

## Editorial: Engaged Queerness in African Speculative Fiction

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As is the case with many literary and filmic genres, the term “speculative fiction” has been debated over the years. “Speculative fiction” is often used as a synonym for “science fiction”, but “science fiction”, too, strains against its definitional borders. In 2009 the debate reared its complicated head again, when author Ursula K. Le Guin claimed, in a review of Margaret Atwood’s novels *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), that Margaret Atwood “doesn’t want any of her books to be called science fiction”. Le Guin (2009) notes that the reason Atwood gives for this is that all of the events in her books have already happened or are imminently possible. She detects a note of snobbery in the rejection of this label, however, and says that “This arbitrarily restrictive definition seems designed to protect [Atwood’s] novels from being relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awarders. She doesn’t want the literary bigots to shove her into the literary ghetto”.

In the essay collection *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, Atwood (2011, 6) wrestles with this accusation, again repeating that she understands “science fiction” to refer to literature dealing with impossible things such as otherworldly invasion, whereas “speculative fiction” activates “plots that descend from Jules Verne’s books about submarines and balloon travel and such — things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the author wrote the books.” Atwood explains that in conversation with Le Guin, she realised that Le Guin considers science fiction to refer precisely to literature dealing with possibilities, while fantasy refers to literature dealing with impossibilities. Atwood (2011, 7) concludes that, “[w]hen it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefended, and things slip back and forth across them with insouciance.” Given this “insouciant” genre-bending, she decides that “Science Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Sword and Sorcery Fantasy, and Slipstream Fiction: all of them might be placed under the same large ‘wonder tale’ umbrella” (Atwood 2011, 8).

Some dictionaries, however, define “speculative fiction” as just such an umbrella term, encompassing all the “wonder tales” mentioned by Atwood. *Collins Dictionary* (2020), for example, defines “speculative fiction” as “a broad literary genre encompassing any fiction with supernatural, fantastical, or futuristic elements”. I use the term in this way, not to disavow or avoid the term “science fiction”, but to include it,

along with other literature dealing with wonder — wonder about the future, the present and the past, as well as the not-quite-real or -realised. If there is anything I am trying to avoid in this issue, it is the defence or policing of genre-borders as discrete, imporous and fixed.

An advantage of using such a broadened version of the term “speculative fiction” in the African context is that it not only includes contemporary examples of African science fiction, Afro- and Africanfuturism, but also encompasses a long tradition of African literature (including oral literature) dealing with the wondrous and imagined. This can be counterposed with contemporary histories of African literature, usually foregrounding the realist novel as *the* African literary form *par excellence*, as Edgar Fred Nabutanyi argues in this issue. In the same article, Nabutanyi directly activates genre, queerness and lived reality, when writing that “[...] African folktales are truly sci-fi texts. [T]he very concept of African sci-fi is queer because it destabilises the popular conceptions of African literature as realistic African novels. To claim that traditional African literature is sci-fi, is then to claim a queer heritage for contemporary African sci-fi.” While Nabutanyi uses the term “sci-fi” and I prefer “speculative fiction”, we are united in considering African folktales and contemporary science fiction as part of the same speculative tradition expressing wonder, which, according to Nabutanyi, in the African context could also be considered a queer tradition.<sup>1</sup> The usefulness of the term “speculative fiction” can be illustrated by *Zambian novel The Old Drift* (2019), by Namwali Serpell. Serpell recently won the 2020 Arthur C. Clarke Award, one of the global literary stage’s most prestigious awards for science fiction. Labeling *The Old Drift* as science fiction can however be misleading, given the promiscuity with which the novel crosses, prods and implodes genre categories. It is a novel which defies categorisation, and describing it as broadly speculative is not only, to my mind, more accurate, but also links it to the various global and specifically African literary traditions it enfolds.

The 2019 recipient of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, novelist Tade Thompson (quoted by Flood 2020), commented that *The Old Drift* represents “[a]t last, an African book of unarguable universality.” This statement is debatable, not least because, far from being an anomaly, *The Old Drift* is part of a prominent, and growing, trend in twenty first-century African novel writing that “slip back and forth across [genres] with insouciance”, to quote Atwood (2011, 7) out of context. Speculative fiction is booming in Africa, and not only in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda, the countries represented in this issue. This might prompt one to ask “Why speculative fiction? Why Africa?”

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<sup>1</sup> Outside of African literature, too, Wendy Gay Pearson, Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon (2008, 3) see as queer science fiction’s “ability to think outside mimetic reproduction of contemporary reality.”

On the one hand, the African speculative wave can be understood as a result of the booming African literature scene which, while having existed as long as literature has, has attracted global attention in the wake of some authors' success in uncompromisingly leaning into African identity without essentialising it (such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie). On the other hand, and as all of the authors in this issue propose, the speculative provides opportunities to engage with the social in ways unavailable to realism.

These queer specular engagements are not new, as evident in Ama Ata Aidoo's mainly realist (although hypersubjective and lyrical) novel *Our Sister Killjoy: or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint* (1966), where she uses a metaphor borrowed from speculative fiction to explain the peculiarities of social reality. With regards to the creation of the racial categories of black and white (primarily to justify slavery), Sissie, the narrator of *Our Sister Killjoy*, reflects: "It all sounds like science fiction. Like the story of Frankenstein. But then, science fiction is only a wild extension of reality, no?" (Aidoo 1966, 115).

The metaphors and genre conventions of science fiction and other forms of speculative fiction are not only queer in the sense that these traditions can be opposed to the dominant realist African literary mode. They can also be used to depict and reflect on the experiences of queer humans. Like Sissie, we can wonder at the similarities between *Frankenstein* and the othering of queer people. Also referring to Mary Shelley's influential speculative novel, Wendy Gay Pearson (2008, 18) reflects on how "sf" (by which she means science fiction, but I would broaden it to include all of speculative fiction) "has a long history, dating back at least to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, of questioning systems of thought, particularly those we now label metanarratives (science, history, and so on)." In this way, too, speculative fiction is queer, or at least amenable to be utilised to queer ends.

The contributors to this issue investigate the ways in which authors in Africa employ speculative fiction queerly. Their concerns are varied, but two main threads run through the issue. The first is the idea that speculative fiction provides metaphors that are useful for exploring the way in which queer people are Othered — where, even in/through painful marginalisation, there is the possibility of "choosing the margin as a space of radical openness", as bell hooks (1990, 145) put it in reference to the position of black women in American society. The second concerns speculative fiction's postulating of alternative futures. Many of the literary works discussed in this issue try to imagine futures that are different and more hospitable to queer people than the present. In many, discrimination continues, marking an inability to imagine a future that would be radically different, but they do continue the trend that has always been inherent from utopian fiction. Many critics contend that Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) should be read less as a blueprint for a perfect society, and more as *littérature engagée*. Critics such as Lees (2004, 6), Miles (2008, 37), Davis,

(2010, 45) and Jacobsen (2012, 71) argue that the estrangement evinced by the speculative nature of More's *Utopia* allows him to prompt his readers to reconsider the taken-for-granted world. It is this same ability, circling back to queerness, to "reflect[...] contemporary realities back to us through the lens of a particular imagination" that charges science fiction and, we would argue, speculative fiction, with queer potentiality, according to Wendy Gay Pearson, Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon (2008, 3).

Our issue opens with "2070", an excerpt from *Meanwhile ... Graphic Short Stories About Everyday Queer Life in Southern and East Africa* (2019) by the Qintu Collab (a collaborative group made up of eighteen queer youth from Botswana, Kenya and Zimbabwe, two academics, three artists and a journalist), which is appropriate given our interest in possible redrawings of disciplinary boundaries, as well as the supposed border between academic and creative work, and between academia and lived reality.<sup>2</sup> As Sonia Audi, Nas Hoosen, Alex Müller and Talia Meer explain in their introduction to this excerpt, most of *Meanwhile ...* is autobiographical and concerned with "queer pasts, moments that have been let go, that are over or have been overcome — self-denial, familial rejection [and] religious oppression." "2070", by contrast, envisions a future Nairobi, one in which androids have replaced humans as the oppressed class. Sonia Audi, who conceptualised the narrative, sees it as dealing with the Other and the continuation of othering into a post-human future. "2070", then, introduces this issue's two most prominent themes: how can speculative fiction be used to imagine a queer (or, conversely, anti-queer) future, and how can it be used to unflatten ideas about the (queer) Other? As Audi, Hoosen, Müller and Meer put it, "Science fiction [and, I would add, speculative fiction more broadly] presents more room to critique dominant culture and imagine different worlds where our 'otherness' is celebrated, not shamed or erased, or as is the case in '2070', where new others have emerged."

Keeping in mind the ultimately future-oriented nature of the issue, the first two academic articles, by Chantelle Croeser and Rory du Plessis, respectively, rather represent queer explorations of the past. As I have indicated, we use the term "speculative fiction" deliberately in the title of this issue to include not only science fiction (with which the term is often conflated), but also tales of wonder: folk tales and legends of a speculative nature. There is much potential for investigating the queer potential of folk tales from our continent that concern gender, sexuality and outsiders, and this potential is broached in Edgar Nabutanyi's contribution to this issue, "Queering the Post-Apocalypse in Three Selected Short Stories by Dilman Dila". In this, Nabutanyi refers to Ugandan science fiction writer Dilman Dila's reworking of narratives that are common in Ugandan folk tales about outsider figures who possess redemptive potential.

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<sup>2</sup> Thank you to GALA and MaThoko's Books for permission to reproduce this excerpt.

The only article in the issue solely concerned with folk literature is Chantelle Croeser's "A Wilting Whisper of Antjie Somers: A Meditation on the Witchery and Gender Non-conformance of Afrikaans Folklore Figure, Antjie Somers." Antjie Somers is an Afrikaans boundary-crossing witch-like folkloric figure, "both past and present, absent and present, both living and not, non-binary, gender non-conforming, perhaps black, perhaps coloured, perhaps white," said to steal naughty children. Croeser reads Antjie Somers as a queer figure who, like queer people, elides, prods at, and challenges binary thinking and categorical mastery and who is, because of this, violently ostracised. Croeser ends their article with a paean to retellings of Antjie Somers as examples of queer storytelling, storytelling that "allows space for fragmentation, for breaking with words that no longer suffice and allowing for the (re)growth of words that work better." In keeping with this sentiment as well as with "2070"'s crossing of the boundaries of genre and medium, Croeser's article is interspersed with excerpts from a creative writing project in which she imaginatively embodies Antjie Somers. Croeser's academic and creative exploration of Antjie Somers links up with existing research and art and opens up the possibility of future investigation of the queer potential of other gender- and racially ambivalent folkloric figures, such as Pinky Pinky (who is also South African).

In Rory du Plessis's "Tales of Female Sexuality and Scandal: Lauren Beukes's 'Princess' and Archived Asylum Texts" he continues along the lines of Croeser's excavation of queer histories. Like Croeser, Du Plessis focuses on a narrative which can be considered speculative, if not science fiction, namely Lauren Beukes's twenty-first-century fairy tale, "Princess" (2016). "Princess" represents a rewriting of traditional fairy tales in which princesses are usually passive, the "sought-for person" who directs the male hero's quest (De Lauretis 1984, 79). Lauren Beukes's princess, in contrast, discovers her clitoris and ability to pleasure herself without the need of a man to rescue her. This arguably queer and sex-pleasure-positive deviation from the norm is punished in a similar manner to Antjie Somers's: a mob reacts to the princess with "outrage and superstition and fear". Du Plessis uses "Princess" as a point of departure to discuss the ways in which South Africa regulated (white) women's sexual pleasure in the late nineteenth century. He does this by analysing casebooks of the Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum. Through these casebooks it becomes clear, again, that women taking control of their own sexual satisfaction (whether through masturbation or being "promiscuous") were labelled as degenerate and pathologised, and that the aim of the asylum was to curb the queer, non-normative proliferation of pleasure.

In this way, Du Plessis's article introduces a theme which echoes throughout the issue, namely reading queerness as synonymous with Otherness or non-normativity. In this way the issue builds on the work of David Halperin (1995, 62), Adetunji Osinubi (2016, 163) and Michael Warner (1999). While in this issue we try to resist a dilution of the term *queerness* that can result from this move — if everything non-

normative is queer, does queerness still have the same potency that allows for political and social mobilisation? — it is possible to read the freakish and monstrous often represented in speculative fiction as analogous to queerness, and often linked to the same boundary-troubling and prodding that queerness busies itself with, as both Croeser and Du Plessis clearly show.

In Luiza-Maria Caraivan's "Mapping Identities in Lauren Beukes's (Re)Imagined Cities", she avoids this issue by not referring to queerness, but rather investigating the ways in which Otherness in general functions in Lauren Beukes's novels *Moxyland* (2008), *Zoo City* (2010), *The Shining Girls* (2013) and *Broken Monsters* (2014). Caraivan's analysis is situated in the continental (i.e. European) philosophical tradition and she uses the work of Michel de Montaigne, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean Baudrillard and others to argue that Beukes depicts an Other who is, as defined by these authors, marginalised within their own community, and who "takes advantage of past urban planning that persists for a long time after their original purpose has faded: walls, barbed-wire fences, bridges, city gates." She goes on to argue, however, that in Beukes's novels these Others are not opposed to stable Selves, as the internet and other twenty first-century phenomena have fractured all identities. While she does not refer to queerness specifically, Caraivan's article acts as an urban backdrop of sorts, linking queer theory with other theoretical analyses of alterity, and acting as an impetus to provoke readers constantly to reconsider the validity of categories of Self and Other, queer and normative.

Gibson Ncube's "'Human Beings Have a Hard Time Relating to that which does not Resemble Them': Queering Normativity in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*" returns the focus to queerness specifically and also to a literary text more commonly associated with speculative fiction, namely Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor's novel, *Lagoon* (2014). Ncube brings *Lagoon* into dialogue with the literary genre known as Afrofuturism.<sup>3</sup> Ncube engagingly points to the ways in which theories about Afrofuturism overlap with queer theory in the ways in which both aim to challenge established thought—clichéd ideas about Africa and African literature in the case of theories about Afrofuturism. While *Lagoon* can be considered an Afrofuturist or Africanfuturist novel, dealing as it does with aliens landing in Lagos, Ncube argues that Okorafor employs "plurivocal narrative technique enmeshed with Nigerian folktales and myths". As I have indicated elsewhere in this introduction, these folktales and myths can themselves be considered examples of speculative fiction, and Okorafor is therefore not only appropriating traditionally Western forms of speculative fiction, but also engaging with older speculative literary forms.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Okorafor herself describes her work as "Africanfuturist" rather than "Afrofuturist", to place the emphasis on the African continent rather than the diaspora implied by "afro-".

Ncube reads the portrayal of Ayodele, an alien shapeshifter, as blurring heteronormative boundaries, as well as the boundary between the human and the nonhuman. In this sense Ayodele represents a new form of otherness that defies normative conventions. The queerness of Ayodele is also related to human queerness in *Lagoon*, when the queer student society Black Nexus decide to come out in order to find Ayodele. This leads to conflict with a homophobic Pentecostal group. Homophobia in a Pentecostal key also features in Edgar Fred Nabutanyi's "Queering the Post-Apocalypse in Three Selected Short Stories by Dilman Dila". Nabutanyi argues that in Dila's short story "A Wife and a Slave", the antagonistic Christian Council is symbolic of the Ugandan Pentecostal advocacy group. Though speculative fiction is unavoidably concerned with metaphors and symbolism, the real-world homophobia that African queer people face is urgently and immediately surfaced in both *Lagoon* and in "A Wife and a Slave."

Nabutanyi's reference to the veiled depiction of Ugandan Pentecostal advocacy group serves as an indication that his article is also concerned with the ways in which queer people are Othered. The article's specific focus is how marginalised characters (including queer characters) are figured as metaphors for redemptive futurity in the science fiction short stories of Ugandan author Dilman Dila. Nabutanyi contends that the queer and marginal characters in these stories sacrifice themselves for the sake of redemption (of society and of themselves), and that the representation of the pain associated with their marginalisation acts as social critique. By not only investigating stories set in an apocalyptic future, but also foregrounding the relationships between queerness and futurity, Nabutanyi introduces the second thread running through this issue. He does this while, as previously mentioned, and similarly to Ncube, invoking the wonder-past by arguing that Dila is not only reworking Western speculative genres, but also traditional Ugandan folklore dealing with redemptive outsider characters.

The theme of queer futurity is continued in Joy Hayward-Jansen's "Queering the Lost Child and the Politics of Failure in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*". Hayward-Jansen links South African literature's "anxieties about the future" (related to the failures of rainbow nation ideals in post-1994 South Africa), with the figure of the queer child, in order to explore "the generative politics of failure". Where Nabutanyi explores the redemptive potential of queerness, then, Hayward-Jansen similarly (but without focussing on sacrifice) sees the queer child as figured in Lauren Beukes's novel *Zoo City* (2010) as offering an alternative not only to the future presupposed by reproductive futurity, but also to both a "failed" South African future and to a "rainbow nation" utopia. They do so by showing how the novel portrays the future as "always already compromised", prioritising the care demanded by the materiality conditions and vulnerability of real existing children, and contrasting this with the purity and innocence ascribed to ideal children as symbols of the future.

Bibi Burger, too, invokes South Africa's rainbow nation narrative. In her contribution, "Relationships between futurity, rurality and urbanity in Masande Ntshanga's queer African science fiction *Triangulum*", she argues that Ntshanga's novel complicates both this narrative—queer narratives that conceptualise the city as a haven for queer people—and modernist narratives in which the city represents progress and futurity. In *Triangulum* (2019) a return to the rural and to pre-modernist ways of life is, rather, presented as the only way forward for South Africa, the planet and the novel's queer protagonist. Burger, like Hayward-Jansen, refers to José Esteban Muñoz's writing on queer utopia to argue that while reproductive futurity should be rejected, speculative fiction can help us to imagine a radically different queer ecofuture.

In the final academic article in the themed issue, "South African Queer Futures and Cyborg Experiences in Speculative Fiction: *The Prey of Gods* by Nicky Drayden and *Moxyland* by Lauren Beukes", Grant Andrews intertwines the two main threads of the issue by investigating the representation of queer characters as symbolic of alterity, and by exploring the relationships between queerness and futurity in the two novels under discussion (*Moxyland* (2008) by Lauren Beukes and *The Prey of Gods* (2017) by Nicky Drayden. Andrews also returns the focus to the work of Lauren Beukes and his article therefore acts as a bridge between the "Articles" section of the journal and the review and interview following it, which centre Beukes's newest novel, *Afterland* (2020), and the revisit and coda, which both speak to future/further avenues of exploration in Beukes's oeuvre. Andrews contends that the cyborg characters in *The Prey of Gods* and *Moxyland* both represent the position of queer people as ostracised in South Africa, and the potentialities of a future that would be empowering to queer people, in which the boundaries between human/animal, human/machine and the physical and non-physical are blurred. Through this ambiguity, an utopian envisioning of potentialities for the future is tempered by a reminder of the troubles of the present.

The troubles of the present are uncannily figured in Lauren Beukes's *Afterland*, which presciently deals with the aftermath of a global viral pandemic. In this novel Beukes experiments with different ideas around gender, through the innovative fictional device of a pandemic killing 99% of the world's male population, and an exploration of the resulting objectification and fetishisation of men. She, therefore, as Beschara Karam notes in her review of the novel, tweaks the contemporary commodification of teenage girls' bodies, in order to explore this objectification and concomitant gender politics from a fresh vantage point. In Nedine Moonsamy's interview with Lauren Beukes, Beukes explains that her novel's "flipping [of] the narrative" around gendered objectification aims to destabilise binary gender discourses, in that the world ruled by women depicted in *Afterland* is still a fully human world, with all of the violence, oppression and corruption (traditionally coded as masculine) that implies.



The laudability of the novel's complication of binary gender discourses was itself complicated when trans readers commented that some of the details in the novel about testosterone are not scientifically accurate, and took issue with the fact that the novel depicts trans women being equally affected by the virus as cis men (see Mardoll 2020). Without in any way excusing or defending Beukes, I do think that her prompt apology following the criticism (see her tweet of 28 July 2020) compares favourably to the reaction of other writers of speculative fiction who have been accused of transphobia, namely J.K. Rowling and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's defence of Rowling's views (Allardice 2020).

The caveat on *Afterland*'s reception chimes with Jennifer M. Schmidt's contribution, in the form of a hybrid revisit of Beukes's award-winning documentary *Glitterboys & Ganglands*, about the Miss Gay Western Cape Pageant. By asking us to think beyond Butler, and specifically beyond Butler's revisiting of *Paris is Burning*, Schmidt wonders aloud to what extent the ampersand between glitterboys and ganglands can be read as being about the redemptive power that a wonder-queerness can actualise in lived South African realities. She also questions the dearth of scholarly attention to *Glitterboys & Ganglands*, especially in the era of Netflix's *Pose*, and relates it to revealing scholarly ambivalences about intra-queer tension and "the challenge of finding the language that neither flattens nor distorts but retains intersectional nuance".

Such a questioning of the boundaries of scholarly work on queerness animates the concluding piece in this themed issue, Wemar Strydom's fragmented "Green(white) Coda", in which Strydom places notes of his reading of "The Green", from Beukes' 2016 collection *Slipping: Stories, Essays & Other Writing*, next to snippets from Morton, Chen and Luciano, Bloch, and Edelman, and Darko Suvin. The coda's fragmentation speaks to an unflattening of queerness, in its textualising of the wonder-limits of a white scholar reading a text by a white author within an African context, and, finally, echoes back and forth to ask, queerly akin to "2070", how speculative fiction (and its wonder-reception) can be used to envision queer, anti-queer, or queer-adjacent futurities. Strydom's piece raises the issue of the problematic overrepresentation of white South African author Lauren Beukes in an issue purporting to focus on African speculative fiction. This imbalance can be ascribed to two factors: the situatedness of the editor in South Africa, and the genesis of this issue from a panel at the 2018 February Lectures on queer readings of Beukes's work.<sup>4</sup> Despite most countries on the continent not being represented in this issue (and many relevant works and issues left undiscussed), I decided to frame the issue as focussing on specifically African

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<sup>4</sup> February Lectures is an annual South African queer academic conference, organised by Wemar Strydom and Chantelle Gray. The existence of this issue is largely due to Strydom's initiatives. I would like to thank Wemar for his encouragement, as well as for his advice and help throughout the editing process.

speculative fiction. This framing runs the risk of evoking the idea of Africa as a monolith, but this was never my intention. Rather, what I want to suggest is that despite the diversity in both African literature and the lived experience of African sexualities (on the latter, see Nyanzi 2013, 952), there are certain aspects that most works of queer African speculative fiction have in common. These are mostly due to the continent's shared experience of colonialism and include a concern with writing against, in response to and with Western literary forms and traditions. Many of the texts discussed in the issue are concerned with combining Western and specific African literary forms. Similarly, many of the texts are concerned with resisting and interrogating Western narratives about sexuality and about the future. This issue, its contributors and the texts they discuss all ask, along with Keguro Macharia (2018), "What speculative experiments are granted to African thinkers and theorists. What are we allowed to imagine and invent? What do we need to imagine and invent?"

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