Australian Journal of Environmental Education (2025), **41**, 708–718
doi:10.1017/aee.2025.10054

ARTICLE

Speculative Documentary as World-Building: Contaminated Knowledge and Future-Making

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(Received 18 March 2025; revised 30 May 2025; accepted 30 May 2025; first published online 07 August 2025)

Abstract

In the context of climate emergency and growing mistrust in knowledge institutions, both science and documentary practice have often been positioned as neutral authorities. Yet the knowledge they produce is shaped by political, social, and material conditions. This paper presents a creative practice research project that uses speculative documentary to trouble dominant narratives of truth and objectivity. Rather than rejecting science, it critiques the authority of singular truth claims in both scientific and documentary domains, asking how knowledge is constructed and maintained. The analysis centres on It Will Not Be Pure, a multi-channel video installation created as a form of climate fiction. Set in a near-future where soil is scarce and arable land is gated for the privileged, the work follows a researcher documenting life beyond these enclosures. Fiction and documentary language are blended to examine environmental collapse, purity politics, and socio-economic exclusion. Accompanied by video documentation, this paper reflects on speculative documentary as both aesthetic strategy and research method. Within environmental education, such approaches offer critical ways of engaging with uncertainty and imagining otherwise. The work draws on feminist, queer, and anti-colonial scholarship to explore interdependence and alternative futures.

Keywords: Arts-based; critical thinking; eco-feminism; power; story

> People don't care about the truth. If science and facts worked on people, the world wouldn't look the way it does. (Damon Davis, as cited in Aufderheide, 2025, para. 16)

> Feminists have a special friendship with horses. Who says these stories do not still move us materially? (Haraway, 2016)

Reframing climate education through storytelling

The weight of the climate crisis, both financial and emotional, often feels overwhelming, making it easier to turn away than to face it. Education, policy, and scientific discourse alone have struggled to shift attitudes and behaviours. Research shows that simply understanding the impacts of climate change on a cognitive level does not necessarily lead to changes in behaviour or mindset (Rousell &

Cutter-Mackenzie, 2022). Some argue that current education models fail because they neglect to engage with the social justice issues surrounding the climate crisis (Kagawa & Selby, 2010). Others critique the preservation and integration of fossil fuel interests within pedagogical structures, which further entrench existing power dynamics (Chavez, 2024; Eaton & Day, 2020). Rather than critically examining these structures, education policy too often reinforces them, making climate education particularly vulnerable to ideological and economic distortions.

Yet, if facts and scientific knowledge alone were enough, as Davis suggests above, the world would not be in its current state. What moves people to act is not just the intellectual processing of facts but also affect, imagination, and embodied experience, which engage with complexity, relationality, and lived realities. Storytelling plays a role in this dynamic. While poetic abstraction can illuminate the nuances of wicked problems, narrative offers another way of engaging with urgency, making it felt, situated, and responsive. Through speculative storytelling, we don't just describe a crisis, we shape how it is experienced and potentially reimagined. This paper considers speculation as a method of inquiry, a narrative genre, and a political stance, each offering distinct but intersecting modes of critique and possibility.

Epistemic authority and situated knowledges

Following Stengers (2000), the notion that science exists independently of social and political forces should be problematised. Knowledge is not produced in isolation but is shaped by political, ethical, and material conditions, with multiple, situated ways of knowing. This brings us to the question of epistemic authority; how different knowledge systems (such as science and documentary practice) construct, legitimate, and maintain their claims to truth. As Stengers notes:

> A great number of actors, all of whom have been, in one way or another, produced by the text, undertake to draw lessons from it. All are situated in the space it has opened; none can claim to have a privileged relation of truth with it. (p. 40)

Building on this, Fujimura and Holmes (2019) argue for a critique of science that accounts for its social, institutional, and material contexts. At the same time, they warn against the dangers of anti-science discourse, particularly in the era of post-truth politics and climate science denial. Similarly, Pitts-Taylor (2020) highlights how fossil fuel companies strategically use scientific and technological rhetoric to greenwash their activities while simultaneously working to undermine climate policy and funding. However, avoiding critique does not equate to disengagement. Critique is not denial; rather, it is a form of interaction that expands discourse. Fujimura and Holmes stress the importance of teaching science as an evolving and contested practice to help students understand that change is inherent to scientific progress. As they assert, "rigidity is ideology and not science" (p. 12). Likewise, Pitts-Taylor argues that "scholarship can both demonstrate and demand ethical relationships to knowledge" (p. 232). This ontological multiplicity resonates with Indigenous knowledge systems that reject rigid divisions between nature, culture, and practice. Instead, a continuum between scientific, artistic, and sacred ways of knowing is recognised and lived (Poelina *et al.*, 2024). This perspective challenges dominant epistemologies that separate systems of knowledge, reinforcing the idea that meaning is always relational, situated, and shaped within collective contexts (Liboiron, 2021a).

Science, then, is not an ultimate truth that stands apart from these entanglements. It is a method of inquiry shaped by the positionality of the researcher, the limits of the tools available, and the structures that determine whose knowledge is recognised. The dominant frameworks of science have often reflected the perspectives and priorities of white, Western, and male institutions, marginalising other ways of knowing. Recognising this does not mean rejecting

https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2025.10054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

science, but rather situating it, understanding that ethical and relational practices are necessary for knowledge-making that is accountable to more than just dominant systems of power.

This ethic of knowledge-making, what Barad (2007) terms an ethico-onto-epistemology, extends beyond scientific inquiry to the ways we tell stories that are embedded within the material-discursive world. Stories *matter* and science *matters*, just as power is entangled in what comes to *matter* in *mattering* the world. Science itself is a form of storytelling, one that is deeply embedded within both the natural and the cultural. Acknowledging this entanglement reinforces the need to recognise multiple ways of learning and understanding the world ethically.

Haraway (1988) suggests that:

> Here is where science, science fantasy, and science fiction converge in the objectivity question in feminism. Perhaps our hopes for accountability, for politics, for ecofeminism, turn on revisioning the world as coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse. (p. 596)

The speculative offers an approach that engages both critique and possibility. It allows for a feminist vision of a fairer future, a future critique that speaks to the now of political trajectories, or the *what-if* of future worlding. The speculative, as noted by Truman (2019) is a practice of worlding that "defamiliarizes [sic], queers perception, and disrupts habitual ways of knowing" and that while speculations may be "fabulations, that does not mean they are incompatible with science facts" (p. 1–2). This paper presents a work of climate fiction that is speculative as a method of inquiry that unsettles epistemic authority and invites reflection on the present by imagining futures that remain grounded in material and relational conditions. From a queer and crip perspective, Truman points to the different timescales that speculation can open, unsettling dominant narratives of progress, newness, and imperialism. As I have discussed elsewhere, a queer ecopedagogy enacts a utopia that can be sensed but not realised in the present. It exists as both a promise and an impossibility, gesturing toward a future that could be if the present were different. This is queer futurity (Tytler, 2024). The speculative presents different future potentials while simultaneously critiquing current realities.

Framing speculation in these layered ways – as method, genre, and political engagement – allows us to attend to the conditions in which knowledge is produced, mediated, and resisted. Central to this is the concept of epistemic authority: the power to define what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose perspectives are validated. Both science and documentary practice have historically occupied this position, reinforcing dominant worldviews through claims to neutrality and objectivity. In this context, speculative modes of inquiry are not just imaginative exercises but also shape the narratives we construct as truth. In documentary practice, the speculative impulse can be mobilised to disrupt the authority of images and complicate their claim to reality. Speculative documentary is thus not only an artistic strategy but a pedagogical one. It engages learners affectively, requiring them to sit with ambiguity and partial knowledge. Unlike traditional documentary that often affirms dominant narratives through closure and coherence, speculative documentary invites critical reflection and imaginative engagement. In doing so, it helps viewers interrogate how knowledge is constructed and whom it serves, enabling a deeper, more critical environmental literacy. What happens when the documentary form itself becomes speculative? This brings us to speculative documentary, a form that does not simply document the world as it is, but asks how truth itself is produced, by whom, and to what end.

Speculative documentary

This paper draws on the above interrogation of how "knowledge" texts are produced and turns its focus to the cultivation of "truth" narratives in storytelling, namely within documentary practice.

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Figure 1. Installation shot of It Will Not Be Pure (2024), a four-screen video installation that resists linearity and narrative closure. The spatial configuration invites embodied movement and multisensory engagement, aligning with the work's rejection of epistemic authority and purity politics. Gallery25, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. Photo: Cassandra Edwards.

Storytelling and art practice are not innocent. Stories shape power. The way histories are told, including who speaks, who is silenced, and whose voices carry authority, not only determines what is remembered but also structures what is accepted as the "truth" of history.

For this Special Issue of the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, I am contributing documentation of a video installation titled *It Will Not Be Pure* that was exhibited at Gallery25, Boorloo/Perth in Western Australia. This work was one of six separate works that was a part of my solo exhibition titled *Soiled*.[1] I describe *It Will Not Be Pure* as a speculative documentary, which I consider a mode of speculative fiction. I choose the "documentary" moniker to draw attention to how the documentary is often positioned as a neutral voice of truth and reason, despite being a form of storytelling shaped by the perspectives and approaches of the filmmaker (Figure 1).

Documentary has often been positioned as a form of knowledge production, reinforcing dominant narratives through claims of reality. As many audio-visual theorists argue, most notably Nichols (2017), "[d]ocumentaries are … a fiction (un)like any other" (p. xi). A documentary's power lies in its claim to factuality, reinforced by the audience's trust in the image as a direct record of reality. This becomes problematic when the documentary form naturalises particular perspectives as objective truth, masking the constructed nature of the narrative and reinforcing dominant power structures under the guise of neutrality. Speculative documentary is a mode that deliberately unsettles these assumptions by using the language of documentary *as fiction*. However, as I will highlight below in relation to *It Will Not Be Pure*, it is informed by research into

[1]See catalogue essay for Soiled exhibition here: https://www.ecu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1073794/Cassandra-Tytler_-Catalogue.pdf.

https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2025.10054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

existing life-worlds and scenarios that form its conjecture. It is a form of transdisciplinary creative practice-led research.

Following Steyerl (2007):

> [T]he only possible critical documentary today is the presentation of an affective and political constellation which does not even exist, and which is yet to come. (p. 8)

However, when this authority is unsettled, when storytelling resists certainty, when narrative fractures and makes space for speculation, new possibilities emerge. Speculative documentary highlights the boundaries between reality and invention, fabulation and speculation, and what is observed or illusory.[2]

The neologism "Speculative Documentary," as coined by artists and researchers van Dienderen *et al.* (2019), refers to a documentary practice that does not claim to capture objective truth but instead constructs *possible* worlds. These worlds while being fictional, remain entangled with existing socio-political conditions. The group write that "[t]hrough a layered approach in which multiple realisms are poetically intertwined – we attempt to navigate around the subjective and fabricated nature of [categorical] boundaries" (p. 113). This speculative approach does not negate documentary's relationship with reality but reframes it. Rather than simply documenting the present, speculative documentary interrogates how history is told, how futures are imagined, and how reality is constructed through media. Similarly to Hartman's (2008) concept of critical fabulation, that works "to jeopardize [sic] the status of the event," and "to displace the received or authorized [sic] account" (p. 11), speculative documentary uses the language of documentary forms to grapple with unspoken life-worlds and contested truths.

The term "speculative" can pose problems of use. First Nations Eidsvold Murri writer Fuller (2020) resists the term speculative fiction, even as her work is often categorised within it. Her stories emerge from her culture and the belief systems embedded within it. To frame these stories as myths misrepresents their significance. "[T]hese are beings we believe in. For us, their existence is fact. Not some imaginery, [sic] made up thing" (p. 176). She argues that such positioning disregards her beliefs and traditions. In contrast, Western belief systems are deeply embedded in the dominant culture, where their narratives are inherently validated and respected. Fuller further critiques authors who appropriate Indigenous storytelling and spiritual frameworks without permission or acknowledgement, often distorting them in misinformed ways. Here, the audience "will assume it's correct. That is the power of the authorial voice" (p. 177). Similarly, Liboiron (2021b) questions empty forms of inclusion of Indigenous "voice" as opposed to expertise, stating, "using Indigenous knowledge to enrich non-Indigenous learning has been a core component of colonial knowledge systems" (p. 876). In this context, I suggest that naming my work as *speculative* documentary is an act of resistance against the authorial, colonialist, patriarchal, and imperialist voice. I position *It Will Not Be Pure*, the research I will discuss below, as working within feminist, queer and anti-colonial frameworks. This work also reflects my own commitments as a researcher and artist. My practice is grounded in questioning inherited forms of authority, both scientific and cinematic, and exploring alternative methods for knowledge-making that are embodied, relational, and politically accountable. This positionality shapes how I approach speculative documentary as a mode of practice-based research. This is not about appropriating alternative worldviews but about unsettling

[2]See Nichols (2017) for his extensive work on the multiple modes of documentary. Speculative documentary shares similarities with the reflexive mode he describes, where the filmmaker's interaction shifts from observing the world to interrogating the act of representation itself. However, where the reflexive mode questions how the world is represented, speculative documentary imagines beyond it, engaging in acts of speculation rather than emerging directly from the world we inhabit.

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Figure 2. Detail shot of It Will Not Be Pure (2024) showing soap embedded in dirt. This visual motif references the "soft-soaping" of empire, where cleanliness and hygiene narratives mask structures of exclusion and control. The imagery embodies the installation's critique of purity politics and settler-colonial sanitisation (McClintock, 2020). Photo: Cassandra Edwards.

dominant narratives of "objectivity" and "truth" that have shaped both documentary and scientific discourse.

It Will Not Be Pure is transdisciplinary research. As I have discussed previously (Tytler, 2022), transdisciplinary research resists fixed disciplinary boundaries, instead working through their intersections and tensions. *It Will Not Be Pure* as an artwork emerges from this approach, engaging ecological science, social humanities, political science, and critical theory while remaining experiential and embodied. Rather than presenting singular solutions, the work invites multiple ways of knowing, unsettling distinctions between art and research, subject and object, human and more-than-human.

It will not be pure – an artwork

It Will Not Be Pure is set in a near-future where healthy soil barely exists. The ground is dry, and desertification has taken place over much of the land. Access to soil to grow vegetables exists for the very privileged, who live in gated communities. Getting in and out of these segregated areas is not an easy task, where "worth" is tied to wealth, whiteness, and the hegemonic normative. The film follows Jessie, a researcher documenting life outside the walls of the affluent, food-secure enclaves. The people beyond the gated community, including nurses Jamie and Sam, survive on dirt biscuits and the odd donation of vegetable purée leftovers. Their existence is shaped by an exclusionary system that privileges some while discarding others. There is mention of camps of people waiting to be allowed into the soil-rich society, but the group we see live happily, reading, playing music, and quoting critical theory (Figure 2).

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Figure 3. Digital video still of It Will Not Be Pure (2024), featuring characters Sam and Jamie collecting dirt for their community. This act of gathering soil highlights the work's engagement with contamination as care, foregrounding collective survival beyond purity logics. Actors: Donita Cruz and Ella Hetherington, Cinematographer: Fionn Mulholland.

The work exists as a four-screen video installation within a sculptural space formed from silicone plumbing materials. The framework of the pipes was chosen for its links to infrastructure, health and sanitation. Quoting Shotwell (2016): "when classifications work well, they become infrastructure – they fade out, we cannot easily perceive them, and the social relations they shape become common-sensical" (p. 26). Sanitation hides our waste, yet in the case of *It Will Not Be Pure*, dirt is seeping out of the installation piping. An attempt at a politics of purity cannot be fully achieved. Viewers enter this set-like structure and encounter four screens at different right-angles, where the video unfolds in a fragmented, looping structure that is sometimes synchronised across screens and at other times shifts unpredictably. The work is sonically mixed so that the sound guides movement, becoming louder on one side, directing attention towards it, and then shifting to another side, leading focus there. Rather than interrupting from one screen to the other, the work is edited as a flow between them, so that no direction is incorrect, and attention is guided rather than forced. There is no fixed beginning or end; instead, the installation resists linearity, rejecting the conventional narrative authority of documentary (Figure 3).

The speculative nature of the work is not an escape from reality but a way of making present crises more visible. Haraway's (2016) concept of "speculative fabulation" is useful here. She describes it as a process of worlding, where fact and fiction merge to generate new ways of thinking. Speculative documentary similarly creates possible worlds that are not purely fictional but remain entangled with material realities. *It Will Not Be Pure* is neither strictly dystopian nor realist, but something more unstable, demanding an active engagement from its audience. The installation structure itself reinforces this instability. Rather than conventional framed screens, the sculptural space of the installation distorts and shifts perspectives. Viewers must navigate a space that resists passive viewing, mirroring the way knowledge about environmental collapse and socio-political inequality is always partial, contingent, and mediated.

https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2025.10054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 4. Digital video still of It Will Not Be Pure (2024), featuring the character from the soil-rich enclave smelling soil in a wine glass. This gesture satirises the commodification of land and the aesthetics of privilege, linking soil to cultural capital and purity politics. Actor: Kara Perrin, Cinematographer: Fionn Mulholland.

Watch 5 minutes of video documentation of *It Will Not Be Pure* as a video installation =https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQWm6DHbvBA
Full length of the work: 16 minutes played on a continuous loop

While *It Will Not Be Pure* imagines a near-future of environmental collapse, its narrative is embedded in research on soil degradation, purity politics and racialised exclusion. The scenario of characters eating dirt biscuits may seem playful or exaggerated, yet it reflects real-world responses to food scarcity, such as the consumption of *terre* (mud cookies) in Haiti, originally a cultural practice, but moving beyond, born from "economic hardship, deforestation, famine and scarcity" (Kelley, 2020, p. 201). The film responds to existing ecological crises, where the depletion of healthy soil not only threatens agriculture but disrupts entire ecosystems (Borrett, 2024; Leong, 2023). Yet, beyond its environmental concerns, the work interrogates how purity, both biological and ideological, structures exclusionary systems. The idea of "clean soil" for "healthy bodies," as Sam names it in the film, echoes broader anxieties around the politics of farming practices, health and morality (Luna *et al*., 2021). Ideas of purity and exclusion shape how dirt is understood, not simply as a material reality but as a socially constructed marker of disorder, otherness, and disposability. This is wrestled with as characters chant an abridged quote from Douglas' (2013) *Purity and Danger*: "dirt is disorder, the eye of the beholder."[3] As Yusoff (208) argues, geology is itself a racialised formation, entangled with histories of imperialism, extraction, and exclusion. In *It Will Not Be Pure*, this logic extends to the nation-state, where access to resources is governed by purity narratives that determine who is considered deserving of aid and who is left outside the gates. These anxieties already underpin Australia's protectionist stance on immigration, and the film speculates on how this might intensify as food scarcity worsens (Figure 4).

Contamination and reworlding as pedagogy

Returning to the "fabulation" of Haraway, *It Will Not Be Pure*, while being a warning about and critique of current systems, also speculates for what could be. It uses storytelling that is built on

https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2025.10054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

feminist, queer and anti-colonialist scholarship to imagine and hope for different futures. The world created is not a world of pure loss but one of radical possibility. Beyond the walls, where soil is scarce and the future is uncertain, a different kind of life is being cultivated; one that does not seek to dominate the environment but to exist alongside it. In refusing the hierarchies of the old world, this space of survival becomes something more: a site of collective re-imagining, where waste is not discard but continuity, where decomposition is not decay but transformation. Here, relation is not bound to territory or bordered enclosures but unfolds through entanglement between bodies, land, and the remnants of what came before. Against the purity narratives that have long underpinned colonial logics, the community embrace contamination as a process of becoming, ingesting the dirt, merging with the earth, changing as the world changes, and refusing the illusion of separation. To eat dirt is not an act of desperation, but of communion, of returning to the material realities that sustain all life. In this speculative gesture, being human is an ongoing negotiation, an insistence that another way of being is not only possible but already in motion.

Documentary, despite its claims to factuality, inevitably constructs its own world, shaped by selection, framing, and narrative structure. This includes the reproduction of settler-colonial logics in environmental narratives, where land is framed as resource rather than relation, and history is sanitised of its ongoing colonial violence. Speculative documentary opens space to disrupt these epistemologies, foregrounding entanglement, kinship, and decolonial futurities that challenge territorial, racial, and institutional boundaries. *It Will Not Be Pure* extends this idea by positioning itself in an intermediary space between the real and speculative. It does not attempt to document the present directly, nor does it fully claim the label of fiction. Instead, it asks viewers to engage with the instability of knowledge itself; to consider not just what is, but what could be. Ultimately, speculative documentary does not abandon documentary's relationship with reality but expands its possibilities. It acknowledges that all documentary is, to some degree, an act of world-building, and in doing so, it reframes the question: if documentary has always shaped our understanding of reality, what kinds of worlds should it create? If different futures are conceived, which ones are worth imagining?

As Gough-Brady (2022) observes in relation to presenter documentaries, knowledge is not something retained by the presenter but "offered to the viewer to take into their world" (p. 133). Similarly, speculative documentary does not position itself as an authoritative voice but instead creates conditions for the viewer to engage with speculative possibilities. By immersing audiences in unstable, entangled worlds, this form of documentary advances new ways of thinking and feeling about environmental futures. This is an essential approach within climate change education. Rather than merely documenting environmental crisis, speculative documentary actively intervenes in how we imagine and relate to the world, unsettling fixed narratives and expanding the possibilities of the real. In a moment when climate denial, greenwashing, and extractive knowledge systems continue to dominate, speculative documentary does not just envision alternative futures. It makes visible the ideological structures shaping the present, forcing us to confront the stories we tell about crisis, survival, and transformation. In this sense, *It Will Not Be Pure* not only theorises *contaminated* knowledge but also materialises it, immersing audiences in a pedagogical encounter that is not didactic but relational, speculative, and ethical. This is what an anti-colonial and feminist environmental education might begin to look like.

Acknowledgements. This research was done on the unceded lands of the Whadjuk Noongar people. I respectfully acknowledge Elders past, and present and acknowledge that a treaty is yet to be signed.

Financial support. This work was made with the support of the Forrest Research Foundation.

Ethical standard. The research was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards and was approved through Edith Cowan University's Research Ethics Management System (approval number 2024-05050-TYTLER).

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https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2025.10054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Cassandra Tytler is an artist and researcher working across experimental moving image, performance, and site-based installation. Her practice examines power dynamics between humans and more-than-human ecologies in the context of the climate crisis. She explores feminist participatory art as a method for expressing wellbeing beyond language, amplifying diverse community experiences and challenging dominant narratives of care and ecological responsibility. She is a Forrest Creative & Performance Fellow with the Centre for People, Place, and Planet, and a postdoctoral fellow in Wellbeing and Education at Edith Cowan University. Her work has been performed, exhibited, and screened nationally and internationally.

Cite this article: Tytler, C. (2025). Speculative Documentary as World-Building: Contaminated Knowledge and Future-Making. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* **41**, 708–718. https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2025.10054