

## 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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*<sup>2</sup>. 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).<sup>3</sup> 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.)

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<sup>2</sup> *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* will hereafter be referred to as *Ashala Wolf*.

<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> 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, 21<sup>st</sup>-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.<sup>6</sup> In this context, Ashala’s age

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<sup>6</sup> 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

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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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

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<sup>7</sup> 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).<sup>8</sup> 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).<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> Fortunately, a lot has improved: Same-sex

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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

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<sup>11</sup>Of 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.<sup>12</sup> 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).<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 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).

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

<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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

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<sup>15</sup> 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).<sup>16</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup>-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),

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<sup>16</sup> 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*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> 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).<sup>18</sup> *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.<sup>19</sup> 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).<sup>20</sup> By taking up Aboriginal ideas of non-anthropocentric conviviality, *Ashala Wolf* both

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<sup>18</sup> 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).

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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).<sup>21</sup> In the context of how *Ashala Wolf* speculates

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<sup>21</sup> 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”.<sup>22</sup> 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.)

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<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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

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<sup>23</sup> 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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