

## **Indigenous Futurity: Two Apocalypses in Claire G. Coleman's *The Old Lie***

Anne Brewster

### **Abstract:**

This paper analyses how the Indigenous futurism of Claire G. Coleman in *The Old Lie* denaturalises Australian egalitarian democracy and liberal progressivism. Through the genre of apocalyptic fiction Coleman lays bare the violence of white supremacy embedded in settler-colonial exceptionalism. The novel demonstrates that apocalypse is a powerful trope for genocide and the anthropogenic environmental damage inflicted on Indigenous peoples. In its negotiation of multiple endings and return, Coleman's Indigenous futurism, this article argues, fashions a strategic narrative that both 'moves forward' into history and affirms survival within the present (see Dillon). It explores how Coleman's Indigenous futurism figures Indigenous mobility in the interplanetary multiverse. It suggests that the worlding of the novel can be read as demarcating a democratic intergalactic imaginary which foregrounds decolonial cosmopolitanism and gendered Indigenous sovereign erotics.

**Keywords:** Indigenous futurism; Claire G. Coleman; apocalyptic fiction; white apocalypse; Indigenous cosmopolitanism; Indigenous sovereign erotics

*The story of settler-colonisation  
is the story of many apocalypses  
(Ambelin Kwaymullina, *Living on Stolen Land*, 4)*

*Little girls who come back home after church on Sunday, who look around  
themselves at the human fallout and announce matter-of-factly, Armageddon begins  
here. (Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, 1)*

*When we have power over our destiny, our children will flourish.  
(“The Uluru Statement from the Heart”)*

### **1. Indigenous Apocalypse**

This article investigates the trope of apocalypse in the speculative fiction of Wirilomin Noongar writer, Claire G. Coleman. Coleman's first novel, *Terra Nullius* (2018), collected numerous literary awards and was quickly followed by her second, *The Old Lie* (2019), which consolidated her reputation as an accomplished speculative fiction writer. These books raise the profile of the field of Indigenous speculative fiction (which we can also refer to as Indigenous futurism), a field demarcated in Australia by the work of writers as diverse as Eric Wilmot, Sam William Watson, Alexis Wright, Ellen van Neerven and the Young Adult fiction author, Ambelin Kwaymullina. The focus of this article is on Coleman's second novel, *The Old Lie* (referred to hereafter as *TOL*).

In her work on American modernist fiction, Mariya Nikolova argues that newness and futurity have been represented as the prerogative of whiteness. My question in this article is: what happens when Indigenous writers venture into a futuristic genre—such as speculative fiction—

which has been dominated by white writers? It has been widely observed (see Weaver; Dillon; Lempert; Fraser; Whyte; Hsu and Yazell; Fricke; Polak) that speculative fiction by Indigenous writers across the globe—which focuses on dystopian and apocalyptic scenarios—has been written from a very different viewpoint to that of mainstream fiction, one which references (either overtly or indirectly) the violent colonial histories of Indigenous people within the first world, and emphasises the fact that their past as colonised people has been one of catastrophe and apocalypse.

In her discussion of Indigenous futurism, S. N. Fricke suggests that many science fiction narratives may not, in fact, be wholly classified as fiction by Indigenous readers and writers who have experienced comparable destruction of their homelands, cultures, languages, families, and ecosystems (110). Coleman distinguishes the impact of catastrophe on Indigenous people proposing that Aboriginal people in Australia are, in fact, “post-apocalyptic,” having lived through “an attempt to exterminate us” (“Claire G. Coleman” 12: 41). She says, “we have already survived things that most people couldn’t even imagine facing” (“Claire G. Coleman” 12:15).

I will borrow from the work of Briohny Doyle who distinguishes between the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic by defining apocalypse as a genre where “catastrophe precedes revelation of a new world” (99). Post-apocalyptic narratives, on the other hand, depict the aftermath of catastrophe where human lives are “not sites of redemption and transcendence but simply vistas for processes of survival, witness, and change” (Doyle 100). The emphasis, she suggests, is not on redemption or revelation but survival.

In the discussion that follows, I examine how the deployment of apocalypse in *TOL* impacts two different cultural imaginaries—Indigenous and settler-colonial. Science fiction and the trope of apocalypse provide Coleman with a powerful cultural, political, and aesthetic resource to fashion an imaginative decolonial Indigenous futurity. For white readers, on the other hand, I argue, the novel’s proleptic apocalyptic vision of a “future failed state” (Manjikian 285) challenges the normativity and solidity of settler-colonial dominance and white supremacy.

## **2. Indigenous Futurism**

The term ‘Indigenous futurism’ has been popularised in the past decade by Anishinaabe scholar Grace L. Dillon, in the anthology she edited titled *Walking the Clouds* (2012), the first anthology of global Indigenous Science Fiction.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous futurism was inspired by the term Afrofuturism, which refers to Afrodiasporic technocultural styles of music, visual art, literature, and film, and emerged largely in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Both futurisms, in Ojibwe (Anishinaabe) artist Andrea Carlson’s words, refer respectively to the practice of black and Indigenous cultural practitioners embracing technoculture in order to “imagin[e] [themselves] into the future despite all efforts to eradicate [their] pasts” (1).

Grace Dillon insists that the evocations of futurity in Indigenous speculative fiction enable Indigenous writers to orientate themselves towards apocalyptic pasts in ways that integrate past, present, and future, generating a powerful sense of continuity, in spite of the apocalyptic violence and loss to which they have been subjected. She says: “Indigenous Futurisms are not the product of a victimized people’s wishful amelioration of their past, but instead a

---

<sup>1</sup> It has also been popularised in Dillon’s Introduction to the special issue of critical essays on Indigenous futurisms she curated for *Extrapolation* (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Its emergence was uneven across art forms. It appeared, for example, in the Jazz of Sun Ra during the 1940s.

continuation of a spiritual and cultural path that remains unbroken by genocide and war” (“Introduction” 2).

If Indigenous and minority people have traditionally been excluded from political and cultural discourses of the future, this is because they have been denied access to and acknowledgement of their past (Delany qtd. in Dery; see also Fricke). Black-American science fiction writer, Samuel R. Delany explains why, in his view, Afrofuturism emerged relatively late in the US (in relation to mainstream SF): “the historical reason that we’ve been so impoverished in terms of future images is because, until fairly recently, as a people we were systematically forbidden any images of our past [as slaves] ... every effort conceivable was made to destroy all vestiges of what might endure as African social consciousness” (qtd. in Dery 190-191).

The black American hip-hop theorist Tricia Rose says, “If you’re going to imagine yourself in the future, you have to imagine where you’ve come from” (qtd. in Dery 215). Imagining where you have come from, for many Indigenous writers, as Hsu and Yazell suggest, may call for a vernacular treatment of apocalypse, one which is “local and contingent” (353). I want to look now at an important nexus in *TOL*, which indicates the book’s embeddedness in the local and the contingent. Coleman has indicated that the novel has been shaped in crucial ways by her specific familial history. She relates how an image of personal reclamation lies at the centre of this novel and, I would suggest, shapes it in profound ways. When asked in an interview what “prompted” her to write the novel (“Claire G. Coleman” 51:17), she tells a story about a trip to her ancestral lands to look for her grandfather’s grave. She relates being “shocked” (“Claire G. Coleman’s Futurist Novel” 2:20) to discover that although her grandfather had been a war veteran, his grave was unmarked by any commemorative paraphernalia.

Her discovery of the unmarked grave was followed by further research which revealed other information about the mistreatment of returned Indigenous soldiers, such as their failure to get pensions, to receive land as part of the soldier settlement schemes, and the fact that some of the Indigenous veterans had had their children removed while they were at war (Coleman 353). She says that this knowledge motivated her to write *TOL*: “Once I had the facts I ... had to do something about it and I had to write a book” (“Claire G. Coleman’s Futurist Novel” 3:40).

The term “apocalypse” derives from the Greek word “apokalupsis”, which means to uncover or reveal. Coleman’s apocalyptic novel had its genesis in a moment of discovery of family history, a history that speaks to the systemic obliteration of the Indigenous past. I would suggest that the discovery of her grandfather’s history of invisibility has the characteristics of a revelation and—because it spurs her into action—of a political awakening. Much Indigenous fiction, I suspect, may incorporate these metatextual narratives of personal and collective becoming, many of which may not be legible to non-Indigenous readers. I would suggest that Nukunu/Nuguna/Ngadjuri YA writer Jared Thomas is referring to the existence of these metatextual layers when he describes his goal in writing fiction as being to give his young Indigenous readers “insight into key Aboriginal moments.”

### **3. War**

Coleman’s thematisation of war in *TOL* is essentially “local and contingent,” to borrow Hsu and Yazell’s phrase (353), and the novel has at its core the commemoration of Coleman’s grandfather’s grave and his life as a “Black Digger”. We see this “key Aboriginal moment” enshrined in the book’s dedication to him “and the other Black Diggers, who went to war for a country that did not see them as people” (Coleman n. pag). Coleman broadens the theme of the

suffering body of the soldier and the “pity of war”<sup>3</sup> in the early chapters to include combatants of the First World War, summoned paratextually in references to Wilfred Owen’s poetry.

Chapter 1 presents a carefully reproduced but futuristic WWI front-line war zone, complete with iconography of trenches, fox holes, cannon fire, bomb craters, corpses, mud, rotting boots, barbed wire, stretcher-bearers, tents and even a gas attack similar to the one portrayed in Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” (the poem which gives Coleman’s novel its title). The chapter introduces us to one of the Indigenous protagonists, the futuristic soldier Shane Daniels. It borrows from the iconic language of the sublime to suggest that war is ineffable and indescribable, in lines such as: “There were no words adequate to talk about the hell in which a soldier’s heart walked” (Coleman 18). Through the use of the sublime, the soldier’s suffering is accorded a kind of hallowed status in the novel’s commemorative project.

Despite the presence of revelations in its metatextual layering, the novel, as I have suggested, can be described as post-apocalyptic and, according to Doyle’s definition, its main narrative development is focused on survival rather than on a revelation of salvation, a redemptive transition from one world to the next, transcendence or the deliverance from disaster. Nonetheless, within the novel’s post-apocalyptic scenario, we can identify glimpses of hope and restoration. The novel pays homage to Coleman’s grandfather (and Coleman’s familial history) through its celebration of family—both Shane Daniels’ family, which has been split asunder by the child removal policies of the Federation, and the non-heteronormative family of Romeo, the Indigenous fighter pilot, and her wife, Harper. Despite almost impossible odds, the various members of Shane Daniels’ family pursue their quest to be reunited, which initially means, for some (Shane, Jimmy, and Itta), returning to Earth. They succeed in coming tantalisingly close to meeting, and, although the reunion is deferred, the promise of reunion, rebuilding, and renewal remains alive, as does the struggle and commitment to realising this goal. Community and family thus remain enshrined in the narrative, rehearsing the novel’s tribute to Coleman’s grandfather.

Within the Indigenous futurism of the novel the theme of war provides continuity, linking the historical military service of Coleman’s grandfather to the service of Shane Daniels and Romeo, both of whom, like Coleman’s grandfather, are betrayed by their governments. As the narrative unfolds, the theme of the “pity of war” and the suffering body (exemplified by the narratives of Jimmy, Walker, and William) becomes interleaved—in the hybrid textuality of the novel—with its boisterous episodes of space opera: its hyper-militarised intergalactic war battles and the heroic exploits of the tough-women combatants, Shane Daniels and Romeo. The parallel narratives of two other Indigenous protagonists, William and Walker, exemplify the suffering body we were introduced to in the novel’s opening chapter. Walker, in particular, focalises a picture of another kind of war zone, a post-apocalyptic Earth which is disintegrating after the explosion of a deadly viral radiation bomb threatens all material things—both organic and non-organic.

These sections of the novel reference the British nuclear bomb tests at Maralinga and other sites in South Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. The stakes of end-game warfare are high and this vision of apocalypse in the landscape Walker stumbles through is so cataclysmic that I suggest it evokes the end of Earth and its human civilisation. Elsewhere the apocalyptic futurity of the novel anticipates the imagined demise of the human epoch in the face of the multi-species multiverse. The possibility of humanity’s demise had presented itself earlier in the novel,

---

<sup>3</sup> Wilfred Owen, epigraph at the beginning of the novel (Coleman n. pag.).

namely at the point at which the Conglomeration first threatened to invade Earth. At this time, we are told, “humanity faced extinction” (Coleman 21). There are other hints in the novel that this process of the extinction of the human might already be underway in this futuristic world. We discover at the end of the novel that the Federation has bureaucratically overtaken the “planet previously known as ‘Earth’” (Coleman 267) and has turned it into “a luxury retirement estate for returned soldiers” from the full-member planets of the Federation (Coleman 267). Humans no longer have residency or full citizenship rights and cannot own land. As a result, they are rendered stateless refugees, fugitives, nomads, and outlaws.<sup>4</sup> The threat of human extinction is one possible future in the apocalyptic scenario presented in the novel. The other is armed “terrorist” (350) resistance or revolution led, it is implied, by Indigenous humans, as hinted at in the novel’s final pages where Shane sends out a message across the Federation. We see this revolution presaged the novel’s opening where the building housing the Department of Births, Deaths and Marriages is bombed.

#### **4. White Apocalypse**

If the novel presents the possibility of the end of human civilisation, I want to propose that this apocalyptic event impacts quite differently on white and Indigenous people (as figured in the novel). As I have observed, numerous commentators on apocalyptic fiction and film (including Coleman) have argued that contemporary Indigenous people are already post-apocalyptic. They have already lived the apocalyptic theft of land, attempted genocide, environmental destruction, and various forms of slow, attritional violence (see Nixon). Coleman’s Indigenous protagonists are *survivors* of apocalypse,<sup>5</sup> variously endowed with an interplanetary, cosmopolitan mobility and technocultural military prowess, on their intergalactic journeys back to Country to assert their sovereignty.

For *white* humans, on the other hand, the apocalyptic threat of the end of their world is unprecedented.<sup>6</sup> The invasions of Earth by the two intergalactic powers could be seen as representing the first major challenge to white human dominance during the period known as the Anthropocene. The subsequent subordination of humanity to these intergalactic powers can be read as an event which reverses the status of the dominant white group. In *TOL* we see a scenario where the white settler-colonial state has lost its mastery and its ability to protect its white citizens and safeguard their power and dominance. The imaginative worlding of the Indigenous futurism of novels like *TOL*, in coding reversals of (white) status and the loss of power, can prompt, I suggest, a specifically white revelation that white supremacy and imperialism are epistemologically unstable and threatened by (discursive) collapse. Perhaps this might function for some readers as a moment of white political awakening which parallels

---

<sup>4</sup> The Federation thus betrays Earth in several ways by invading it and usurping human rights, and by testing a deadly bomb there (the novel references here the British tests at Maralinga and elsewhere) while blaming this on the Conglomeration (Coleman 232).

<sup>5</sup> This statement applies at least to the women. Two of the male protagonists are not such successful survivors.

<sup>6</sup> The white apocalypse that I outline above is not fully figured narratively in *TOL* but occurs off stage, in the wings of the narrative, as it were. As an expression of Indigenous futurity, the novel essentially focuses on Indigenous characters and their agency and not on the white human population of Earth. The five protagonists of the novel are Indigenous and the few white characters that are identified as such, are minor (for example, Romeo’s wife, Harper [Coleman 237]). Nevertheless, the history of white imperialism/colonisation saturates the background of the narrative and is indexical of other imperialisms and invasions that take place in this futuristic world. Therefore, the horizon of whiteness and the white state is visible at all times, I would argue, even if the existence of this world is not figured in descriptive detail in the novel.

that moment of Indigenous political awareness I delineate in Coleman's discovery of her grandfather's unmarked grave. Perhaps Indigenous literature can generate for white readers 'key' moments of insight, in this case into the operations of whiteness.

This is not to celebrate prematurely the demise of whiteness or to suggest that the privileges and power of whiteness can simply be eradicated or surrendered by an act of will: the opposite is evidentially true—race is a vast discursive and material system which is continually being reconfigured, re-assembled, reasserted, and re-entrenched (see Lentin). Further, capitalism, the foundation of the Anthropocene and of colonising whiteness, is also shown to have metastasised throughout the warring intergalactic imperialist multicultures in the novel.

I suggest that the perspective, produced by Indigenous futurism, of *looking back* from the future at contemporary whiteness, contributes to a sense that whiteness has always been challenged and contested. The futuristic world of *TOL* envisages a world where the turning point towards apocalypse has already occurred, where whiteness is on a downward trajectory, its authority delegitimised, and its hegemony eroded. In *TOL* this alternative world where the two intergalactic empires, the Conglomeration and the Federation, mimic white imperialist expansion on Earth, puts into question the (white) Australian state's claim to exceptionality (exemplified, for example, in discourses of peaceful 'settlement', egalitarianism, neo-liberal progressivism and democracy). The colonisation of Australia takes its place, rather, in a long line of past and future aggressive colonising powers.

### **5. Treaty of Shared Power and Risk**

In positioning Australia's history of whiteness within a long line of imperialisms within a multispecies multiverse, the novel sheds light on white supremacy as a macro formation. I would like now to reflect on the operations of whiteness *at a micro level*, that is, in the politics of the consumption of the novel. In order to illuminate the cross-cultural scene of reading Indigenous-authored literature, I turn to Mununjali-Yugambeh writer Ellen van Neerven's poem "TREATY OF SHARED POWER" in their 2020 book of poetry *Throat* (60-62). Here van Neerven attempts to negotiate the terms of relationality in the virtual space of reading by brokering a contract between themselves (as an Indigenous author) and a non-Indigenous reader. I want to investigate whether the trope of the contract can shed any light for me on how I can negotiate the ways in which whiteness positions me as a settler-colonial reader.<sup>7</sup>

Van Neerven asks the reader "How do we co-exist on this page?" (62) and requests that the reader "enter ... into an agreement" (61) with them where they and the reader clarify their "relationship with each other" and their "expectations of each other" (61). Van Nerveen starts by asking that the reader recognise van Neerven's sovereignty but then van Nerveen expresses concern about the reader's non-Indigenous identity saying, "I'm not sure *whom* I'm entering into this agreement with" [emphasis added] (61). This concern might be seen to arise out of the white reader's unmarked, normalised identity. They ask the reader to identify themselves as readers and their standing on Indigenous lands. Van Nerveen's request to the reader to clarify the reader's positionality is, I suggest, a call for the white settler colonial reader to address and

---

<sup>7</sup> I am using this trope in a slightly different context to the one that van Neerven evokes in this poem. My comments here are based on my own location as a white cisgender woman. I take a white settler reader as an exemplary reader in this discussion (and one reflective of my own positioning), acknowledging in my final paragraph that the cross-cultural reading of Indigenous literature can convene engagements with many different readers. In addition to cross-cultural engagements the novel also convenes Indigenous readers and readings.

identify their whiteness.<sup>8</sup> In the discussion that follows I take my own act of reading Coleman's novel as an instance of this readerly treaty. This allows me to think about the powerful ramifications for whiteness which issue from the novel's evocation of Indigenous futurity.

Indigenous futurity, I suggest, challenges the ways in which white anti-racism reproduces white power and privilege. Geographer Andrew Baldwin, for example, argues that anti-racism theory is often predicated on the eventual demise or disappearance of white racism. Baldwin argues that the future is seen as "the terrain upon or through which white racism will get resolved" (174). Much anti-racist theory, he suggests, is based on a particular temporality which assumes that "white racism can be modernized away" (174). If we are able to correct historical practices of whiteness, the argument runs, then racism can be dismantled. The unfortunate outcome of this logic, Baldwin argues, is that white racism gets deferred to the future rather than being fully addressed and made accountable in the present. Mariya Nikolova identifies a similar logic in white feminism which, she argues, "visualizes a [non-racist] future that white women ... can escape to" (85), one which aims to "absolv[e] their culpability" (112) and allow white women "to abandon the burdens of the past" (85).

Thinking about the whiteness of my own anti-racist practice makes me aware of my hope that my own work can act as a critique of and a corrective to extant racist discourse. Such are the claims I enshrine in grant-applications, for example. In reflecting on these aspirations, two questions arise for me about whiteness and the risk it poses for Indigenous people: (1) *In the very act of rendering Indigenous knowledge and culture readable/legible to white readers, is it possible for me to avoid colonising/appropriating Indigenous literary texts?*; and (2) *is my own anti-racist rhetoric subtended by a sense of its own white exceptionalism?* In other words, if I cannot guarantee that my own work will avoid the pitfalls which I identify as racist, how do I proceed?

In their poem "TREATY OF SHARED POWER" Van Neerven qualifies their formulation of the readerly contract with the question "[i]s this an agreement or a series of/unanswered questions?" (62). Reflecting on the implications of van Neerven's rhetorical turn here, perhaps the most productive contract for me to undertake would be to continue to rehearse the two questions posed above in the awareness that they may not be finally resolvable; and to address and examine the ongoing structural operations of whiteness (see Lentin), following the injunctions of Indigenous writers such as Alison Whittaker and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, who advise that "deconstructing white supremacy is [white people's] duty" (Whittaker 12) and that white feminists should "theorise the relinquishment of power" (Moreton-Robinson 186).

## **6. Science Fiction and Gender**

My argument to this point has been that the futuristic worlding of Coleman's novel foregrounds the artifice of white exceptionalism. I would like to change focus here and suggest that Indigenous futurism above all also powerfully asserts Indigenous people's agency—their self-determination, self-representation, and sovereignty. According to the logic of white possessive investment (see Lipsitz), futurity has been reserved for whiteness and white people. For Indigenous people who have been denied discursive access to the future imaginary as well as access to socio-economic mobility, the technocultural worlding of science fiction provides a significant aesthetic and cultural resource. In the next section I will discuss the intersection between Indigenous gendered futurism and science fiction.

---

<sup>8</sup> It could also be read as an invitation to non-white settler-colonial readers to address their standing on Indigenous lands. I am focusing on white settler-colonial readers here.

Science fiction may seem a dubious vehicle for Indigenous writers' aspirations to imaginatively occupy the future, given the dominance, in mainstream SF, of patriarchal imperialist fantasies of conquering worlds, subduing hostile nature, and rescuing vulnerable foreign beings/people (see Fricke 117). Nalo Hopkinson (a Jamaican-Canadian speculative fiction writer) has suggested that writing science fiction as a person of colour is to "be under suspicion of having internalized one's colonization" (1). Coleman herself has expressed an awareness of mainstream SF as "white, male [and] imperialist" ("Claire G. Coleman" 19:43). She says that her own vision of an Indigenous post-apocalyptic world aims to rework the mainstream SF canon ("Claire G. Coleman" 12:41). In the last section of this paper, I would like to examine the ways in which the creative techno-worlding of Coleman's speculative fiction intersects with gender and Indigeneity. My focus will be on her two female Indigenous protagonists, Romany (Romeo) Zetz and Shane Daniels.

In the space opera of the hyper-militarised intergalactic world of *TOL* these two highly-ranked, tough women participate fully in modernity and excel in their skills as armed combatants.<sup>9</sup> As Coleman comments in an interview ("Claire G Coleman's Futurist Novel" 5:48), female front-line soldiers are rare in science fiction.<sup>10</sup> Her female fighter pilots recalibrate what it means to be a fighter pilot. In the novel's futuristic world, the role is ideally suited to women as they are selected for their small stature (no pilot is able to be taller than 160cm [Coleman 36]) in order to fit within the cockpits. In this way a feature of femaleness—smaller stature—which is conventionally seen as a deficit, is weaponised, becoming a powerful asset and allowing women to excel in this traditionally male role.

### **7. Decolonial Sovereign Erotics**

If Romeo and Shane are heroic action fighters they are also figured as playful, trickster characters. While the male Indigenous characters in the novel (apart from Jimmy) are often alone, isolated, and atomised, the two female Indigenous protagonists, Romeo and Daniels, are very strongly ensconced in a community of women. They are shown to be embedded within networks of love—familial, communal, and romantic.

Romeo is a comic figure who allows Coleman to challenge the patriarchal worlding of mainstream science fiction. A kick-ass female fighter pilot who occupies what is a conventionally masculine role, she also takes up a starring role within a non-heteronormative romance narrative.<sup>11</sup> The Cherokee Two-Spirit and queer writer and literary studies scholar, Qwo-Li Driskill, argues that "as Native people, our erotic lives and identities have been colonized along with our homelands" (52) and that, as a result, First Nations' peoples' sexualities are embedded in "the legacy of historical trauma and the ongoing process of decolonization" (51). Driskill coins the term "Sovereign Erotic" to describe the "return to and/or continuance of the complex realities of gender and sexuality ... erased and hidden by colonial cultures" (56-57). Other North American writers have affirmed that the erotic is "a creative or generative force" (Miranda 145 qtd. in Driskill et al. 3) for artists, and those literary erotics have the power to "[d]isrupt colonial heteropatriarchal regimes" (Driskill et al. 3), and to realise Indigenous imperatives.

---

<sup>9</sup> For an informed discussion of space opera in *TOL*, see Polak.

<sup>10</sup> Young Adult SF may be an exception here. See Dillon's discussion of Indigenous futurist heroines in YA SF (4) and James.

<sup>11</sup> The Shakespearean provenance of the name could be seen as gesturing to the queered staging of gender in romantic narratives in Shakespeare's plays where female characters were played by male actors. I thank Sue Kossew for this observation.



These statements, by a range of global First Nations artists and writers, align with Coleman's gendered and queered interventions in SF narratives of both love and war, to enact, in Driskill's words, a "return to and/or continuance of the complex realities of gender and sexuality ... erased and hidden by colonial cultures" (56-57). In examining Coleman's characterisation of both Romeo and Shane I suggest that the gendered and queered interventions of these two characters intersect with Coleman's narration of their Indigeneity. At the point at which Coleman challenges gendered stereotypes and heteronormative sexualities, her literary erotics simultaneously perform the decolonising work of intervening in and disrupting colonial regimes of race to resignify Indigeneity.

Both characters challenge and destabilise the conventionally male figures of the combatant—Romeo, as I have mentioned, through her petite femininity resignifying military prowess. In the first few chapters devoted to Shane Daniels—which focalise her harrowing combatant experience in the field of war—Shane remains an indeterminate figure, not identified by a gendered pronoun. It is not until Chapter Eight, at the point at which she and her old friend Romeo meet up for the first time, that she is identified as a female. For some readers this may function as a moment of defamiliarisation and rupture. Given Daniels' role as a soldier and her non-gender specific name,<sup>12</sup> some readers may have identified her up until this point as male. Significantly, she is identified as Indigenous at the very moment she is identified as female, that is, in the instance when Romeo addresses her as 'tidda' (an Indigenous word meaning 'sister'), which indexes simultaneously both her gender and her race (Coleman 56). This is a representational event that is indicative of the intersectionality of subjectivity which emerges from the juncture of gender with race and many other categories.

### **8. Mobility/Cosmopolitanism**

If, as I have argued, Indigenous futurism provides the creative resources for Indigenous writers to reclaim the future imaginary in the aftermath of catastrophe, what kind of world do the Indigenous protagonists of *TOL* inhabit and what kind of mobility does it afford them? In this final section, I examine the links between catastrophe, mobility, and cosmopolitanism.

The incessant, restless mobility of the Indigenous characters across planets and space could be seen as a mode of catastrophic inhabitance, which reminds us of what Anishinaabe scholar Grace L. Dillon describes as the diasporic condition of many Indigenous people historically dislocated from their homelands across the globe ("Miindiwag and Indigenous Diaspora"). Hsu and Yazell suggest that in mainstream American SF the "long denigrated" nomadic practices of Indigenous nations have been taken up as a trope of the "human condition in the wake of the apocalypse" (355). However, the mobility of the Indigenous protagonists in *TOL* is distinguished from other forms of mainstream post-human nomadism by the sovereign spiritual and material embeddedness of these characters in their homelands and their Country. They long to return to Country in a manner that is reminiscent of (although not identical with) the Stolen Generations.

In the midst of the intergalactic battles between the Federation and the Conglomeration, there exists a subaltern intergalactic, interspecies community who struggle within the interstellar precariat to survive in a post-apocalyptic world, through transitory and contingent alliances. In their interstellar mobilities these communities and the Indigenous actors within them might be seen to exemplify a mode of interplanetary cosmopolitanism.

---

<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, this name is often conventionally considered to be gendered male.

If we turn to contemporary Indigenous scholarship, we can see that the vision of Indigenous cosmopolitanism is not restricted to the modern world. Sean Teuton's study of the nineteenth-century Cherokee in modern-day northern Georgia, for example, investigates the cosmopolitan culture of pre-contact and post-contact Cherokee (33-53). He describes the Cherokee culture as historically informed by an "international imaginary," evidenced by extensive networking which included negotiating alliances and trading with both Europeans and other Indian nations, and adapting knowledge and skills. In demonstrating the cosmopolitan skills of the Cherokee, Teuton challenges the modern/ancient binary and that between putatively "civilised" white and "primitive" Indigenous cultures.

In Coleman's novel we see a futuristic equivalent of the early cosmopolitanism that Teuton identifies among the Cherokee. Here the circulation of Indigenous characters among multiple species within the intergalactic multiverse brings them into proximity of a wide range of different species, a narrative scenario which is informed with a politics and aesthetics of difference. The multiple species that inhabit the contact zone of mainstream science fiction are marked by cultural, bodily and political difference, which conventionally has been shaped by an exoticising, ethnographically focalised gaze. The criticism that otherness is often fetishised through the creation of racialised hierarchies designed to establish the singularity and exceptionalism of a master race, has been levelled at canonical cinematic science fiction texts. Coleman, for example, describes *Star Wars* as "racist" and "speciesist," commenting that the only speaking species is human ("Claire G. Coleman" 2).

So how does Coleman approach the issue of the representation of alien species and cultures? How does she write back to this mainstream tradition of exoticism and universalisation, and what poetics and politics of difference inform her Indigenous futuristic imaginary? Most of the bodily cosmopolitan encounters in *TOL* between the Indigenous protagonists and other species occur in Jimmy and Itta's relations with the various beings they encounter in their travels back to Earth, the most significant of whom is the hermaphrodite scholar, Speech. In Jimmy's relations with other species, difference is not assimilated to a colonial racialised hierarchy.<sup>13</sup>

Jimmy's point of view is that of the subaltern fugitive and it references Indigenous peoples' subjection to colonisation. From this position he forges an authentic egalitarianism. In his encounters with other species, difference is often acknowledged as unknowable, as in the case of his responses to the variety of food and languages of other refugees that he meets, which he registers as unreadable. His reactions to other species' bodies, gestures, and facial expressions and their gender are similar. As I have argued, the futuristic narrative of the novel is organically embedded in the colonial history of Indigenous people's dispossession with specific references to extra-diegetic colonial events and historical figures, such as the Stolen Generations, British nuclear testings in South Australia in the 1950s and 1960s and Coleman's grandfather, a WWII veteran. The politics of racialised difference are thus everywhere foregrounded in the text and Coleman's sovereign Indigenous imaginary informs the textual construction of her intergalactic, multispecies multiverse.

---

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly there is no "master" or core race designated or identified as founders of either the Federation or the Conglomeration, nor is a specific planet named as an originary home of each organisation (for example, in the last section of the novel where Shane Daniels mounts an attack on the communication tower in a station above the home planet of the Conglomerate, significantly she does not know the name of the planet or the species who call it home). This could have a number of implications, one being that as the dominant multiverse powers these two races have become normalised and unmarked—in a way which mimics the invisibility and non-naming of whiteness. Alternatively, this could have other narrative significance relating to the secrecy of these two superpowers.

I propose that we can see in *TOL* a unique futuristic style of cosmopolitanism which displaces the white settler/Indigenous binary to create a new type of democratic intergalactic/interplanetary imaginary. In the novel, I suggest, the multispecies multiverse functions as a heuristic device to model new forms of cosmopolitanism where the Indigenous characters participate in respectful and inclusive forms of inter-species friendship and companionship, such as that Jimmy and Itta share with Speech. These cosmopolitan relations, I suggest, can be seen as being characterised by connectedness, interdependence and reciprocity which sometimes lead to collaborative ventures, assistance, and co-operation. For example, we see evidence of solidarity and co-operation at a low point of the narrative where the crew seal refugees off in a separate compartment from the rest of an ailing ship and a group of the refugees gets together to build a body ladder in order to locate and fix a life-threatening leak in the roof.

In this cosmopolitan precariat, groups from different species are linked by a common experience of poverty, disenfranchisement, lack of rights and vulnerability. However, despite the fact that they are fugitives and refugees among other similarly displaced people, the Indigenous characters are all distinguished by their status as First Nations people and their mission to return to Country. The motif of return, I suggest, indexes an overarching quest in which the Indigenous characters resist and challenge the coercion of imperialist powers and assert their sovereign rights to Country.

## **9. Coda**

Slavoj Žižek suggests that apocalyptic narratives often work to normalise crises. Indeed, it is widely evident that dominant discourses of catastrophe such as settler environmentalism can normalise racialised necropolitical narratives of erasure and extinction. In this article I have argued that Indigenous futurism, however, in its vernacular historiography, can be seen as mobilising tropes of apocalypse to forge a continuity between local and contingent readings of the Indigenous past, on the one hand and, on the other, a futuristic reinvention of a cosmopolitan Indigenous mobility which celebrates love, friendship and a decolonial sovereign erotics.

In my analysis of Indigenous futurism and apocalypse I want to acknowledge the discursive violence that settler literary criticism has enacted on Indigenous literature (and the normalisation of this violence in settler anti-racist criticism's claims to exceptionalism) by acknowledging the embeddedness of my own work within this tradition. In closing I want to reflect further on the ways in which whiteness positions me as a settler-colonial reader and return to Ellen van Neerven's question quoted above: "How do we co-exist on this page?" (62) to remind myself that there are multiple readers who peruse the pages of Coleman's novel including Indigenous readers.

In a recent article in the *Journal of Australian Studies*, Indigenous studies scholar Clint Bracknell notes the ever-increasing non-Indigenous interest in and demand for Indigenous cultural texts and analyses the impact of this demand on Indigenous researchers and communities. He talks about the lack of space and time for communities to "claim, consolidate and enhance our heritage and knowledge amongst ourselves" (213).<sup>14</sup> Bracknell's comment raises questions about the non-Indigenous reader's presence in conversations about Indigenous literature. As a non-Indigenous reader and commentator on Indigenous literature I am aware of the implications of Bracknell's comment for the way in which I conceive of the kind of work this article undertakes. I aspire to contribute to the dissemination and circulation of Indigenous

---

<sup>14</sup> This last paragraph is adapted from "Anne Brewster reviews *Where the Fruit Falls* by Karen Wyld," *Mascara*, March 18, 2021.

literature in a way that is mindful of the conditions of commodification of Indigenous bodies and texts and that seeks to acknowledge and not encroach upon the Indigenous space that Bracknell identifies.<sup>15</sup>

## References

- Baldwin, Andrew. "Whiteness and Futurity: Towards a Research Agenda." *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2012, pp. 172-187.
- Bracknell, Clint. "Rebuilding as Research: Noongar Song, Language and Ways of Knowing." *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 210-223.
- Carlson, Andrea. "A Mothership Connection: Past Futures of Resurrection and Absence." *MPLSART.COM*, 21 Feb. 2018, [www.mplsart.com/written/2018/02/a-mothership-connection-past-futures-of-resurrection-and-absence](http://www.mplsart.com/written/2018/02/a-mothership-connection-past-futures-of-resurrection-and-absence). Accessed 14 January 2021.
- Coleman, Claire G. *The Old Lie*. Hachette, 2019.
- Coleman, Claire G. (interviewee). "Claire G. Coleman: *The Old Lie*." Interview conducted by Tyson Yunkaporta. *Wheeler Centre*, 16 Sept. 2019, <https://www.wheelercentre.com/broadcasts/podcasts/the-wheeler-centre/claire-g-coleman-the-old-lie>. Accessed 2 February 2021.
- Coleman, Claire G. (interviewee). "Claire G. Coleman's Futurist Novel is about the Past." Interview conducted by Sarah L'Estrange. *The Book Show ABC RN*, 2 Sept. 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/the-book-show/claire-g-colemans-futurist-novel-is-about-the-past/11461330>. Accessed 10 January 2021.
- Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Saul R. Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery, Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 179-222.
- Dillon, Grace L, editor. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. University of Arizona Press, 2012.
- Dillon, Grace L, editor. "Introduction: Indigenous Futurisms, Bimaashi Biidaas Mose, Flying and Walking towards You'." *Extrapolation*, vol. 57, no. 1-2, 2016, pp. 1-6.
- Dillon, Grace L, editor. "Miindiwag and Indigenous Diaspora: Eden Robinson's and Celu Amberstone's Forays into 'Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy.'" *Extrapolation*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2007, pp. 219-243.
- Doyle, Briohny. "The Postapocalyptic Imagination." *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 131, no. 1, 2015, pp. 99-113.
- Driskill, Qwo-Li. "Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2004, pp. 50-64.
- Driskill, Qwo-Li, et al., editors. *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*. University of Arizona Press, 2011.
- Fraser, Gordon. "Troubling the Cold War Logic of Annihilation: Apocalyptic Temporalities in Sherman Alexie's 'The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven.'" *PMLA*:

---

<sup>15</sup> I acknowledge the Kaurna people on whose unceded lands this article was researched and written. An earlier version was originally delivered as a keynote address at the European Association for Studies of Australia Conference, "Australia as a Risk Society: Hope and Fears of the Past, the Present and the Future," convened by University of Naples "L'Orientale", Italy, March 29th–April 1st, 2021. My thanks to the two anonymous readers for their thoughtful feedback and to Associate Professor Katherine Russo for the invitation. I thank participants at the conference for their feedback. My thanks also go to Hazel Smith and Sue Kossew who read this article in draft form, giving insightful feedback, and to Sarah Pope Alexi for her excellent research assistance.

- Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 130, no. 3, 2015, pp. 599-614.
- Fricke, Suzanne N. "Introduction: Indigenous Futurisms in the Hyperpresent Now." *World Art*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2019, pp. 107-121.
- Hopkinson, Nalo. "Introduction." *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*, edited by Mehan Uppinder and Nalo Hopkinson, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004, pp. 1-2.
- Hsu, Hsuan L. and Bryan Yazell "Post-Apocalyptic Geographies and Structural Appropriation." *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*, edited by Nina Morgan et al., Routledge, 2019, pp. 347-356.
- Hsu, Hsuan L. and Bryan Yazell "Post-Apocalyptic Geographies and Structural Appropriation." *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2019, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5070/T8102046345>.
- James, Lynette. "Children of Change, Not Doom: Indigenous Futurist Heroines in YA" *Extrapolation*, vol. 57, no. 1-2, 2016, pp. 151-176.
- Kwaymullina, Ambelin. *Living on Stolen Land*. Magabala Books, 2020.
- Lempert, William. "Decolonizing Encounters of the Third Kind: Alternative Futuring in Native Science Fiction Film." *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2014, pp. 164-176.
- Lentin, Alana. *Why Race Still Matters*. John Wiley & Sons, 2020.
- Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*. Temple University Press, 2018.
- Manjikian, Mary. *Apocalypse and Post-Politics: The Romance of the End*. Lexington Books, 2012.
- Miranda, Deborah. "Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy: Searching for American Indian Women's Love Poetry and Erotics." *Frontiers*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2002, pp. 135-149.
- Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*. University of Queensland Press, 2000.
- Nikolova, Mariya. *How Whiteness Claimed the Future. The Always New Vs. the Always Now in US-American Literature*. 2020. University of Potsdam and UNSW, PhD thesis.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Polak, Iva. "Native Apocalypse in Claire G. Coleman's *The Old Lie*." *Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 69, 2020, pp. 2-13.
- Teuton, Sean Kicummah. "Cities of Refuge: Indigenous Cosmopolitan Writers and the International Imaginary." *American Literary History*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2013, pp. 33-53.
- Thomas, Jared. "Black Words." *ASAL2020 (VIRTUAL) Reading and Writing Australian Literature*. Conference Proceeding. 30 June 2020.
- "The Uluru Statement from the Heart." *The Uluru Statement*, 2021, <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement>. Accessed 6 February 2021.
- Van Neerven, Ellen. *Throat*. University of Queensland Press, 2020.
- Weaver, Roslyn. "'Smudged, Distorted and Hidden.' Apocalypse as Protest in Indigenous Speculative Fiction." *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World: Essays on Postcolonial Literature and Film*, edited by Ericka Hoagland and Reema Sarwal, McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2010, pp. 99-114.
- Whittaker, Alison. "So White. So What." *Meanjin*, Autumn 2020, pp. 1-19. <https://meanjin.com.au/essays/so-white-so-what/>. Accessed 18 January 2021.
- Whyte, Kyle Powys. "Our Ancestors Dystopia Now. Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene." *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, edited by Ursula K. Heise, et al., Routledge, 2017, pp. 222-231
- Wright, Alexis. *Carpentaria*. Giramondo Publishing, 2006.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World*. Polity, 2020.

**Anne Brewster** is Honorary Associate Professor based at the University of New South Wales. Her research interests include Australian Indigenous literatures, Women's literatures, minoritised women's literatures, critical race and whiteness studies, violence studies, cross-racial research methodologies and explorative critical writing methodologies. Her books include *Giving This Country a Memory: Contemporary Aboriginal Voices of Australia* (2015), *Literary Formations: Postcoloniality, Nationalism, Globalism* (1996), *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* (1995, 2015), *Towards a Semiotic of Post-colonial Discourse: University Writing in Singapore and Malaysia 1949-1964* (1988) and, with Sue Kossew, *Rethinking the Victim. Gender, Violence and Contemporary Australian Women's Writing* (2019). She is the series editor for *Australian Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* Peter Lang Ltd.

**Email:** [a.brewster@unsw.edu.au](mailto:a.brewster@unsw.edu.au)