian speculative fiction that deserve more detailed research in the future.

### ***Queer Australian Speculative Fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Queerness on the Sides***

An early and prominent example of speculative fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which explicitly includes queerness in a positive manner is Trudi Canavan's Black Magician series, a fantasy series that has become extremely popular outside of Australia as well, though it is perhaps not always perceived as Australian.<sup>14</sup> The series revolves around the so-called Magicians' Guild located in Imardin, the capital city of Kyratia, where young nobles are educated in the use of magic. The series' main character is Sonea, who, as the prototypical Chosen One, is extremely adept at magic despite being a pauper who, according to the rules that govern Kyratia's society, should not be magical. Once her magic prowess is revealed, the eponymous Guild sends out magicians to capture her lest her magic become uncontrollable. One of those looking for her is young Dannyl, who first features as a good friend of Sonea's eventual mentor but gains importance throughout the series as an ambassador for Kyratia. He is a focaliser in some chapters of Canavan's novels.

Dannyl's queerness is hinted at early on in the narrative, when his youth is discussed as follows:

Years before, when Dannyl was a novice, Fergun had circulated rumors about him in revenge for a prank. Dannyl hadn't expected anyone to take Fergun seriously, but when the teachers and novices began treating him differently and he realized he could do nothing to regain their regard, he had lost all respect for his peers.<sup>15</sup>

While this scene remains deliberately vague on the exact nature of the rumors that had been circulated, later interactions between Dannyl and his bully Fergun confirm that it is his queerness which alienates Dannyl from his peers. During his search for Sonea, Dannyl arranges to meet an informant in the slum areas of Imardin. While waiting, he encounters Fergun, who immediately insinuates that Dannyl is in the slums to visit the brothels. The male informant leaves as soon as Fergun arrives, causing him to further interrogate Dannyl:

'Oh, was he the one then?' Fergun asked, glancing behind. 'A bit rough looking. Not that I have any idea what your *specific* tastes are.'<sup>16</sup>

14 This is, in fact, an enduring problem for Australian speculative fiction (by which I mean speculative fiction written by authors who are situated in Australia on a long-term basis). Once a text, particularly in the fantasy or science fiction genre, becomes popular internationally, it is often seen as de-localised, global fantasy, despite the fact that the authors' Australianness or their Australian surroundings often influence even their most fantastical speculations, albeit often in a covert manner. C.S. Pacat's Captive Prince series is another example of queer speculative fiction whose Australianness might not immediately be obvious to international readers.

15 Trudi Canavan: *The Magicians' Guild*, p. 144.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

The 'specific' tastes Fergun refers to are clearly meant to indicate homosexual attraction, hence the interaction frames the society in which Dannyl lives as an intolerant one. There are also scenes in the novel where friends of Dannyl's note that he has not yet found a wife and express concern that he will be lonely, suggesting deeply ingrained heteronormativity.

Dannyl's sexuality does not stay between the lines, nor does Kyrulia's heteronormative society remain unchallenged. In the second novel of the series, 'The Novice', Dannyl meets Tayend, a young noble, while in a neighbouring country as ambassador. Dannyl's first reaction to meeting Tayend is reflected in an internal commentary about "the elaborate, *close-fitting* garb [which] suited *this handsome young man*" (emphasis added),<sup>17</sup> which may be interpreted as an early indication of Dannyl's attraction to Tayend, though he does not immediately act on it since he presumably expects similar social consequences for queerness to the ones he experienced in Kyrulia. Indeed, another Guild ambassador to Elyne opens a conversation with Dannyl by sharing gossip about "a man of dubious associations",<sup>18</sup> which are later insinuated to be homosexual relationships. While Dannyl is at this point still closeted, both to the reader and himself, he does voice sympathy for queer people and the oppression they face: "To have inclinations that are unacceptable, and to have to either deny them or undertake elaborate measures to hide them, would be a terrible way to live".<sup>19</sup>

Though Tayend reassures Dannyl that Elyne is not as strict as Kyrulia, since "a few interesting or eccentric habits"<sup>20</sup> are almost expected, it is clear that Elyne still regards queerness as strange and Other. Dannyl and Tayend later travel to Lonmar, a country in which queerness is persecuted in a far more extreme way than in both Kyrulia and Elyne. The two men arrive just in time to witness an execution, whose victim "has earned the ultimate punishment for corrupting the souls and bodies of men"<sup>21</sup> with what are deemed his 'unnatural lusts'. Canavan, then, showcases three societies that deal with queerness negatively, ranging from mere othering, but no criminalization, to "dishonour and shame"<sup>22</sup> for the so-called crime, to the death penalty. The narrative choice to include discriminatory and punitive views on homosexuality runs the risk of portraying the queer experience as a tragic one, but ultimately Canavan stays clear of this danger: Towards the end of the novel, Dannyl admits to himself and to Tayend that he is gay, inspired by Tayend's "certainty in [himself] about what is natural and right for [him]".<sup>23</sup>

At the beginning of the third volume, 'The High Lord', the two men have become a couple. Far from following the infamous 'Bury your gays' trope,<sup>24</sup>

17 Trudi Canavan: *The Novice*, p. 84.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 511.

24 'Bury Your Gays' refers to a long-standing literary trope: "The pattern of this trope's usage states that in a narrative work (novels especially), which features a same-gender romantic couple, one of the lovers must die or otherwise be destroyed by the end of the story. Many instances of this trope draw a direct correlation between the couple confessing their

Canavan has Dannyl and Tayend spend at least twenty years together, though the couple separates in the sequel series, *The Traitor Spy Trilogy*. While Dannyl is not the latter series' main character, he is one of the focal characters and crucial to the broader storyline. Such representation in a popular fantasy novel, as early as 2001, must have been of great importance to young queer readers, and likely continues to be so, especially since queerness is still far from universally accepted or understood. Even ten years after publication, queer representation in Canavan's speculative fiction continues to be seen as controversial by certain groups of readers, as evidenced by comments on the website *goodreads.com*. On March 13, 2012, for instance, *goodreads* user Aliased commented on an interview with Trudi Canavan, writing that they "find the ratio of gay/lesbian main characters to straight ones to be off-putting and beyond [their] willing suspension of disbelief",<sup>25</sup> despite the fact that at least the original trilogy only has two queer main characters – Dannyl and Tayend. While individual comments such as the one quoted above may not be representative of the novel's dominant reception (a larger, quantitative study would be needed to determine this), it serves as an indication that queerness in speculative fiction at least to some readers was not a matter of course in 2012.

Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* series, also published in the early 2000s, represents queerness in a more understated manner than Canavan's novels. The series portrays femininity and masculinity in a nuanced and complex way – and the fact that its protagonist Takeo has sex with a man in the first volume of the novel and sees no need to agonise over it in the slightest is certainly part of Hearn's construction of a kind of masculinity that allows for softness, vulnerability and open displays of emotion. This is most visible in the relationship between Takeo and the warrior monk Makoto, with whom he develops a deep and intimate friendship. After the death of Takeo's adoptive father, Makoto attempts to comfort him and the latter's tender admission "I notice everything about you"<sup>26</sup> already indicates his romantic feelings for Takeo, yet the sexual act itself is only hinted at, which may be attributed to the fact that it is a young adult series:

Now Makoto drew me into his embrace and held me closely. [...] His affectionate words, his touch, made the tears flow again. Beneath his hands I felt my body come back to life. He drew me back from the abyss and made me desire to live again. Afterwards, I slept deeply, and did not dream.<sup>27</sup>

The scene is fairly vague and could be interpreted differently. Cathy Sly, for example, describes the same scene as a religious experience during which "Takeo abjects all that is not 'clean and proper' in himself".<sup>28</sup> The queer interpretation, however, is confirmed in the second novel of the series, where Takeo states that Makoto had "held [him] until grief had given way to desire".<sup>29</sup> Though central

feelings for one another, kissing, having sex for the first time and the character's death; they often die mere moments or pages after their relationship is confirmed for the audience". (*Haley Hulan: Bury Your Gays: History, Usage, and Context*, p. 17)

25 Aliased: Message 1, n. p.

26 Lian Hearn: *Across the Nightingale Floor*, p. 284.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 285.

28 Cathy Sly: *Re-memembering the Self*, p. 47.

29 Lian Hearn: *Grass for His Pillow*, p. 206.

to the plot of the initial Otori trilogy, Makoto is only a supporting character to the protagonist Takeo, who is ultimately married to Kaede, seemingly confirming heteronormative relationships, albeit with a gender role twist, considering that Takeo is the softer of the two, whereas Kaede is more used to their warrior society. Still, Makoto's love for Takeo is never portrayed as harmful, but rather as the tender root of Makoto's intense loyalty. It provides a necessary counterpoint to the "sadistic, fetish-loving, Fu-Manchu-style homosexual Lord Fujiwara",<sup>30</sup> who, as a queer-coded villain, would otherwise be the only queer presence in the novels.

### ***Gay Princes, Lesbian Plants, and Human/Nonhuman Love in the Balance***

The years following these two examples have seen the publication of the occasional queer speculative fiction novel or short story – both in regular journals and online – and, of course, a plethora of queer fan fiction has also been published. They not only satisfy the queer fanbase's desperate desire for good representation but also contribute to the eventual print publishing of queer speculative fiction. One such romance series that "prompt[s] re-evaluations of common assumptions about the many connections between fanfiction and romance" and clearly belongs within the field of queer Australian speculative fiction is genderqueer author "C.S. Pacat's 2008-2012, 2014-2016 'original slash' series *Captive Prince*".<sup>31</sup> It is "an erotic M/M [male/male] romance series [...] set in the fantasy kingdoms of Vere and Akielos".<sup>32</sup> Though the series is not without controversy due to its portrayal of sexual slavery, it did play an important role in proving to mainstream publishers that a gay romance fantasy trilogy could be successful – first through an avid readership on live journal, then through conventionally published books.

Indeed, the series, which first followed a fanfiction-like format, as it was published "in serial updates that readers could access and comment on freely", was, to many readers, "their first introduction to the possibilities of M/M romance"<sup>33</sup> and thus by extension likely also their first introduction to queerness in fantasy literature. This corresponds directly to Pacat's intention of writing queer content into genre fiction that was missing in her own youth.<sup>34</sup> Pacat criticises that fantasy "can be a really conservative genre at times",<sup>35</sup> speaking of a nostalgia that often excludes queer people or other minorities, which reflects the aforementioned concerns about fantasy being a backwards looking genre that is potentially hostile or at least indifferent to queer people. The *Captive Prince* series provides a fantasy influenced by history (and is, thus, as nostalgic in tone as more mainstream fantasies), but with a specific focus on queer characters. Rather than drawing from medieval Europe – as many fantasies worldwide still do – Pacat

30 Sheng-mei Ma: *Zen Dog*, p. 169.

31 Maria Alberto: *Original Slash, Romance, and C.S. Pacat's Captive Prince*, p. 216.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Natalie Ng: *SEXtember*, n. p.

35 *Ibid.*

draws from Ancient Greece, a period and place, in which homosexual relationships were generally permitted and which is perceived as more open than the so-called Dark Ages,<sup>36</sup> which allows her to construct a world where queerness is normal. In Pacat's example, then, it is society itself that becomes queer by virtue of being unlike what we are used to, thus rendering the queer characters normal and even placing them in positions of power. Although it is considered as 'original slash' and M/M romance by Alberto, for example, the series departs from M/M romances as covered by prominent scholars in the field, such as Lucy Neville and Jonathan Allan. Allan claims that "male/male romance novels, which tell the story of two men falling in love [...] are written, like most romances, 'for women, by women'"<sup>37</sup> and Neville considers "[i]ssues raised by the prospect of women intruding on the 'sexual territory' of 'The Other' and the fetishization of gay male sexuality".<sup>38</sup> However, this does not do justice to the *Captive Prince* series since it is written by an openly genderqueer author, who uses both 'she/her' and 'he/him' pronouns, though Pacat may well be read as female by scholars unaware of his identity. This may be true for other writers in the genre as well, including those not yet openly 'out' in terms of their sexuality and/or gender, which is why the focus of this overview article is firmly on queer characters, not (just) queer authors.

Australian speculative fiction also contains more liminal experiences, featuring figures who are both marginalised and revered, depending on the perspective from which they are viewed. Ellen van Neerven's short story 'Water' and Ambelin Kwaymullina's *Tribe* series engage with queerness both in terms of queer ecological thought and individual queer identities from their respective Mununjali and Palyku perspectives. Scholarship on 'Water' has already acknowledged this, as is showcased by Samuele Grassi's analysis that it "is concerned with the connections of sexual freedom and environmental justice, and with the political import of feminist knowledges for contemporary queer theories and the struggle against patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, anthropocentrism, and colonialism".<sup>39</sup> Ellen van Neerven's 'Water' does indeed touch on all of the above through the relationship between the main characters Kaden and Larapinta, which crosses "dualistic notions of sexuality, gender, race, and human-ness" and which culminates in "a powerful call to engage with, as opposed to merely acknowledging difference, thus shaping unforeseen pedagogies for living with and loving others".<sup>40</sup> Aside from the queer relationship at the heart of van Neerven's short story, the latter is also significant in its portrayal of gender as well as transgender and non-binary experiences. Crucially, even though Grassi speaks of Kaden's lesbianism, Kaden refers to her identity as "[q]ueer, I guess".<sup>41</sup> Her

36 Whether this is indeed true or rather based on medievalist assumptions and popular perceptions of both periods, is a different question, explored in *Queer Medieval and Queer Antiquity Studies*.

37 Jonathan Allan: *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance*, p. 69.

38 Lucy Neville: *Girls Who Like Boys Who Like Boys*, p. 37.

39 Samuele Grassi: *Queer Natures*, p. 178.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

41 Ellen van Neerven: *Water*, p. 95.



comment that “hair is the least of it”<sup>42</sup> when it comes to feeling like a woman – or not – indicates potential fluidity in terms of gender identity. This is related to Kaden’s previous discussion with Larapinta, the plant woman with whom she later forms a relationship, since Larapinta asks “if [Kaden] feels like a woman even though [she has] short hair”.<sup>43</sup>

Such deliberate blurring of Western notions of the gender binary is reinforced through the story’s arguably most speculative element, the plant people, who are “ungendered; see, their gender is not predetermined and is only communicated”.<sup>44</sup> Bundjalung scholar Madeleine Clark sees herein a refusal to use the Western language of queerness, and a presentation of “an unresolved relationship to gender and sexuality”,<sup>45</sup> which I also recognise in the text’s refusal to name a specific label for Kaden’s identity that goes beyond the broad term ‘queer’. Queerness as a concept is certainly a part of ‘Water’, but absolved of the need to define precisely what is meant by the word and which (micro-)categories are or are not a part of it. I agree with Emily Yu Zong, who states that ‘Water’ as well as other speculative fiction stories featuring queerness “render the familiar world strange to allow for queer spaces and non-normative narratives”,<sup>46</sup> and that this is one of the reasons why speculative fiction might be especially useful for portraying queerness. Speculative fiction is capable of imagining

fantastic scenarios, alternate corporeality, and multispecies subjectivity to challenge readers’ expectations regarding reproduction, gender roles, and racial and more-than-human otherness. Stylistic elements of fantasy, myths, and science fiction offer these writers a unique artistic landscape in which to unsettle the biological discourse of race, gender, and sexuality and to re-examine subaltern pasts and envision alternative futures.<sup>47</sup>

Zong adds that stories such as ‘Water’ make “a case for queering the nonhuman as a creative response to social marginalization of diasporic, Indigenous, and queer experiences”.<sup>48</sup> Van Neerven’s ‘Water’ and its refusal to make a definitive statement about Kaden’s and Larapinta’s gender and sexuality can also be seen as a rejection of “the colonial project of denying difference in gender and gender diversity within Indigenous peoples”.<sup>49</sup>

Ambelin Kwaymullina’s *The Tribes* series similarly delves into human-nonhuman relationships, though it is for the most part less overtly queer than ‘Water’. For a more thorough discussion of how the novel “brings together discourses of queerness and the more-than-human”,<sup>50</sup> I recommend Christina Slopek’s article *Aboriginal Speculations. Queer Rhetoric, Disability, and Interspecies Conviviality in ‘The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf’*. I, however, would like to focus on the queer couple that features in the second and third volume of the series. We meet Leo in ‘*The Disappearance of Ember Crow*’ (2013) as an important political figure who

42 Ibid., p. 95.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., p. 78.

45 Madeleine Clark: *Noone Will Touch Your Body*, p. 150.

46 Emily Y. Zong: *Dragon Lovers and Plant Politics*, p. 3.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Sandy O’Sullivan: *The Colonial Project of Gender*, p. 1.

50 Christina Slopek: *Aboriginal Speculations*, p. 12.

goes by the name of the Lion; ironically, this is not a signifier of power, but rather an early indication of Leo's strangeness. Ashala, the protagonist, has never seen a lion before, as they became extinct long ago, and assumes that they are "giant lizards, sort of the same as saurs".<sup>51</sup> He is described as "tall, broad shouldered, and a little overweight",<sup>52</sup> which is a deliberately embodied, 'fleshy' and organic description, considering that Leo is later revealed to be one of the 'sentient robots' referenced in the title of this article, or rather an artificial intelligence. There is also a considerable focus on his emotions. At one point, he is described as looking "more than sad. *Bleak*"<sup>53</sup> because he is mourning his partner Peter. While this could easily have been attributed to the 'Bury Your Gays' trope, Kwaymullina uses the tragic couple in a very different manner. Their relationship is never questioned because they are both men, but rather because Peter is human and Leo is not – Peter aged and died peacefully of old age after nearly sixty years of being with Leo, while Leo himself is functionally immortal. Even though Leo does not struggle with his homosexuality, his struggle with his own nature – is he a sentient, feeling being or just a machine? – may resonate with queer people, too, who have frequently been called 'unnatural' themselves. This allows the narrative to present relatability for queer readers, who are still struggling in contemporary heteronormative society, without replicating discrimination based on sexual identity in the futuristic setting.

Ultimately, Kwaymullina resoundingly confirms that there is no essential difference between Peter and Leo despite Leo being "synthetic instead of organic";<sup>54</sup> instead, Starbeauty, one of the creation spirits, dispels Leo's fears that he may not have a "spirit to go to the Balance" and confirms that "[y]our end is not your end",<sup>55</sup> thus renewing Leo's hope for a possible reunion with his loving partner after death. Peter and Leo's love is shown as romantic and spiritually fulfilling as well as intricately connected to the novel's concept of the Balance, an epistemology based on Aboriginal belief systems, since both are on different sides of the Balance while still being connected through their love. The queer couple is explicitly a part of "[t]he world the ancestors made [...] in which all life is joined in a web of relationships",<sup>56</sup> which also provides a counterpoint to any worldview that might see homosexual relationships as 'unnatural'.

## ***Interlude***

### ***The Babadook as a Queer Icon***

In Australian speculative fiction, then, writing about queer characters often goes together with writing about characters that are othered, strange, and outside of what is broadly considered to be 'normal'. Sometimes, this can lead to characters who are othered from Australian society in different ways to be read as queer,

51 Ambelin Kwaymullina: *The Disappearance of Ember Crow*, p. 232.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 237.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 240.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 322.

55 *Ibid.*

56 Ambelin Kwaymullina: Introduction. *A Land of Many Countries*, p. 10.

even if this was not the original intention. In Jennifer Kent's 2014 Australian psychological horror film 'The Babadook', a single mother is struggling with grief for her husband, who died while she was giving birth to their son. Mother and son are soon tormented by a sinister-looking creature, the Babadook, which is first introduced as part of an eerie children's picture book. Due to a mistake by the Netflix algorithm that put the movie in the streaming service's Pride collection, joke memes started appearing on social media websites, especially 'tumblr', insisting "that despite heterosexual society's inability to see it, the Babadook was indeed queer".<sup>57</sup> According to various academics and journalists, the Babadook's queerness is, however, not merely an accident. The Rolling Stones journalist E. Young remarks, for example, that

the Babadook represents queerness itself, an invisible threat made real through denial and oppression. Queerness is often cast away into small corners of society but never completely destroyed, often coming back bigger and stronger and more visible, more of a perceived threat to heteronormative society.<sup>58</sup>

The Babadook is certainly not the first creature of horror to be adopted by the queer community, not least because many Gothic villains and monsters have traditionally been used to express anxiety over queer identities. However, with the Babadook's lair being a quiet Australian suburb and with the movie's eventual resolution of the mother simply accepting the Babadook's presence, it seemed remiss not to address this oddity of queer Australian speculative fiction for the overview at hand.

### ***Becoming Queerer Gender and Sexuality in Recent Australian Speculative Fiction***

A closer look at examples of more deliberate queer representation in Australian speculative fiction reveals an enduringly vibrant space for explorations of queerness by authors as diverse as the queer spectrum itself. In the last ten years, multiple queer speculative stories have been published by reasonably well-known Australian writers via traditional publishing opportunities as well as by virtually unknown writers who publish independently. Amongst recent young adult (YA) publications, the most famous example of queer speculative fiction, especially outside of Australia, is undoubtedly Jay Kristoff's *Nevernight* series and its "bisexual (anti)heroine"<sup>59</sup> Mia Corvere. Other traditionally published queer and speculative YA novels include Alicia Jasinska's 'The Dark Tide' (2020) and 'The Midnight Girls' (2021) (lesbian representation), Lili Wilkinson's 'After the Lights Go Out' (2018) and 'The Erasure Initiative' (2020) (bisexual representation), as well as Will Kostakis' 'Monuments' (2019) and 'Rebel Gods' (2020) (gay representation).

Certainly, the option of independently publishing e-books for relatively little money has contributed to more diverse offerings in genre fiction than

57 Michael J. Faris: *The Queer Babadook*, p. 403.

58 E. Young: *Why Babadook Is the Perfect Symbol for Gay Pride*, n. p.

59 Marthe-Siobhán Hecke: *But You Will Be a Girl Heroes Fear*, p. 49.

Pacat would have been able to find as a teenager. Additionally, the option of e-publishing makes queer Australian speculative fiction more accessible to interested readers and scholars outside of Australia. One such example is Stephanie Gunn's novella 'Icefall' (2018), a science fiction story about a mysterious mountain on a distant planet and the mountain climber who wants to conquer it, watched over anxiously by her wife in orbit. 'Icefall' is an atmospheric example of cosmic horror and the portrayal of the central lesbian couple focuses on their love for one another rather than on their queerness, which allows for a text that is explicitly queer but is not solely defined by its queerness.

Claire G. Coleman's dystopian anti-war novel 'The Old Lie' (2019) features an openly lesbian protagonist, Romany "Romeo" Zetz, who regularly gets in trouble for her dalliances with other pilots – mostly women or non-binary people – not because of the queer nature of these trysts, but rather because "[a]pparently you were supposed to wait until shore leave before fraternizing with the other pilots".<sup>60</sup> Her later relationship to the radio operator and hacker Harper is accepted without much comment; the only concern seems to be that Romeo is technically Harper's superior, which Romeo downplays by stating that they are "different services, different chain of command, nothing to stop [them] being friends".<sup>61</sup> The couple's eventual reunion after a successful military operation certainly fits the tone of the epic space opera and positions them as a central romantic couple: "Romeo lay with Harper in her arms; finally, Harper in her arms, she was building dreams for the first time in her life, building a life for the first time".<sup>62</sup> Significantly, two of the protagonists, Shane and Romeo, are both women in non-stereotypical military positions – foot soldier and fighter pilot – and have names more frequently associated with male characters, which allows Coleman to play with gender expectations as she leaves Shane's gender ambiguous for a considerable part of the narrative, noticeably avoiding using her pronouns until later in the novel.

Coleman's novel attempts to present a gender diverse world, though to varying levels of success. There is, for example, a "five foot three height requirement for pilots", resulting in most pilots being either "women or enbies".<sup>63</sup> This runs the risk of suggesting that 'enbies' (non-binary people) are naturally or at least predominantly people who were assigned female at birth, which not only erases non-binary people assigned male at birth but also may suggest that non-binary people are just 'women lite' or simply 'confused women', which is a common allegation that AFAB (assigned female at birth) non-binary people face. The grouping of 'women and enbies' is not challenged in the narrative, which is at least partly due to the fact that non-binary people only play minor roles in the novel. The only exception is a friendly alien encountered by two children on the run from the authorities. Professor Speech, when questioned by Jimmy, the older of the two children, about their gender, replies that "[t]hat is important to you humans, isn't it? It's even embedded in your languages so you have difficulty

60 Claire G. Coleman: *Sweet*, p. 36.

61 *id.*: *The Old Lie*, p. 158.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 237.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

talking to someone when you don't know their gender", implying that the focus on gender is far from universal. From that point onward, Jimmy consistently refers to Speech with 'they/them' pronouns. Speech is certainly not an ideal representation of human non-binary identities not only due to being alien and thus inherently Other, but also because they are part of a species without "extreme sexual dimorphism".<sup>64</sup> "Yes, we are hermaphrodites," Speech asserts at one point, while also claiming that "hermaphrodite species are less warlike".<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, Speech can be read as a sympathetic character with a relatively prominent role in the narrative.

Despite some awkwardness around the representation of non-binary identities in 'The Old Lie', the novel's explicit inclusion of enbies and nonhuman conceptions of gender does hint at an ongoing trend in queer Australian speculative fiction. In recent years, explorations of gender and genderqueerness certainly have become more and more prominent on the Australian speculative fiction scene. This is noticeable in recent publications such as #loveOZYA's short story anthology 'Kindred - 12 Queer Stories', which contains a fair share of speculative fiction. At least four of the stories combine gender diverse narratives with speculative fiction, even though speculative elements were not a requirement for contributing to the publication, suggesting once again that speculative fiction is particularly suited to depictions of queerness.

Coleman's short story in this anthology, for example, depicts a future society in which gender is outlawed and a "most perfectly agender-looking"<sup>66</sup> appearance has become the beauty ideal. Ultimately, Coleman's story underlines the idea that gender is a highly individual category that cannot be assigned from outside forces, neither as a binary system nor as a complete absence, since the story's title character Sweet eventually comes out as gendered. The words she uses explicitly mirror the languages used in our contemporary society by non-binary or transgender people when coming out:

'To be precise, I am a woman, female', she said. 'I have felt this for a while, felt different, felt like I must be gendered for some time but just couldn't put it into words, didn't know the right words. The only words I knew for what I am were foul, disgusting, terrible. Those words make me sick. [...] Then I met someone [...] and she told me about being gendered. It put a word to the concept and I know now what I am.'<sup>67</sup>

Coleman makes use of the speculative fiction trope of an alternative reality, in which current conditions are almost reversed, thus allowing cisgender people a glimpse into the experiences of people whose gender is not currently considered 'normal'.

Gender also plays an important role in Alison Evans's children's and YA novels. 'Ida' (2016), 'Highway Bodies' (2019), and 'Euphoria Kids' (2020) all explore diverse gender identities and especially non-binary and genderfluid identities, which reflect the author's own experience. "My gender didn't exist in fiction when I

64 Ibid., p. 165 ('important', 'dimorphism').

65 Ibid., p. 166.

66 Claire G. Coleman: Sweet, p. 122.

67 Ibid., p. 126.

was growing up – so I wrote myself into existence”,<sup>68</sup> they said in an interview with *The Guardian*. ‘Euphoria Kids’ is especially important in that it focuses on the too frequently neglected joy of transgender children. In an article focusing on non-binary characters in YA fiction, Alex Henderson states that “[t]he novel lacks any transphobic bullies or characters who enforce or represent transnormative ideals, leaving the three trans protagonists to experiment playfully with their gender presentations without fear of social repercussions”.<sup>69</sup> Evans’ work is thus a vital contribution to a discourse often determined by dysphoria and social oppression, rather than joy and playfulness.

Last but not least, I would like to touch on a novel that was a finalist for both the 2022 Lambda Literary Award for Transgender Fiction and the 2022 Hugo Award for Best Novel and has been described as “an important entry in the LGBTQ [sic] fantasy canon”,<sup>70</sup> namely Shelley Parker-Chan’s ‘She Who Became the Sun’ (2021) since the novel is not only indicative of increasing representation of genderqueerness in speculative fiction, but its success also speaks to increasing acceptance of genderqueer narratives. The novel is a creative reimagining of the rise to power of the Hongwu Emperor in 14<sup>th</sup> century China. It is also, at least partly, a rewriting of Hua Mulan, not so much via references to the original folktale, which was set several centuries earlier, but through various plot elements that will seem familiar to viewers of the corresponding Disney movie. At the beginning, two children are the last remaining survivors of a peasant family, a boy, Zhu Chongba, and a nameless girl. The boy is prophesied to achieve greatness, the girl – nothing. But then the boy seems to simply give up on life and dies, prompting his sister to take over his life, fate, and gender.

At first glance, this may seem like a common ‘girl dresses up as boy to survive in a patriarchal society’ story, and while nothing would be wrong with such a storyline, ‘She Who Became the Sun’ is much more nuanced in its depiction of gender identity. Zhu Chongba is more than just a disguise for Zhu, as the protagonist usually refers to herself. While Zhu maintains the pronouns ‘she/her’ in her personal narration – perhaps also due to the time period in which the novel is set<sup>71</sup> – she constantly insists that she is not a woman.

During an attempt to take over an enemy city, Zhu makes use of her body, which can be perceived as female, to gain entrance into the women’s quarters of the governor’s palace, where men are not allowed, to speak to the former governor’s widow, Lady Rui. She is motivated by her greater understanding of female perspectives because she realizes that the pregnant widow will be desperate to

68 Alison Evans: *My gender didn’t exist in fiction*, n. p.

69 Alex Henderson: *From Painters to Pirates*, p. 13.

70 Eliot Schrefer: *Review*, n. p.

71 Similarly, Zhu never employs terms such as ‘genderqueer’ or ‘non-binary’ to refer to herself, which is reflective of the concept of trans\*historicity. Trans\*historicity allows contemporary scholars and writers to “stake a claim in *trans* as a sign for corporeal practices that have existed outside or across interrelated binaries [...] without making definitive or appropriative claims about what counts as a trans past (or present), but also without dismissing the investments that shape our relations to historical subjects, and their effects on both identity and community” (Lea Devun and Zeb Tortorici: *Trans, Time, and History*, p. 534). Shelley Parker-Chan’s Zhu is undeniably queer, but there is no narrative need to identify her any further.

assure her own safety and that she cannot return to her “birth family to whom [she]’ll be nothing but a shame and burden”.<sup>72</sup> Zhu’s insight into a female perspective even prompts the widow to suspect that Zhu is not a monk disguised as a woman but a woman disguised as a monk – a suspicion Zhu fervently denies. While in the widow’s chambers, Zhu is struck by “the smell of a woman’s inner sanctum, as alien to Zhu as a foreign country”. I would argue that her estrangement from womanhood is not so much due to the fact that she spent most of her childhood and youth as a monk among other monks; instead, it is part of her identity as a person who is neither man nor woman. Zhu experiences an intense disdain for her disguise as a woman that allows her entry to Lady Rui’s rooms: “[W]ith every moment her feeling of suffocating wrongness mounted. A violent litany repeated inside her head: *This isn’t me*”. When part of her disguise, the scarf hiding her ordination scars, is removed, she “fe[els] a burst of relief to have it gone” because “the indelible mark of her true identity: her monk self” is revealed. She refers to her female body in multiple other situations, but always with an intense loathing akin to gender dysphoria. This is also evident in her reactions to being called a woman: “*I’m not,*” she said violently;<sup>73</sup> as if reacting on instinct because her very identity is being called into question.

The protagonist consistently insists on her identity as both and neither, confirming that Zhu is a genderfluid, genderqueer character, emphatically outside of the gender binary. Eventually, she becomes more comfortable in her identity as neither man nor woman and embraces her fate as her own. After her and her dead brother’s fate irreparably drift apart, she “dive[s] deep into the mutilated body that [i]sn’t Zhu Chongba’s body, but a different person’s body – a different substance entirely”,<sup>74</sup> which she accepts joyfully. Zhu’s new-found confidence allows her to have a more sexual relationship with Ma Xiuying, whom she married in order to keep Xiuying safe and also to fortify her own position within the group of rebels she joined to achieve greatness. Their marriage is made possible by the fact that Zhu is perceived as male by most people, but Zhu becomes comfortable enough to tease her wife with her own ambiguity:

‘I’d wondered why you chose me instead of Sun Meng, since I’m so much uglier than he was, but now I know the truth: it’s because I have breasts,’ Zhu said. She’d found that the more she said such things, the easier they were to see. ‘You took one look and knew I was the man for you.’<sup>75</sup>

‘She Who Became the Sun’ questions normative understandings of gender, while taking into account both bodily and mental experiences. “What difference does it make to me?”, asks Xu Da, Zhu’s fellow monk. “You’re my brother, whatever’s under your clothes”.<sup>76</sup> Thus, without referring to modern queer language, Parker-Chan manages to capture genderqueer and non-binary experiences, all the while telling the exciting story of an outsider-outcast’s unlikely rise to power.

72 Shelley Parker-Chan: *She Who Became the Sun*, p. 177. The following quotations can be found *ibid.* on p. 175.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 339.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 344.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

## ***Concluding Remarks***

As this cursory overview shows, queerness has been an integral part of Australian speculative fiction published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – be it in the form of queer side characters, gay or lesbian protagonists, characters questioning their gender, characters celebrating their transgender identities or other queer contents –sometimes written by straight (or not overtly queer) authors, sometimes by authors who seem to have wished to write their own queerness into the speculative fiction genre. It is more than likely that queerness in Australian speculative fiction will not be a temporary fad but that queer identities will continue to be explored in a genre that is particularly suited to it.

The novels discussed in this article are, of course, only examples. The wide array of Australian speculative fiction means that a significant number of works have not yet been explored academically with a focus on queerness. Writers such as Foz Meadows and Will Kostakis have consistently written queer speculative stories, but there are also numerous notable recent publications, with varying degrees of queer representation. They include Krystal Sutherland's 'House of Hollow' (2021), Freya Marske's 'A Marvellous Light' (2021), 'A Restless Truth' (2022), and 'A Power Unbound' (to be published in 2023), C.S. Pacat's newest publication 'Dark Rise' (2021), Omar Sakr's 'Son of Sin' (2022), Georgina Young's 'Bootstrap' (2022), Vanessa Len's 'Only a Monster' (2022), Kate Murray's 'We Who Hunt the Hollow' (2022), and many more, also often published as short stories in online magazines or 'only' as e-books.

These texts, in addition to the ones touched on in this article, provide ample opportunity for studying how speculative fiction is employed to experiment with new genders, or new ways of viewing one's own identity and sexuality. Speculative fiction provides spaces for imagining worlds in which queerness is accepted, worlds in which heteronormativity is a marginal position, or worlds in which queerness is still unaccepted but the queer protagonists flourish regardless. Furthermore, speculative fiction enables writers to dissect societal conventions, expectations and beliefs. The weird and queer outcasts, both within and without the fiction, are able to fashion spaces for themselves within speculative fiction while not denying their queerness, which continues to be outside the norm in the world we currently live in, since speculative fiction itself is always, by definition, not the norm, not the consensus reality of every-day life, but something special, outside, weird, Other. As the diversity showcased in this article aptly demonstrates, Australian speculative fiction would benefit from increased scholarly attention in general, and the application of queer theoretical frameworks in particular.



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