

Speculative Morphological Assemblages from Canhedonia's Wetlands: A Queer Ecology within the Animated Film *The Spire*TM

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This practice-enabled research¹ presents a series of stills from the authors' forthcoming experimental, generative AI film, *The Spire*TM. Set in the not-too-distant future realm of Canhedonia, a polluted wetland bleeds into the edges of an industrial megacity. Within this eroding wetland–city threshold, morphological assemblages blur ontological distinctions of human and non-human, nature and culture, and animal and object. Human-made artefacts, flotsam and detritus from nearby industrial excess, combine with microbial life, plastic pollution, animal and human DNA, proteobacteria, and cultural paraphernalia to form fused and agglomerated entities.

¹ The term “Practice-enabled research” refers to approaches in which creative practice enables and generates knowledge, rather than serving solely as an object of analysis. See Craig Batty and Arezou Zalipour, “Research, Practice, Knowledge: Introducing the Creative Knowledges Enabling Framework,” *Media Practice and Education* 26, no. 4 (2025): 461–477, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2024.2384686>.



Figure 1. *Untitled #1*. Still from *The Spire*TM. AI-generated digital image, 2026.



Figure 2. *Untitled #2*. Still from *The Spire*TM. AI-generated digital image, 2026.

These speculative morphological assemblages (figures 1–6) emerge from within a wetland queer ecology. While imagined, they resonate with a growing body of ecological

phenomena that challenge ingrained subject/object dualisms, such as artificial versus natural,² and question heteronormative conceptions of what “nature” is or can be.³ This practice-enabled research situates itself within contemporary queer ecological thought by posing, through image-based speculative morphology, the question: “What counts as ‘natural’ – and why?”⁴ This question is addressed in relation to gender, sexuality, and environment.

In the technofeudalist city of Canhedonia, a vast underground bio-computational network operates as a “cloud-based sweatshop,”⁵ generating power and maintaining surveillance operations for the corporation, *The Spire*TM. The network’s tentacular, throbbing cables gradually swallow the city’s spire-like markers, entrances, and exits. At the eastern entrance to the corporation, a polluted wetland zone has given rise to morphological assemblages that collapse and resist metaphysical distinctions between biological and cultural, human and non-human, and object and entity.

These assemblages, situated within the wetland environment, disrupt “obedient conceptions of containment and fixed boundaries of natural spaces so often conceived of as exploitable reserves.”⁶ As Rod Giblett argues, wetlands are “non-binary: neither land, nor water, but both; neither solid, nor liquid, but both. Their identity is fluid, trans-generic and indeterminate.”⁷ Wetlands have historically been viewed as sanctuaries, offering refuge and

² Stephen Buranyi, “‘We Are Just Getting Started’: The Plastic-Eating Bacteria That Could Change the World,” *The Guardian*, September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/sep/28/plastic-eating-bacteria-enzyme-recycling-waste>.

³ Abigail Lowell, “Nature Is Queer,” The Environmental Protection Information Center, August 2025, <https://www.wildcalifornia.org/post/nature-is-queer>.

⁴ Nicole Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Springfield, Chicago, and Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 2.

⁵ Yanis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (London, UK: Vintage Publishing, 2023), 77.

⁶ Richard Watts, Maureen Ryan, and Danny Hoffman, “The Queer Ecologies of the Tambass Wetlands,” *Edge Effects*, November 2025, <https://edgeeffects.net/tambass-wetlands>.

⁷ Rod Giblett, *Wetland Cultures: Ancient, Traditional, Contemporary* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 7.

liberation.⁸ The polluted marshes and craggy glens surrounding *The Spire*TM similarly constitute a “queer ecology.”⁹ A passionate defender of swamps as marginalized environments, Giblett further notes that wetlands “punch way above their weight,” covering approximately six percent of the Earth’s surface while remaining an “oppressed minority” and a “marginalized community of plants and animals (humans and more than humans).”¹⁰

This practice-enabled research draws influence from nonbinary animals that exhibit bilateral combinations of male and female traits, characteristics, and anatomies, sometimes referred to as “chimeras.”¹¹ The dual-sex butterfly, for example, is asymmetrically divided along its body, displaying both male and female antennae, legs, wing colorations, and reproductive organs that are “fused down the middle.”¹² This phenomenon is known as bilateral gynandromorphism.¹³ Like Giblett’s wetlands, which are neither fully land nor water but both,¹⁴ gynandromorphs are neither exclusively male nor female, neither masculine nor feminine, but instead embody both simultaneously.

This form of biological indeterminacy resists singular systems of classification. Natural phenomena such as dual-sex butterflies disrupt binary sex taxonomies and categorizations, thereby challenging the heteronormative assumption that queerness is ‘unnatural.’¹⁵ Bilateral

⁸ Rod Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1996).

⁹ Nicole Seymour, “Queer Ecologies and Queer Environmentalisms,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*, ed. Siobhan B. Somerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 108.

¹⁰ Giblett, *Wetland Cultures*, 6.

¹¹ Miles Griffis, “Gynandromorphs Are Nature’s Nonbinary Beauties,” *Atlas Obscura*, April 2024, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/wild-life-excerpt-gynandromorphs>.

¹² Ian Sample, “Half Male, Half Female Butterfly Steals the Show at Natural History Museum,” *The Guardian*, July 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/jul/12/half-male-half-female-butterfly>.

¹³ Katie Pavid, “Beauty of the Dual-Sex Butterfly,” Natural History Museum, September 2024, <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/beauty-dual-gender-butterfly.html>.

¹⁴ Giblett, *Wetland Cultures*, 7.

¹⁵ Melyka Bennett, “Queer Ecology – Embracing Diversity in the Natural World,” British Ecological Society, June 2023, <https://www.britishecologicalsociety.org/introducing-queer-ecology-embracing-diversity-in-the-natural-world>.

gynandromorphs can thus be understood as existing outside rigid binary demarcations of male/female and masculine/feminine.



Figure 3. *Untitled #3*. Still from *The Spire*TM. AI-generated digital image, 2026.

In the animated film *The Spire*TM, the city of Canhedonia's public relations team has developed a series of experimental technologies designed to metallurgically reinforce the human spinal column through a prescribed regimen of oral medication, ostensibly eliminating back pain among gig workers. This speculative premise draws inspiration from the evolutionary transformations depicted in David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (2022), particularly the removal of physical pain, while also echoing themes of worker exploitation found in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936).

As part of these experimental programs, donated human spinal columns are studied within a network of interconnected underground laboratories. However, the biological and chemical waste disposal system at Canhedonia's primary spinal research facility is severely mismanaged. A malfunction in one of *The Spire*TM's spinal column sorting belts results in a

human spine being expelled at the porous boundary between the facility and the surrounding wetlands. This breach allows toxic chemical sludge and human DNA to leach into the wetland ecosystem, generating the conditions for rapid morphological evolution.



Figure 4. *Untitled #4*. Still from *The Spire™*. AI-generated digital image, 2026.

Within this contaminated and radioactive environment, new morphological assemblages emerge, fusing human and animal genetic structures with bioluminescent microbial life and industrial waste materials (figure 1), among other elements.

Deep within the eroding threshold between the wetlands and *The Spire™*'s waste facility and spinal research laboratory, spatial zones become indeterminate, forming a queer ontology. Drawing inspiration from Andrei Tarkovsky's sci-fi film *Stalker* (1979) and Alex Garland's Lovecraftian horror *Annihilation* (2018), the wetlands of *The Spire™* are populated by mutated lifeforms that devour prey and writhe through radioactive bulrushes in search of mates. Amid fungal growths of accumulated waste, spreading like mushroom spores dispersed by the wind,

binary distinctions collapse and seep into one another. These indeterminate zones parallel the unstable boundary between the wetlands and *The Spire*TM's waste and research infrastructure.

Post-Enlightenment Western thought has been shaped by Cartesian dualism and Eurocentric humanism,¹⁶ producing and sustaining divisions such as subject/object, nature/culture, mind/body, self/other, material/discourse, and human/world. These divisions have been critically challenged by new materialist, posthumanist, and relational theoretical frameworks.¹⁷ The distinctions between masculine and feminine, male and female, and sex and gender are likewise reinforced through an essentializing “binary logic.”¹⁸ Judith Butler asks: “What possibility exists for the disruption of the oppositional binary itself?”¹⁹

In the spirit of troubling subject/object dualism, one such possibility is explored through indeterminate zones between the biological and the artificial, and the human and the non-human, within a text-to-image prompting practice. This form of digital design can be understood as “doing philosophy,”²⁰ insofar as digital artefacts shape how humans relate to the world. Generative AI imagery, moreover, possesses a discursive capacity that enables a reorientation toward an increasingly porous reality in which boundaries between material, digital, biological, cultural, social, and discursive domains are “increasingly blurred.”²¹

¹⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019), 15.

¹⁷ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*.

¹⁸ Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 15.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 36.

²⁰ Jesse Josua Benjamin et al., “Machine Learning Uncertainty as a Design Material: A Post-Phenomenological Inquiry,” paper presented at the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '21), Yokohama, Japan, May 8–13, 2021, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.3445481>.

²¹ Simon Susen, “Reflections on the (Post-)human Condition: Towards New Forms of Engagement with the World?,” *Social Epistemology* 36, no. 1 (2022): 65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2021.1893859>.

The image sequence depicting wetlands life in Canhedonia engages a key trope of queer ecology: “the strange intimacies and blurry ontologies of living matter.”²² The text-to-image prompting process operates as a form of queering, understood as a verb, by “questioning and defamiliarizing foundational categories.”²³ In this case, it involves unsettling binary distinctions such as living/non-living, animal/object, and nature/culture. The authors construct an imaginative digital space in which such dualisms are suspended, producing “tensions between determinacy and indeterminacy.”²⁴

This AI image generation practice invites taxonomical fusion, for example, by compositing rubbish, discarded building materials, debris, and flotsam with insectile architectures (figure 4) to generate new morphological forms, and by enabling slippages between ‘natural’ and ‘human-made’ categories. The ambiguity of image data boundaries is evident throughout the series. Tube-like structures, for instance, may be perceived as either synthetic polymer materials or translucent biological tentacles (figure 2), while skin, flora, and geological matter overlap and merge (figures 3, 5), rendering taxonomical categories indeterminate. What the authors describe as indeterminacy refers to a perceptual tension that arises when visual data initially appears coherent but becomes ambiguous upon closer inspection, particularly when viewers attempt to categorize or taxonomize these speculative assemblages. This indeterminacy is intensified by an expectation that discrete entities, textures, and morphological categories should exist.

²² Seymour, “Queer Ecologies and Queer Environmentalisms,” 109.

²³ Seymour, “Queer Ecologies and Queer Environmentalisms,” 109.

²⁴ Martin Zeilinger, “The Politics of Visual Indeterminacy in Abstract AI Art,” *Leonardo* 56, no. 1 (2023): 78, https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_02291.

Here, the authors draw on analyses of visual indeterminacy in Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) imagery²⁵ and in painting.²⁶ Most text-to-image models operate through diffusion processes, in which noise is progressively removed from image data using learned associations between textual prompts and visual features within high-dimensional vector spaces.²⁷ These processes can generate perceptual effects of indeterminacy. As Aaron Hertzmann argues, machine learning models produce continuous pictorial fields in which elements can merge, resulting in a lack of distinct boundaries. Consequently, “object creation and texturing steps do not operate on separate, distinct objects,” and visual elements can blend “like filling in a coloring book where none of the outlines are closed.”²⁸

Such models enable fluid reconfigurations of taxonomical categories, unconstrained by a substantialist metaphysics of discrete, bounded objects and subjects. This challenges “culturally and socially determined expectations of how perception and interpretation function,”²⁹ particularly the expectation that stable boundaries exist between natural/artificial, human/non-human, and subject/object categories.

Within this image series, diffused indeterminacy manifests in several ways. Categorical slippage renders depicted entities unclassifiable in absolute terms. Hybrid textures collapse distinct morphological forms, for instance, combining wood with reptilian scales, while previously separate entities merge, such as a gnarled tree stump fused with a reptilian head (figure 5). Textural blending further contributes to this indeterminacy, as bone, skin, and plant

²⁵ Aaron Hertzmann, “Visual Indeterminacy in GAN Art,” *Leonardo* 53, no. 4 (2020): 424–428, https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_01930.

²⁶ Robert Pepperell, “Seeing without Objects: Visual Indeterminacy and Art,” *Leonardo* 39, no. 5 (2006): 394–400, <https://doi.org/10.1162/leon.2006.39.5.394>.

²⁷ Dave Bergmann and Cole Stryker, “What Are Diffusion Models?” IBM, August 2024, <https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/diffusion-models>.

²⁸ Hertzmann, “Visual Indeterminacy in GAN Art,” 425.

²⁹ Zeilinger, “The Politics of Visual Indeterminacy in Abstract AI Art,” 77.

matter appear to merge through processes suggestive of biological contamination and genetic leakage (figure 5).



Figure 5. *Untitled #5*. Still from *The Spire*TM. AI-generated digital image, 2026.

Some images also reference existing queer ecological phenomena (figure 2), in which binaries such as artificial/natural have already broken down, for example, in the case of plastic-eating bacteria.³⁰ The *The Spire*TM image series additionally presents composite morphologies in which geological materials co-determine biological forms, such as a quadruped partially constituted by rock (figure 3). Flora, fauna, insectile architectures, and cultural artefacts similarly agglomerate into hybrid systems (figure 4).

Some of the diffused imagery in the series also foregrounds plastic debris as a violent ecological force that is both generative and destructive (figures 2, 4, 6). One example is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, an approximately 1.6 million square kilometre accumulation of plastic waste in the North Pacific Ocean, composed of mobile phones, plastic lighters, bags,

³⁰ Buranyi, “We Are Just Getting Started.”

toothbrushes, water bottles, and innumerable other human-made objects. Plastic pollution has colonised the hydrosphere and, on one hand, affords ecological processes, for instance, plastic debris can function as rafts for marine organisms, enabling transoceanic dispersal. At the same time, these plastically mediated conditions generate inhospitable environments and contribute to marine life mortality.³¹



Figure 6. *Untitled #6*. Still from *The Spire*TM. AI-generated digital image, 2026.

The generative AI-based morphological assemblages in *The Spire*TM confront the viewer with what Logan Natalie O’Laughlin terms “toxic encounters.”³² O’Laughlin argues that toxic animal traces “have lives well beyond their initial encounter and do important cultural work as foils, mirrors, and bellwethers for Human(kind).”³³ In the film’s speculative ecology, the surrounding wetlands have adapted and transformed in response to polluted environmental

³¹ Linsey E. Haram et al., “Extent and Reproduction of Coastal Species on Plastic Debris in the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre,” *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 7 (2023): 688, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-023-01997-y>.

³² Logan Natalie O’Laughlin, “Toxic Animal Encounters: Queer Environmental Threats and Racialized Reproduction Anxieties” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2018), 5.

³³ O’Laughlin, “Toxic Animal Encounters,” 5.

conditions and survival pressures. These transformations are not framed as externally imposed body modifications but as processes of adaptation and evolution shaped by environmental change.

Figure 6, for example, depicts a creature that has adapted to the harsh, polluted environment of *The Spire*TM's wetlands. The debris embedded in its body functions both as camouflage and as a display to attract potential mates. Oil-slicked feathers extending from its back enable short bursts of flight, allowing it to evade larger predators, although sustained flight remains impossible. To hunt fish without entering the contaminated water, the creature has developed razor-sharp claws adapted for capturing radioactive mud crabs.

During the diffusion process in text-to-image prompting, features learned from tagged training data are probabilistically reconstructed through an iterative denoising process within a high-dimensional latent space. In this process, categorical attributes derived from visual data representations bleed into one another, fusing textures, objects, and object parts. This fusion produces visual indeterminacy, a perceptual condition in which a viewer's attempt to identify and categorise visual elements is suspended, as the image resists definitive resolution. In generative AI imagery, the visual forms, shapes, and structures of what the authors term diffused speculative morphological assemblages remain porous and resist clear identification within singular ontological or taxonomical categories such as "animal," "object," "human," "natural," "artificial," or "cultural" (figures 1–6). This creative practice engages with discourses of queer ecological becoming, including gender indeterminacy and the nonbinary qualities of wetlands and phenomena in the animal kingdom.

In both the natural world and the imagined world of *The Spire*TM, wetlands are neither entirely water nor land, but both. Similarly, dual-sex butterflies resist classification as strictly

“male” or “female”; instead, bilateral gynandromorphs embody nonbinary biological forms. The speculative wetland creatures in the authors’ forthcoming film, shaped by the environmental breach originating from Canhedonia’s spinal research laboratory, likewise appear indeterminate and resist definitive identification or binary classification. These speculative morphological assemblages thus enact a central trope of queer ecology: an ongoing interrogation and exploration of indeterminacy as a mode of ecological becoming.

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