

Native Apocalypse in Claire G. Coleman's *The Old Lie*

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Abstract: Claire G. Coleman's science fiction novel *The Old Lie* (2019) evokes the blemished chapters of Australia's history as the basis of a dystopian futuristic Earth. By using the metaphor of a secular apocalypse (Weaver) wrapped in the form of a space opera, she interrogates historical colonialism on a much larger scale to bring to the fore the distinctive Indigenous experience of Australia's terra nullius and its horrific o shoots: the Stolen Generations, nuclear tests on Aboriginal land and the treatment of Indigenous war veteran, but this time experienced by the people of the futuristic Earth. Following a brief introduction of the concept of the "Native Apocalypse" (Dillon) in the framework of Indigenous futurism, the paper discusses Coleman's innovative use of space opera embedded in Wilfred Owen's famous WWI poem "Dulce et Decorum Est". The analysis focuses on four allegedly separate stories in the novel which eventually interweave into a single narrative about "the old lie". In keeping with the twenty-first-century Indigenous futurism, Coleman's novel does not provide easy answers. Instead, the end brings the reader to the beginning of the novel in the same state of disillusionment as Owen's lyrical subject.

Keywords: Claire G. Coleman; *The Old Lie*; Indigenous futurism; dystopia; Native Apocalypse; space opera

[: : :] it's happening again, like in the old days. (Coleman 2019, p. 263)

1. Introduction

A relatively new, but by far the most prominent, voice of Indigenous¹ Australian futurism is Claire G. Coleman, a Wirlomi Noongar writer from Western Australia. Her two science fiction novels, *Terra Nullius* (2017) and *The Old Lie* (2019), rewrite Australia's historical terra nullius by stretching its semantic field to the Earth, warning the reader that at some future point the Earthlings may undergo the same predicament as Indigenous peoples. While *Terra Nullius* initially mimics a familiar genre of Indigenous novels mapping Australia's settler years and exposes its "true" genre half way into the novel when the story receives an unequivocal futuristic projection, *The Old Lie* reveals itself as an action-packed space opera with epic space battles, an evil empirical force and multispecies fighting for survival. However, as the first Indigenous writer to appropriate space opera, Coleman does not use the usual space operatic props to construct the story of the Earth in peril, but to address an ongoing sense of crisis embedded in humanity, voiced from the Indigenous perspective. *The Old Lie* reimagines the distinctive Indigenous experience of Australia's terra nullius and its horrific o shoots: the Stolen Generations, nuclear tests on Aboriginal land and the treatment of Indigenous war veteran, but this time experienced by the people of the futuristic Earth.

¹ Unless quoted from elsewhere, the word "Indigenous" and "Aboriginal" is used here to indicate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, while the term "indigenous" refers to any indigenous person anywhere in the world. The terms "Indigenous futurism" and "Native Apocalypse" are used in line with Grace L. Dillon's capitalisation preference, and refer to indigenous peoples in general.

As a lightweight progeny of science fiction with pejorative implications, space opera might arguably be the least expected genre to address “things ‘Aboriginal’” (Langton 2003, p. 119) even when they bespeak “things human” in some futuristic timeframe. However, famous for her innovative twist in *Terra Nullius* and her love of poetry, Coleman easily remodels space opera in the same way as Nalo Hopkinson, a famous author of Taino/Arawak and Afro-Caribbean descent, and revises sf: “In my hands, massa’s tools don’t dismantle massa’s house—and in fact, I don’t want to destroy it so much as I want to undertake massive renovations—they build me a house of my own” (Hopkinson 2004, p. 8). Hence, Coleman adjusts and redesigns space opera’s “lightness of being” by interweaving her futuristic narrative into Wilfred Owen’s famous WWI poem “Dulce et Decorum Est” to enact atrocities of warfare and expose heroic death as an anachronism in modern, i.e., in the case of *The Old Lie*, futuristic warfare. The resulting four narratives in *The Old Lie* voicing myriad destinies map the space—terrestrial, outer, and inner—with the unsettling imagery of the Native Apocalypse that is struggling to offer a path to recovery. As will be shown, consonant with the most recent developments in Indigenous Australian futurism, Coleman’s narrator does not provide the reader with easy answers since the path to regeneration, if there is any in *The Old Lie*, may come too late. What remains in the end are the unresolved hauntings of Australia’s and Earth’s future.

2. Native Apocalypse in Indigenous Australian Futurism

Indigenous futurism, as Grace L. Dillon who coined the term asserts, experiments and changes the traditional tropes of sf to “reenlist the science of indigeneity in a discourse that invites discerning readers to realize that Indigenous science is not just complementary to a perceived western enlightenment but is indeed integral to a refined twenty-first-century sensibility” (Dillon 2012, p. 3). One of the topoi of Indigenous futurism, the so-called Native Apocalypse, unpacks the nexus between the contact and Apocalypse as the “reciprocal cause and effect” (Dillon 2012, p. 9). From the indigenous perspective, the “Native Apocalypse, if contemplated seriously, has already taken place” (Dillon 2012, p. 8), since the contact and resulting apocalypse experienced by indigenous peoples was historical colonization. As Ambelin Kwaymullina, an Aboriginal speculative fiction writer and illustrator from the Palyku people in Western Australia clarifies:

We understand the tales of ships that come from afar and land on alien shores.

Indigenous people have lived those narratives [: : :]. [: : :]

Indigenous people lived through the end of the world, but we did not end. We survived by holding on to our cultures, our kin, and our sense of what was right in a world gone terribly wrong. (Kwaymullina 2014, p. 29)

Indigenous futurism is hence voiced by the descendants of those who survived the first alien invasion—European colonisation from the fifteenth century onwards. Hence, for indigenous peoples, the invasion of technologically superior aliens, consequential enslavement, species extinction, and environmental devastation “are not merely nightmares morbidly fixed upon by science fiction writers and readers, but are rather the bare historical record of what happened to non-European people and lands after being ‘discovered’ by Europeans [: : :]” (Rieder 2008, p. 124). In the words of Hopkinson, “that’s not a thrilling adventure story; it’s non-fiction, and we are on the wrong side of the strange-looking ship that appears out of nowhere” (Hopkinson 2004, p. 7). As a consequence, the Native Apocalypse, when conceived in Indigenous futuristic works, i.e., works frequently tagged as indigenous speculative fiction, is not rooted in the Bible, but in the so-called Age of Discovery or Age of Exploration executed by Christians in the name of the Bible. While the biblical Apocalypse finds its resolution in Revelation, the Native Apocalypse signals the “state of imbalance, often perpetuated by ‘criminal creeds’” (Dillon 2012, p. 9), which is why “Native apocalyptic storytelling, then, shows the ruptures, the scars, and the trauma in its effort to ultimately provide healing and a return to bimaadiziwin [the Anishinaabe peoples’ term for the state of balance]” (Dillon 2012, p. 9).

In search of the state of balance, Indigenous Australian writers locate their futuristic novels in postapocalyptic landscapes which are not a consequence of an alien invasion in the sense of the Braudelian historical event (*l'histoire événementielle*), but a consequence of the Braudelian transgenerational history measured in centuries (*la longue durée*). For Indigenous Australians the eponymous *longue durée* has been and remains to be *terra nullius*, irrespective of its administrative cancellation with the 1992 Mabo Ruling and the 1993 Native Title Act because, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues, if there are postcolonial spaces in Australia “these are not spaces inhabited by Indigenous people. It may be more useful, therefore, to conceptualize the current condition not as postcolonial but as postcolonizing with the associations of ongoing process which that implies” (Moreton-Robinson 2003, p. 30, emphasis in the original). It should not come as a surprise, then, that Indigenous authors often use “the metaphor of apocalypse in their speculative fiction to discuss the impact of colonization of Indigenous peoples” (Weaver 2010, p. 100), since “the apocalyptic paradigm of revelation and disaster can work effectively to interrogate the history of colonization and relations between white and Indigenous Australians, and propose spaces of hope for the future” (Weaver 2010, p. 100).

Indigenous Australian futurism has been around since the 1990s, and one of its most interesting developments in the twenty-first century is visible in the complex shaping of hope for the future, giving Indigenous futuristic narratives ambiguous, if not disconcerting, endings. While the twentieth-century Indigenous novels such as Sam Watson’s *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990) and Eric Willmot’s *Below the Line* (1991) offer a regenerative ending—the restoration of the spiritual order and the end of the Indonesian invasion of Australia, respectively—for the twenty-first-century Indigenous authors, there is no room for what J. R. R. Tolkien calls a *eucatastrophe*, i.e., “the sudden joyous ‘turn’” (Tolkien 2006, p. 153) at the end of futuristic narratives. Ellen van Neerven’s sf novella “Water” from the award-winning collection *Heat and Light* (2014) stops in the midst of the rising ocean making the reader wonder whether Aboriginals and their spiritual elders will be able to put an end to environmental and cultural destruction. Alexis Wright’s kaleidoscopic novel *The Swan Book* (2013) leaves the reader stranded in the ghost place with the protagonist not knowing whether there will be any new stories to tell. Coleman’s first sf novel *Terra Nullius* (2017) halts with the sole survivor of the genocide who has to look for other surviving humans to save the Earth from the alien invasion.

However, irrespective of unwrapping bleak topographies and offering unsettling endings, contemporary Indigenous Australian futurism does not constitute dystopian fiction in the sense of the Western tradition of dystopian novels such as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, characterised by the obvious social and political engagement against a given state apparatus. Rather, Indigenous futuristic writing preserves a specific dystopian impulse “as a focal point for polyphonic confrontations” (Booker 1994, p. 177) or a dystopian mode which is “neither a belief nor a model but rather a mood or attitude, a way of entertaining incongruous experiences” (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, p. 3), unbound by “a program-like set of exclusive rules and devices” (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, p. 5) usually attributed to a genre. Native Apocalypse as a global indigenous phenomenon and its inherently dystopian mode are the results of distinctive cultural positions from which indigenous authors voice their futuristic concerns. As the descendants of cultures that were almost completely destroyed by European colonisation, indigenous authors narrate “a sense of ongoing crisis rather than an upcoming one” (Scott 2016, p. 77). Aware of the epistemological shift necessary for any meaningful global change, their futuristic narratives do not erase light at the end of the tunnel, but challenge the nature of that light.

As it will be shown here, Coleman’s second novel ends with the same unsettling effect in line with the trends of the twenty-first-century Indigenous futurism because the dystopian scenario of *The Old Lie* serves to lay bare Australia’s colonial and postcolonial lies. Irrespective of its “light” space-operatic genre which tends to locate its stories in the “abstract somewhere”, the novel is clearly rooted in the concrete here haunting Australia’s and Earth’s future.

3. The Old Lie as a Poetic Space Opera

Coleman's *The Old Lie* constructs its futuristic chronotope as "an alien world in adventure-time" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 89) where literal "nonhuman forces—fate, gods, villains—[: :] take all the initiative" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 95). The main storyline of the novel can easily be reduced to the Earth being under attack by the Conglomeration forces and the Earthlings joining the intergalactic Federation forces to fight the enemy. The peripeteia, however, occurs when the Terran space pilots become aware of the implications of the Earth's "provisional" membership in the Federation, which leads to two simultaneous yet paradoxical narrative strands: the fight against the Conglomeration in space, and the fight against the Federation on Earth. In line with Bakhtin's alien world, i.e., its abstract somewhere, Coleman appropriates the key ingredients of space opera as defined by the creator of the term, Wilson Tucker, to construct a story involving space-ships and space travel resulting in an adventure dotted with multiple species. (Westfahl 2003, pp. 197–98). She uses those simple tropes very much to her advantage to revamp the genre irrespective of its alleged structural predictability. Darko Suvin famously referred to sf retrogressing into space opera as "committing creative suicide" (Suvin 1972, p. 375), which would mean that Coleman either wanted to end her literary career or had no important story to tell. However, in spite of its frequent labelling as "the despised child of SF" (Mendlesohn 2005, p. 556) by the sf purists who criticise its weak extrapolative nature, the history of space opera testifies to the flexibility of its alleged simple narrative structure and stock characters. It has gradually developed "from crude displacements of competition between nations and races projected into spectacle-space, to epic dream-visions of the dialectics of cosmic evolution. Space opera is almost always an episode in an epic of cosmic selection" (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, p. 33). The nature of this cosmic selection has moved a long way from a simple adventure tale of exclusively a white man's dream of conquering the universe. With its classic, Ruritarian, romantic, and postmodern spin-offs (see Westfahl 2003, pp. 197–208), space opera has shifted from its early optimism about the future to address new (futuristic) realities. From the 1980s, "[s]uddenly, the universe looked like a much darker space. Space opera was no longer looking to go and take over the universe: it was looking to survive" (Dozois and Strahan 2007, p. 4). Observing the most recent trends in American, British, and Caribbean space opera, Jerome Winter asserts that so-called new space opera novels "address and intervene in sociopolitical and historical developments specific to the cultures in which they are written." (Winter 2016, p. 26). He argues that new space opera interrogates "the interweaving of nation-states and transnational culture, especially in connection with the rapidly accelerating postcolonial and neoliberal changes facing our planet today" (Winter 2016, p. 26). In keeping with Dozois and Strahan's claim of a much bleaker outlook of contemporary space opera, Winter refers to its downsized bombastic explorative enthusiasm as being indicative of "a post-imperial melancholia, living in the shadow of its former boisterous glory" (Winter 2016, p. 6).

Coleman's *The Old Lie* does not address the rampant profit-driven neoliberal globalism and its unbounded world markets, or the horrific aspects of contemporary technoculture, which are the focal points of new space opera. What she shares with new space opera is an "anti-globalisation impulse" (Winter 2016, p. 162) that Winter identifies when discussing the sf works of Caribbean writers Nalo Hopkinson, Tobias Buckell, and Karen Lord. This impulse becomes visible at the end of Coleman's novel, but remains penned in the earlier mentioned dystopian mode.

Written from a very distinctive cultural location, Coleman's space opera provides a canvas for literary experiments, wherein an alien world—an abstract somewhere located in the future—is endowed with obvious features of the Australian "now" burdened with the colonial processes of the past. Referring to space opera's potentials, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. maintains that

[w]riters of space opera combine the sublime qualities both of cosmic spacetime and of macro-technological power to transform conditions of physical existence to create story worlds that are not empty of historical logic, but meta with respect to them. The metasociety of futuristic humanity must navigate through (and with) metahistories. (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, p. 221)

The alien futuristic world in Coleman's novel is textualised as a distinctive Australian colonial spectre no longer haunting Australia's past and present but the future of the Earth. The metahistory of *The Old Lie* comes from Coleman's family history, and the history of Indigenous Australia. This seems like an unlikely starting point for choosing the genre of space opera that is understood to be primarily dulce and not necessarily utile. In an interview with Tyson Yunkaporta in 2019 Coleman revealed that the germ of the idea that led to her second sf novel was planted while she was undertaking research for *Terra Nullius*. When visiting her grandfather's country, she discovered that her grandfather's grave was unmarked despite the fact that he had been a WWII digger. Coleman later found that almost all graves in WA of Aboriginal men who had fought in WWII were also unmarked, i.e., that there were no Aboriginal soldiers' memorials. She also discovered that these men did not receive soldiers' pensions or any land based on the soldiers settlement scheme, which was standard practice for Anglo-Australian soldiers post WWII. Worse still, the land utilised for the soldiers settlement scheme had previously been taken from Indigenous Australians. When reading Anna Haebich's *Broken Circles*, Coleman discovered that during WWII Aboriginal children were stolen from their families. This was particularly prevalent in Coleman's ancestral Noongar country, because fathers were not there to raise them, since they were overseas fighting the war. She also learned that Aboriginal soldiers who fought in earlier wars on behalf of the Commonwealth, notably the Boer War (1899–1902), had been denied re-entry to Australia. Among her personal reasons for writing *The Old Lie*, was also the historical physical and cultural harm inflicted on Aboriginal people by the post-WWII British nuclear tests, most notably at Maralinga.

Coleman's love of poetry and her claim that with *The Old Lie* she was trying to "make truth go viral by finding a way to infect the world with truth" (Yunkaporta 2019, podcast) signal that the metasociety and metahistories of this space opera surpass the frequent escapist nature of the genre "lacking a serious purpose" and succumbing to "formulaic plots and mediocrity" (Westfahl 2003, p. 198). *The Old Lie* belongs to that "improved form of space opera [which] emerges for discriminating readers" (Westfahl 2003, p. 198). To become the reader of *The Old Lie* means to appreciate Coleman as an innovative novelist and as a poet.

Coleman's poetic zest is already visible in the novel's title appropriated from a well-known WWI poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" by the most famous WWI soldier-poet Wilfred Owen. Owen called it a "gas poem" [: : :] in October 1918 in a letter to his mother, less than a month before his death" (Araujo 2014, p. 333), ironically only a week before the Armistice. Offering a bitter twist to Horace's famous dictum from *Odes* that *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, the poem portrays a "gas attack with horrifying, filmic verisimilitude" (Araujo 2014, p. 333) depicting "mirror images of a warring culture and civilization in ruins, fragmented, literally and ideationally, in the splintered bodies of its youth and its tattered tradition of glorifying death in battle" (Araujo 2014, p. 338). In Coleman's space opera, Owen's bleak imagery of WWI topped with his ironic take on Horace's dictum are reinforced with dystopian images of the future warfare with desolate soldiers fighting somebody else's battles. As a poet herself, Coleman does not simply take the first half of the penultimate line of Owen's poem for the novel's title, but literally constructs the novel as the middle stanza of Owen's poem and additionally weaves this and two other of Owen's poems into the fabric of the novel.

Accordingly, the quote preceding Chapter 0 consists of the last two lines from Owen's poem (*The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori.*) alongside Owen's claim that his subject is the pity of war while poetry is the pity, which signals the topic and the overlaying atmosphere of the world of *The Old Lie* immediately visible in the imagery of sweltering Melbourne "in the throes of global warming" (Coleman 2019, p. 1) in the opening paragraph of the novel.

Chapter 1, preceded by the opening stanza of Owen's poem, introduces the notion of space war and describes the carnage of the space battlefield, which acts as a *Doppelgänger* for the haggard WWI soldiers marching wearily towards death in Owen's poem. The novel's final chapter ends with the closing stanza of Owen's poem, wherein the soldiers' betrayal in Coleman's novel doubles as Owen's lyrical subject pronouncing the death to the dictum that it is sweet and honourable to die for the homeland.

In addition, Coleman uses two more quotes from two other of Owen's poems. Chapter 31 is preceded by the first four lines from Owen's poem "Anthem for Doomed Youth". Lines from this poem reflect the hopeless battle of a small group of Federation soldiers against the overwhelming Conglomeration army portrayed in that chapter. Finally, Chapter 48 starts with the final stanza of Owen's poem entitled "Mental Cases" addressing the mental torture of WWI soldiers who are continuously reliving their horrific war experience. This melds with the chapter's content where one of Coleman's characters who is being held captive in a laboratory and subjected to horrendous experiments wants to die. In other words, Coleman's space opera functions as a science fictional realisation of Owen's daunting poems, which irrespective of being rooted in the WWI experience, casts a pall over the futuristic world of *The Old Lie*.

4. The Old Lies of Tomorrow

The dystopian world of *The Old Lie* unfolds through four seemingly unrelated narratives happening simultaneously: the story about a distinguished space pilot Shane Daniels and her crew; the story about Jimmy trying to return to Earth; the story about Walker dying in the desert on Earth; and the story about William who ends up in a laboratory and is exposed to a series of experiments on Earth. Each story unravels a lie whose futuristic garment looks familiar to the implied reader, and each story eventually interconnects into a single story about the "old lie".

The chapters dedicated to the story about Shane Daniels and her crew refer to the space war to save the Earth, as the reader and also Daniels are led to believe. These chapters draw their powerful imagery from Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est". They are packed with killing battlefields on distant planets and in outer space, where "the beginning of the gloom was immemorial" (Coleman 2019, p. 5). The imagery of the blood-soaked battlefield reads as if referring to WWI: "Corpses floated, drifted, forming log-jams of bodies, leaking themselves bloodless, bone white, staining the once fertile plains with their life, their loss" (Coleman 2019, p. 6). Juxtaposed with the utter carnage is the image of space soldiers marching towards their next battleground, reminiscent of Owen's WWI soldiers:

To an observer the column might have appeared to be the walking dead, rough-made statues, columns of myth, creatures of mud, not men; they looked barely formed, as if a creator had breathed life into a child's mud pie. Blood stained the mud they wore, blood dripped and trailed behind them from myriad small wounds. Death stalked in their footprints. (Coleman 2019, p. 10)

This "scrawled signature of a massacre" (Coleman 2019, p. 11) is not immediately associated with the imagery of literary or cinematic space opera, but with naturalistic visuals of feature films exposing atrocities and fatuity of terrestrial warfare such as Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* (1981), Sam Mendes' *1917* (2020), and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which is why the reader may for a short while think that *The Old Lie* will turn out to be a documentary realist novel, and not a space opera.

Alongside these gruesome images on the ground, the space above does not seem to fare any better as planets fall to the Conglomeration forces, since "[t]he space between stars was filled with death, just waiting for someone to stumble into it" (Coleman 2019, p. 38). When the story in subsequent chapters shifts to Corporal Daniel's forces fighting to win over the space station, the iconography of the narrative becomes visibly science fictional evoking technological novums customary in the sf genre, such as various parts belonging to the structure of the space station (e.g., "blast-proof box" at the core of the station), weaponry (e.g., "heavy plasma cannon"), and the presence of multi-galactic multi-species stranded on space stations. The latter, i.e., the story of the space refugees who were forced to leave their planets because of ongoing warfare, is personified in the character of Jimmy. As will be shown, the imagery of multi-species refugees being handled like cattle sounds all too familiar and "down to e/Earth".

Like every narrative strand in *The Old Lie*, Jimmy's story too spreads out like a jigsaw puzzle and the reader needs to wait until the end of the novel to collect all the pieces. When his home city was evacuated due to the alien invasion, Jimmy lost his parents and was eventually adopted

and forced to work. When his adopted parents kicked him out, Jimmy became homeless and was arrested, which explains why he is hiding from the Federation and Conglomeration soldiers throughout the novel.

To understand the story behind the invasion of his home town which turns out to be Perth is to know the story behind the universe of *The Old Lie*. As the reader is informed, Earth was invaded by the Conglomeration and the UN brought all the people of Earth together. At some point, the UN sent a message into outer space for help and the Federation answered. Now, the Conglomeration ships have stopped landing on Earth, but the war is still waging in space. In the meantime the Earth has become a “provisional” member of the Federation.

For anyone who has read Coleman’s previous sf novel *Terra Nullius*, the world of *The Old Lie* sounds familiar and interconnected. The alien invasion in *Terra Nullius* happens before the space war in *The Old Lie*. In the interim, the Federation forces arrive to help Earth fight off the alien invasion. In that regard, *Terra Nullius* is about the “second” terra nullius resulting from the arrival of the aliens who treat the Earthlings like the British settlers treated Indigenous Australians by imposing the “first” terra nullius, as stated in Chapter 11 of *Terra Nullius*. If this is so, then Jimmy’s story in *The Old Lie* represents the third “round” of terra nullius, because not only is he taken from his parents but is also prohibited from returning home to Earth. This is why Coleman refers to *The Old Lie* as a “kind of dramatic sequel” of *Terra Nullius* (Coleman qtd. in [Kembrey 2019](#)), and with each new iteration of terra nullius, the story gets bleaker.

The essence of Jimmy’s story and the imagery deployed is similar to that of the war carnage which is central to Shane Daniel’s story, the only difference being that the former dystopian space is dotted with images of weary space refugees rather than weary space soldiers. This makes *The Old Lie* similar to those novels that use postapocalyptic imagery as a metaphor for refugee narratives “in order to create a phantasmagoric world firmly rooted in reality’s most pressing problems” ([Herrero 2017](#), p. 951), as Dolores Herrero argues in her analysis of Merlinda Bobis’ futuristic novel *Locus Girl: A Lovesong* (2015). Moving across space stations in his attempt to return to Earth, Jimmy comes across wanderers and refugees waiting for ships to take them away from their war-torn planets. He watches them “stagger from their ships, overloaded hulks, bulk carriers, hollow trucks” looking like “sentient, whining cargo rather than passengers” ([Coleman 2019](#), p. 86). In the confined space of a ship, people are crushed, crippled, left unconscious, and dead. When their ship arrives to the next station, refugees on board are “unloaded” like a sack of potatoes, and once on the stations they are “welcomed” by stunner guns and paperwork done in a language they do not understand. Then they have to wait again for another space ship willing to take them on board, with or without bribery, which has the appearance of a continuous tug of war between “the bloody-mindedness of the captain and the aggressiveness of the station” ([Coleman 2019](#), p. 137). The predicament of space refugees seems like they have been caught in a catch-22 situation: they are exposed to people smugglers, and if they survive the journey, they face robbers, random acts of violence by the station guards, and haphazard Federation paperwork. Yet they somehow believe that they are moving in the right direction, although there is no destination point and wherever they arrived “they were not told where they were” ([Coleman 2019](#), p. 209). At the same time, *The Old Lie* is constructed in such a way that it becomes increasingly apparent that the war between the Confederation and Federation forces has engulfed the entire known universe. This is why the narrator never reveals where the refugees are going and if at all there is such a thing as a safe “there”, and when they can arrive “there”. They are obviously destined to reach a no-place (utopia) in no-time (uchronia).

This bizarre chronotope or “spatial and temporal indicators” ([Bakhtin 1981](#), p. 84) is just partly shared by Jimmy. His journey also seems to be of an unmarked temporality since it seems endless, yet the spatiality of his movement is more palpable. In spite of sharing the same ships with other space refugees, he moves in the opposite direction than the rest of them since he intuitively knows that he is getting closer to Earth and he seems to be right. This is why he initially functions as the observer of their atrocities even though he undergoes the same treatment. What he does not know at this point is that he is a de facto refugee, drawn into the same spatio-temporal limbo. Paradoxically, this becomes

evident when he reaches “the main Earth orbit space station” (Coleman 2019, p. 248), which is the first textual indicator that there is a meaningful end to his formidable voyage. It is also the last one, since this station hovering above the Earth provides the setting for a story that is ominously Australian. It becomes a place where Jimmy’s and Shane Daniels’ fates intertwine.

After paying people smugglers to get to another ship and undergo yet another harrowing part of the journey, Jimmy arrives at the station and faces immigration officials accompanied by his two companions, a little girl named Itta who becomes his protégée and will eventually turn out to be his sister, and a non-human “academy monk” called Speech who becomes his helper. At the same time, after a successful military mission of establishing the only Federation-controlled spaceport on a remote planet, Shane decides to put a halt to her eight-year military career and to finally return to Earth to reunite with her two children and husband. While Shane waits at the immigration office on that very same station where Jimmy is, she observes two human refugees being taken out from the ship while one of her fellow fighters comments: “Why would humans need to be smuggled to Earth? Earth is their home” (Coleman 2019, p. 255). This constitutes an uncanny point of contact between Shane’s and Jimmy’s story since she is unwittingly observing her two children being taken away. The situation becomes clear when Shane is informed by the authorities that nobody, including herself who is a distinguished Federation soldier, is allowed entry to Earth. This applies to anyone “who is from a race only provisionally in the Federation” (Coleman 2019, p. 265) because the Earth is to become “a luxury retirement estate for returned soldiers from the full-member planets of the Federation” (Coleman 2019, p. 267). From another office, she learns that her two children, Jimmy and Izabella aka Itta, were taken from Earth to foster care since they were found to be without a mother while their father was working long hours, which was identified as a “clear case of neglect”. At the same time, her native town of Perth has turned into the “Perthtown Estate” (Coleman 2019, p. 281) for returned non-human Federation soldiers.

As mentioned earlier, the treatment of Coleman’s grandfather following his return from WWII was a catalyst for the writing of *The Old Lie*, alongside the true stories of Indigenous children being taken from Indigenous WWII veterans while they served in the army, as well as the true stories of Indigenous soldiers participating in the Boer Wars who were not allowed to re-enter Australia because they were “provisional” Australians, i.e., they did not count as Australians. While the topic of the Stolen Generations has been reverberating through Indigenous writing since the late 1970s in the genre of life writing, Coleman uses a futuristic setting to reimagine the same dystopian scenario, as she does in *Terra Nullius*. This time, however, she exceeds her earlier work by introducing the racist treatment of Indigenous war veterans, a topic which has only recently entered Australia’s public domain.² She also adds a twist by giving the main military agency to exclusively Indigenous female characters—most notably, Shane and Romeo, the two tiddas, i.e., Indigenous sisters/friends (Coleman 2019, p. 56)—who in her novel, like Indigenous characters in *Terra Nullius*, represent humanity even though the subtext of the story evidently reflects the Indigenous experience.

Since Jimmy and Itta are likewise identified as “provisional” citizens of the Federation, they are not allowed to go to Earth, but, unlike Shane, they are transported to a space detention centre where they will be detained as refugees until the resolution of their case. At this point, Coleman interweaves another old lie of Australia’s now and propels it into the future because Jimmy and Itta are transported to the “New-Manus Station Detention Centre” (Coleman 2019, p. 287) in Saturn Orbit, a smelly, overcrowded remote facility where

² Indigenous Australian war service, especially how Indigenous soldiers were treated when they returned to Australia, is not a frequently discussed topic in Australian public domain. Arguably, only during the 2015 Gallipoli centenary celebrations did the story about the “forgotten Anzacs”, the Indigenous army, come into limelight. On the other hand, sources and discussions about Indigenous participation in Australia’s pre-Federation military history are indeed rare. John Maynard writes about the issues raised by Coleman in the novel as regards the Indigenous soldiers and trackers not allowed to return home after the Boer War due to the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act (Maynard 2015, pp. 157–58).

Jimmy worried he was going to go mad. [: :] Every other day somebody would be taken away, sedated, more often than not somebody would take their lives. It was no place to be, that detention, there indefinitely, time stopped but still moving, lives over for people not actually dead. (Coleman 2019, p. 277)

Jimmy's experience reads like the lines from *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018), the award-winning "WhatsApp" novel by Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish-Iranian journalist, human rights activist and artist, a former Manus detainee, and now a relatively free man in New Zealand. Like Boochani, Jimmy too is taken "o station" (Coleman 2019, p. 259), ominously reflecting the "o -shore" prefix of Australia's "processing centres", to use the Australian official Newspeak. Even though Jimmy and Itta are children, they will be "processed" there like all the other adults because the futuristic Federation rules follow the same track as the empirical Australian ones, as the only western country that detains children seeking asylum. To appropriate and adapt the infamous Australian governmental Newspeak again, like Boochani who was reduced to dehumanising abstract categories of "irregular/illegal maritime arrivals" and "on-water matters" and relocated to the remote island of Manus, Jimmy and Itta become "irregular/illegal Earth arrivals" belonging to "on-Terran matters" relocated to a detention centre in Saturn orbit far away from Earth. While Boochani managed to get out of Manus following a six-year fight supported by many international helpers, but not as a result of leniency of any of Australia's successive governments, Jimmy manages to escape from the futuristic New-Manus in order to avoid slavery and protect his sister Itta, owing to the help of his non-human friend Speech, his mother Shane, and her fellow soldiers, and not owing to the leniency of the Federation government.

However, Shane's reunification with her two children is short-lived. They are returned to the place from which Jimmy has fled because "he still has years of bonded labour to complete there" (Coleman 2019, p. 341). So, Jimmy's story embeds a tragic cycle of slavery, the Stolen Generations, and callous refugee policies, while Shane's story uncovers the treatment of Indigenous war veterans, the maternal experience of the Stolen Generations, and the endurance of Indigenous women. The latter is additionally tested when she becomes aware that apart from again losing her children, she has also lost her husband on Earth, which enmeshes her story with William's.

Like all four stories in *The Old Lie*, William's starts in medias res, in solitary confinement, demanding the reader to put the jigsaw together as the novel progresses because the heterodiegetic narrator reveals only what the characters know. The reader gradually learns that William used to be a doctor who ended up in prison for trying to stop the Federation forces from removing his (and Shane's) children. He soon finds himself in a peculiar research facility surrounded by non-human orderlies and a doctor named Jack who is using nano-bot technology to rebuild his cells following the exposure to an unknown bomb blast due to which his cells are disintegrating. It soon becomes clear that he is not there to be cured but is a specimen that, like a laboratory rat, will never leave the facility.

The chapters dedicated to William's story, especially his interaction with his non-human doctor, are reminiscent of another patient-"benefactor" pairing, namely Winston and O'Brien in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Like Winston, who finally meets O'Brien "in the place where there is no darkness" (Orwell 2000, p. 29), i.e., in the brightly lit interior of the Ministry of Love to undergo torture, William meets Jack in a space that is paradoxically the most brightly lit in the whole novel that for the most part happens in either confined sparingly lit spaces or open spaces with grey overcast. The purpose of the painful experiments Jack is conducting on William is not meant to kill him but to turn him into their ally because after all William is a provisional citizen of the Federation: "They did not want to starve him, they wanted to break him yet leave him capable of working for them" (Coleman 2019, p. 212). This forebodingly reflects O'Brien's words when he tells Winston how he will be cured: "You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves" (Orwell 2000, p. 293). The dynamics between William and Jack are also similar to that of Winston and O'Brien because initially Jack befriends William and William naively believes that Jack is trying to find a cure for him, which mirrors the minatory description of O'Brien from

Winston's perspective: "He was the tormentor, he was the protector, he was the inquisitor, he was the friend." (Orwell 2000, p. 280). Accordingly, the description of Jack might as well be the description of dehumanised O'Brien: "His tormentor, his controller, was vaguely humanoid" (Coleman 2019, p. 116). When William turns to look at Jack, he is "still, like a robot or a statue, in a way no human could manage" (Coleman 2019). Hence, Sue Lono's comment on O'Brien as epitomising "doublethink made palpable" (Lono 2007, p. 37) equally applies to Jack and consequentially to the whole Federation, i.e., the alleged allies of the humans.

However, Winston's and William's stories have a different closure. Following torture in the Room 101, Winston finally breaks and in the closing sentences of the novel declares a total self-abandonment for the love of Big Brother, thus becoming a hollow man. William is also exposed to tremendous torture. The narrator's comments that "He was the Somme, he was the fields of France, he was Nagasaki, he was the Dardanelles. He was Emu Field, he was Maralinga" (Coleman 2019, p. 271) enact the infamous killing fields of the Western Front and the Gallipoli, the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki and post-WWII British nuclear tests in Australia. However, instead of giving in and selling his soul to the devil, William decides to commit suicide knowing that "[h]is soul, what was left of it, would escape his body and return to his Country. There he would join his old people. His wife and kids would be there one day too" (Coleman 2019, p. 320). Coleman's narrator does not explain the Indigenous concept of Country. Interpretation relies on the reader's preunderstanding of the cultural tradition shaping the world of her novel, one of which is that Country is the very foundation of what is "mostly known in grossly inadequate English translation as 'The Dreamtime' or 'The Dreaming'".

[: : :] As a religion grounded in the land itself, it incorporates creation and other land-based narratives, social processes including kinship regulations, morality and ethics. This complex concept informs people's economic, cognitive, a ective and spiritual lives" (Nicholls 2014, p. 78). As Christine Nicholls argues, "what differentiates Aboriginal religion from other religions is its continuity with local landscapes, or what Indigenous artist Brian Martin has described as 'countryscapes'" (Nicholls 2014, p. 81). Hence, Country is not a mere landscape but a realm imbued with culture-specific meanings. So, unlike Orwell's Winston whose strength comes from Julia, whom he eventually betrays, William's spiritual strength comes from his Country.

Therefore, apart from exposing how the Federation treats humans on Earth, which the Terran space fighters fighting in the name of the Federation are not aware of, William's story also places special emphasis on Country as well as on the mysterious event affecting Country and consequently his health. Clarification comes when his story is nested in the story about Walker.

From the onset, Walker's narrative echoes the experience described in Yami: An Autobiography of Yami Lester (1993), by Yami Lester (1941–2017), a famous Indigenous activist, elder, and nuclear campaigner who lost his sight due to dust from the nuclear bomb in Maralinga. Like Yami who refers to "a black smoke or a mist" engulfing the land with "sickness in the camp that followed" (Lester 1995, p. 29), so too does Walker refer to the "black smoke" and "charcoal-grey dust" followed by the dying of his people "from an invisible poison" (Coleman 2019, p. 31). Like Yami's people, who did not know what had befallen them because the "older people said they'd never seen anything like it before" (Lester 1995, p. 29), Walker, the sole survivor, is also unaware that he has been exposed to a previously unseen bomb of unprecedented destruction. He drags his weakened body across the "grey-black landscape" (Coleman 2019, p. 106) struggling through the black dust lit by the sun that was "the bloodshot eye of a drunkard, what light filtered through the black smoke was wan and sickly" (Coleman 2019, p. 106). Only when he brushes away the black dust from the ground, does he see "proper red beneath, that comforting red; Home" (Coleman 2019, p. 106). Walker is found accidentally by two scientists, Kelly and Kris, who inspect the bomb site. This reiterates the story famously captured on camera about a group of Indigenous women and children who were unexpectedly found in 1964 by Walter MacDougall, a native patrol officer assigned to search for Indigenous peoples entering the

no-go zone during the British nuclear tests in Australia.³ However, Walker is beyond help because he has been exposed to a mysterious “particle bomb” whose radioactive particles spread like a virus and affect everything to the subatomic level. Walker’s final wish is to “finish up on Country with [his] old people” (Coleman 2019, p. 229). As Kelly is also contaminated due to the bomb’s “viral radiation” (Coleman 2019, p. 194), she decides to take him back and eventually visit her own country for the first time knowing that she will probably die there.

Kelly’s story embedded in Walker’s is also connected to clandestine nuclear tests done many years ago in Maralinga. Her mother told her that when “the old people were dying after the Maralinga bomb they did not fear for themselves, they feared for their Country” (Coleman 2019, p. 232). The culture of secrecy surrounding Kelly’s Maralinga story and this mysterious bomb dropped by the Federation on Alice Springs “to test what it would do to people” (Coleman 2019, p. 232) who are, after all, only provisional members of the Federation, reiterates a well-known story of British nuclear tests in Australia done on Indigenous land at the time when Indigenous voices did not count in Australia.⁴ Coleman introduces a fictional account of Maralinga and Alice Springs bombs and the government-led cover-up to evoke systemic destruction of Indigenous peoples and their country through nuclear technology as one of the mechanisms of fortifying the official policy of terra nullius.⁵ While the long-term destruction of the allegedly empty land inhabited by non-citizens and the subsequent official cover-up is part of the white narrative, Coleman introduces the Indigenous experience of nuclear tests. Yami Lester evokes kurun, a specific spirit keeping his people alive (Lester 1995, p. 23), which gives him the strength to seek justice for his Country in London, contributing to the launching of the Royal Commission in the mid 1980s and eventually return to Wallatina. Likewise, Walker needs to return to his ancestral lands since the “old people” are still there because “you can’t kill my Country, strong Country, stronger than that bomb” (Coleman 2019, p. 235). However, Walker does not know that the mysterious particle bomb is not only killing his Country, but if left unchecked it will “destroy all life on this continent while infecting the rock of the land itself it will eat the rocks, move to the water, move to the core of the planet. If nobody stops it the entire planet will dissolve, it can then move on and destroy the entire galaxy, maybe the universe” (Coleman 2019, p. 346). Hence, with each iteration of the old lie, in this case the Federation’s clandestine development and testing of nuclear technology, consequences become graver. It is no longer the issue of Country surviving yet another destructive cycle. It seems that the whole planet and the universe may disintegrate.

The closure of *The Old Lie* belongs to Shane, a character who used to fight wholeheartedly for the Federation and consequently loses her family and her Country. Like Owen’s destitute WW1 soldiers who turned into cannon fodder fighting the war that was supposed to end all wars, and like forgotten Indigenous war veterans who were rejected by the very country they fought for, Shane becomes aware of the fallacy of fighting globally under the Federation’s banner to stop the space invaders from invading the planet and her Country, “the only reason she had gone to war” (Coleman 2019, p. 324). Her world becomes twice removed from Horace’s noble dictum *Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori*—which indeed becomes the old, if not ancient lie. Shane’s realisation of the Federation’s imposture gives Coleman’s space opera a strong anti-globalisation ending, wherein the Federation and the Conglomeration are in fact much of a muchness.

Even though Shane manages to send her warning message into the universe demasking the betrayal by the alleged multi-species multi-cultural Federation which, ironically, was supposed to be Earth’s saving grace, the reader is left in the dark as to whether her message will have any effect

³ This moment is captured in the 2009 documentary *Contact* (dir. Bentley Dean and Martin Butler). For more details, see (Davenport and Johnson 2010).

⁴ For detailed accounts on British nuclear tests in Australia, see (Morton 2017). For details on British nuclear tests at Maralinga, see Parkinson (2007) and Walker (2014).

⁵ As Coleman indicates in the “Author’s Note”, she was inspired by the 2016–19 touring exhibition “Black Mist Burnt Country: Testing the Bomb—Maralinga and Australia Art” and its catalogue, available at <https://blackmistburntcountry.com.au/>.

and whether Country, Australia, and the Earth can survive viral radiation caused by the Federation's mysterious bomb or the assaults by the Confederation.

5. Expendable Tomorrows?

Since Coleman's novel bespeaks a world locked in an endless re-enactment of historical lies which run amok affecting the people in Australia and on Earth on an exponential scale, it is hard to imagine that future radiation-soaked clouds of the Earth can have a silver lining. In this dystopian world, the reader is left to decipher how many terrae nullius and consequential old lies the Earth can take when the whole planet is tarred with the same brush as Australia. That is why Coleman's *Native Apocalypse* maps the futurescape as a necropolis with multispecies still unable to make an epistemological leap of faith to learn from and connect with other cultures. It seems that her starting point is the Indigenous concept of Country which reveals "an emerging sense that Western science has lost something vital by isolating itself from spiritual origins in a quest to achieve objectivity" (Dillon 2016, p. 6). As Coleman says in her essay, "Boodjar ngan djoorla/Country my bones", "Bones in our home/Home in our bones/For I have no home but the home in my bones;/And the bones of my ancestors scattered down the creek" (Coleman 2018, p. 52). Unlike an abstract or imagined term such as the nation and state, as Benedict Anderson argued decades ago, for Indigenous Australians Country is a palpable epistemological source of being and belonging, against which concepts such as terra nullius and its contemporary Doppelgänger should not age well. In the world of *The Old Lie*, where the Conglomeration and the Federation are represented as abstract "hyper-states", it seems that the concreteness and locality of Country can no longer represent humanity's destination point.

Since Coleman is aware that what is troubling the fictional world of *The Old Lie* and its empirical source is not really viral radiation but viral ignorance, her novel disquietingly ends with Chapter Zero where the finishing stanza of Owen's disillusioned lyrical subject echoes over the image of a "white-hot world" (Coleman 2019, p. 1) from the novel's initial Chapter 0, with people asking: "What is next, what is next, who did it, what is next?' Nobody could answer." (Coleman 2019, p. 3). Neither can Coleman.

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