

Past, Present and Future in Claire G. Coleman's Terra Nullius

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DIPLOMSKI RAD

Past, Present and Future in Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius*

(diplomski smjer: engleska književnost i kultura)

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1. Introduction

Claire G. Coleman is a Noongar poet, novelist and essayist, who, both through her work as a writer and as an activist, fights for the rights and voices of Aboriginal Australians. In her book of essays *Lies, Damned Lies*, Coleman recounts her family's story and explains the meaning of the so-called "Hidden Generation" first-hand. Both Coleman and her father spent large parts of their lives believing they were Fijian – with Coleman's father discovering his family's true Noongar, English and Irish origin only in his sixties (Coleman, *Lies* 24-34). The author's father was born in Western Australia in 1941, which was, as Coleman states, a very dangerous context for Aboriginal children and families because of the racist "Aboriginal Protection" laws that were valid at the time in Western Australia (*Lies* 26-27). It may sound inconceivable to contemporary readers if they are not familiar with the history of colonial Australia that well into the 20th century, it was legal to take Aboriginal children of mixed descent from their parents in order to "assimilate" them into the white, mainstream society. To prevent this from happening to his family, Coleman's grandfather developed a lie about them being Fijian, which both protected his descendants when that was necessary and outlived the racist policies in Australia that were the initial cause of the lie. Although Coleman understands her grandfather's decision to lie, she gives the definition of the term "Hidden Generation" which does not shy away from the side effects of this strategy to protect one's offspring from the fate of the Stolen Generations children: "[I]t is a term that I have heard used by some activists and academics. It refers specifically to those children who lost culture due to the actions taken by their parents to protect them" (*Lies* 25).

Against this complex personal background, Coleman wrote her debut novel *Terra Nullius*, which sketches the variety of legalized crimes against Indigenous Australians throughout the colonial history of Australia. However, what makes this novel especially appealing is the way in which it universalizes the experiences that were brought on generations

of Aboriginal Australians. What is more, this universalizing aspect of the novel underscores the potentially productive proposition that reading can cultivate empathy for marginalized groups and foster critical thinking. In other words, in *Terra Nullius*, Coleman does precisely what Martha Nussbaum includes into the definition of what she calls “narrative imagination” (95). Namely, Coleman manipulates the genre of mainstream science fiction in order to literally put all human beings (her readers included) in the shoes of Indigenous Australians. Furthermore, by opting for the genre of science fiction, while foregrounding and retelling the postapocalyptic, that is, post-invasion history of Indigenous Australians, Coleman joins the tradition of indigenous science fiction, the genre that was first introduced by Grace L. Dillon in 2012 under the name of Indigenous futurisms.

The first task of this thesis is therefore to give an overview of Indigenous futurism, which has, according to Iva Polak, grown into a global movement during the first two decades of the 21st century (“Indigenous Futurism” 437). As this also applies to the Australian context, Coleman wrote her first novel at the time when, as Polak argues, the circumstances in which Indigenous Australian authors work were more favourable (“Indigenous Futurism”445). For example, Polak mentions the *black&write!* project, initiated in 2010, as the most important training and mentoring project for Indigenous authors (“Indigenous Futurism”445). Coleman’s *Terra Nullius* not only won the *black&write!* fellowship but was subsequently published in the USA, a country with the biggest number of science fiction readers, and has enjoyed an enthusiastic reception there (Watkins and Wilkins). However, since the circumstances for Aboriginal Australian authors have not always been this advantageous, the thesis also briefly outlines the historical position and reception of Aboriginal novels in general and science fiction novels in particular. This is followed by the analysis of *Terra Nullius* against the basic tenets of Indigenous futurism in the second section of Chapter 2. The purpose is to illustrate how the mixture of science fiction and discussions of issues that are relevant for Indigenous Australians

allows the author to take a critical stance on the lack of knowledge of history, as well as on the general feeling of inertia in the contemporary (Australian) society. Finally, Chapter 2 finishes with the historical meaning of the *terra nullius* doctrine.

The central part of the thesis demonstrates how Coleman tampers with the perimeters of mainstream science fiction in order to target a wider audience against the backdrop of perpetual racism in Australia and the global climate crisis. The ensuing discussion looks into typical science fiction themes that widely originate from colonialism, while also pointing to the connections between current crises and ongoing colonial endeavours; the non-linear concept of time in the context of Indigenous futurism, as well as its complex meanings for various indigenous communities, including Indigenous Australians; and the suggestive inclusion of Indigenous culture and “forgotten” historical facts in order to dispel misconceptions from the colonial history. Significantly, the novel, which the author herself describes as an “empathy bomb” (Coleman, *Lies* 182), aims at provoking empathy for Aboriginal Australians from the onset, that is, even before the story is universalized. In order to illustrate how this is done, Suzanne Keen’s “broadcast strategic empathy” is employed. The thesis then discusses how the story shifts from Indigenous Australians to human beings in general and the implications of Coleman’s strategy of creating multiple mirror images for the contemporary Western reader. Lastly, the final chapter of the thesis reveals multiple layers of colonisation behind the novel’s leitmotif of both devastating and devastated environment. The thesis therefore argues that *Terra Nullius* utilizes the science fiction tropes, which the text strategically lays bare only halfway through the story, in order to reveal their interconnectedness with racist and colonial ideologies. The purpose of this textual manoeuvring is to thematise the violent history of Indigenous Australians after the British settlement. Finally, the thesis argues that the above described strategy aims at cultivating empathy for Aboriginal Australians in the novel’s white readers, as well as at urging the latter not to turn a blind eye to present crises and inequalities. In this thesis,

the word “indigenous” is used to mean indigenous peoples anywhere in the world, whereas “Indigenous” and “Aboriginal” automatically imply Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The term “Indigenous futurism” is used in accordance with Dillon’s capitalisation preference and refers to the global indigenous cultural movement.

2. Defining Indigenous futurism(s)

The term Indigenous futurism was introduced in 2012 by Grace L. Dillon in the anthology of Indigenous science fiction *Walking the Clouds*. Dillon uses the term to make a case for the existence of a global indigenous tradition in the genre of science fiction, as well as to stress the genre’s potential not only to amplify the voices of the colonized but also to posit indigenous knowledge and science against Western ones (1-2). In Dillon’s own words from the famous introduction to the anthology: “sf provides an equally valid way to renew, recover, and extend First Nations peoples’ voices and traditions” (1-2). According to Suzanne Newman Fricke, Dillon uses the term “Indigenous” instead of “Native” in order to cover a wider range of indigenous populations (115). *Walking the Clouds* thus encompasses works by Native Americans, First Nations Canada, Aboriginal Australians and Māori. Dillon’s use of the term “Indigenous futurisms” highlights the global scope of science fiction texts coming from indigenous contributors to the genre.

However, it is vital to point out that, as Amy Ransom argues, “Dillon’s conception of ‘indigenous futurism’ challenges notions of the genre itself” (167-68). To rephrase, indigenous input to science fiction inevitably brings added value to the genre, which Dillon defines in the following manner: “The stories offered here are thought experiments that confront issues of ‘Indianness’ in a genre that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century context of evolutionary theory and anthropology profoundly intertwined with colonial ideology [...]” (2). What

surfaces in this definition is the crucial role that the close tie between colonialism and science fiction plays in the experimental nature of Indigenous futurism. That very connection is discussed, for example, by John Rieder, who, according to Malisa Kurtz, draws on Edward Said's claim that the novel as an artefact of bourgeois society cannot be separated from imperialism. Analogously, Rieder argues that the genre of science fiction does not exist without colonialism (Kurtz 19-20). Ransom summarizes the complex connection between the two in the context of Indigenous futurism in the following manner: "Native peoples are appropriating tools usually associated with white conquest to write back to the empire, imagining alternate histories and vivid – at times bleak and cautionary, at others widely utopian – futures for themselves and their communities" (168). In other words, the tools Ransom has in mind boil down to invasions, apocalypses, environmental crises or a decline in the rights of the othered group, to name just a few.

What is more, this analysis by Ransom could lead the discussion of Indigenous futurism to the next point since it also gives an overview of the variety of focal points, themes and perspectives that authors in the subgenre can choose from. This variety is reflected in the sections, that is, loose categories, into which Dillon divides her anthology: Native Slipstream, Contact, Indigenous Science and Sustainability, Native Apocalypse and Biskaabiiyang, "Returning to Ourselves" (3). For example, for the category of Native Slipstream, Dillon writes that it "infuses stories with time travel, alternate realities and multiverses, and alternative histories" (3), while under Contact, she states that "stories of contact typically cast the Native/Indigenous/Aboriginal as alien/other and exploit the theme of conquest, otherwise known as 'discovery'" (5).

In addition to this multifariousness, Iva Polak argues that it is fair to say that in the second decade of the twenty-first century Indigenous futurism constitutes a global movement ("Indigenous Futurism" 437). Moreover, this global movement has also established itself in

other media, ranging from visual arts to graphic novels and television series (Polak, “Indigenous Futurism 437, 451-52). Polak explains the boom by “a global rise in the interest in sf and fantasy coming from decentred locations, be they geographical, cultural, social or gendered” (“Indigenous Futurism” 446). Finally, to zoom in on Australia, this has had positive impacts on Indigenous futurism there as well. Nevertheless, these developments are fairly recent, which is probably one of the reasons why Polak is “in search of” the Indigenous fantastic in the introduction to her book about fantastic narratives in Aboriginal Australian fiction. She begins the search by discussing non-Indigenous Australian science fiction and fantasy, arguing that its path has been quite foreseeable as “the gatekeepers of Australian literary tradition” typically do not include science fiction and fantasy into the more elitist concept of literature, which is a common fate of the genre in many national literatures (Polak, *Fantastic Worlds* 6-7). For this reason, Polak stresses that although Australian science fiction has existed as long as Australia’s realist tradition, that is, since the 19th century, it has been widely dismissed in scholarly discussions (“Indigenous Futurism” 438).

However, Aboriginal Australian science fiction has indeed had “its own distinctive challenges as a result of intra- and extra-textual circumstances” (Polak, “Indigenous Futurism” 438). These challenges more often than not bypass non-Indigenous science fiction writers. Polak thus writes about specific reader expectations that are imposed on Indigenous authors, pointing to the fact that Indigenous Australians form a small portion of the reading public in Australia, and stating fiction as the least preferred form among other types of Indigenous writing in the Australian book market (“Indigenous Futurism” 438). In addition to all this and the fact that there are not many publishing houses in Australia that publish specifically Aboriginal *novels* (Polak, *Futuristic Worlds* 16), Indigenous futuristic texts pose an additional commercial risk for Australian publishers due to their experimental and innovative qualities (Polak, “Indigenous Futurism” 440). Nevertheless, in the case of Indigenous futurism, the

situation does not have to be resolved once a text is published since the texts and their authors still need to bear with Australian critics (Polak, “Indigenous Futurism” 440). As the first novels dealing with Indigenous futurities appeared in the 1990s, it was then that the ambiguous reception became apparent, revealing quite unfavourable early readings of some of the genre fiction texts thematising colonial crimes like Sam Watson’s *The Kadaitcha Sung* (Polak, “Indigenous Futurism” 441-42). Significantly, and specifically in regard to Watson’s novel, Polak argues that the 90s critics were not prepared for “an Indigenous work which approaches genre fiction in an innovative way to bluntly reveal colonial trauma” (“Indigenous Futurism” 442). At the same time, Indigenous authors in the 90s were working against the backdrop of the 1988 Bicentennial celebration, which expected Indigenous novels to be celebratory and not necessarily confronting or experimental (Polak, “Indigenous Futurism” 441). Nevertheless, the circumstances have, as already indicated, changed for the better in the 21st century.

Specifically, around the 2010s, a new generation of scholars started to read Indigenous novels in a new light (Polak, “Indigenous Futurism” 437). Approximately at the same time, science fiction narratives became more mainstream with “the global rise of sci-fi series and films, based on comic books, graphic novels and popular sf and fantasy writing” (Polak, “Indigenous Futurism” 437). Significantly, Polak emphasizes the prevalence of Indigenous women writers as an important feature of the 21st century Indigenous futuristic texts in Australia, naming Alexis Wright and Claire G. Coleman as prominent examples (“Indigenous Futurism” 446-47). It is interesting to note that Polak links those recent texts by Indigenous women authors who choose (science) fiction as their genre of preference with an older generation of women Aboriginal authors, whose work predominantly dealt with the Stolen Generations and flourished in the 80s under the umbrella term of tiddaism¹ (*Razvoj* 257, 260).

¹ Tiddaism is a term introduced by Aboriginal writer and activist Jackie Huggins to “denote experiences of the Australian Aboriginal womanhood” and to differentiate them from the universalizing and Eurocentric rhetoric of

The scholar thus writes about a certain turning point in terms of genre that started to emerge in the 90s, when Aboriginal women authors started to take up the leitmotif of the Stolen Generations from a different, that is, explicitly fictional rather than (auto)biographical generic angle (Polak, *Razvoj* 260).

2.1 Coleman's *Terra Nullius* as Indigenous futurism

Even though Claire G. Coleman is probably most famous for her debut novel *Terra Nullius*, it is, according to Polak, her trilogy consisting of two more novels, namely *The Old Lie* (2019) and *Enclave* (2022) that has “established her as the leading voice of Indigenous Australian futurism” (“Indigenous Futurism” 447). The first two novels of the trilogy revitalize invasion narratives, thus emphatically pointing to the consequences of the proclamation of *terra nullius*, whereas Coleman's third novel is more focused on contemporary issues such as racism, homophobia or neoliberalism (Polak, “Indigenous Futurism” 447-49). When it comes to *Terra Nullius* in particular, it is almost impossible to analyse the novel without letting on major spoilers. However, it needs to be remarked that the storyline in *Terra Nullius* revolves around two protagonists whose paths merge even though they each belong to a different side of the Native/Settler binary opposition. The narrative, on one hand, begins with Jacky, who is on the run after having escaped from a mission and who is now invested in reuniting with his family. Johnny, on the other hand, is a deserted Trooper, who comes from the planet that colonized Jacky's home planet, that is, the Earth. *Terra Nullius* is therefore a story about the invasion by the so-called “grey fellas” or “Toads” and the subsequent life on the colonized planet permeated with references to the history of Indigenous Australians after 1788.

white feminism (Paul 176). Furthermore, according to Paul, “tidda” means “sister”, with which the term emphasizes the solidarity that plays a crucial part in Aboriginal women's identity formation (176).

In that respect, although *Terra Nullius* can and is often classified as science fiction or speculative fiction, it is (for the purposes of this thesis) most useful to analyse it as a work belonging to the tradition of Indigenous futurism. Coleman's 2017 novel befits the genre as it refers to and then deconstructs the colonial background of mainstream science fiction, the importance of which is stressed in Dillon's introduction to *Walking the Clouds*. *Terra Nullius* is namely explicitly reminiscent of Wells' *The War of the Worlds* and, Coleman describes *Terra Nullius* as "almost a sequel to *War of the Worlds*" ("Claire G. Coleman" 43:57). Moreover, in her 2021 non-fiction book *Lies, Damned Lies*, Coleman paraphrases Wells' introduction to one of the editions to *The War of the Worlds* and writes that "the novel was an attempt to unpack and explain the invasion of Van Diemen's Land, now known as Tasmania, and near-genocide of the Palawa people" (Coleman, *Lies* 96). Interestingly enough, Wells does point to the parallel between the European and alien invasion in the first chapter of his novel: "And before we judge them too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals [...], but upon its inferior races" (7). However, the cited sentence shows that Wells retains what John Rieder identifies as one of the two features of science fiction that most evidently foreground the genre's connection to colonialism, namely the colonial gaze (qtd. in Kurtz 20). Wells therefore takes the suffering of "the races inferior to the European race" at face value and uses it as an inspiration for a piece of genre fiction set in England.

Coleman, nevertheless, is aware of what Kyle P. Whyte writes about in his article "Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene". Namely, whatever apocalyptic scenarios non-Indigenous people may imagine in science fiction texts or fear befalling them in the future, Whyte states that Indigenous peoples have already been through these catastrophes owing to different colonial practices (226). Even though Whyte's article focuses on the climate emergency rhetoric in the West, his argument shows that any apocalyptic future projection from

the Western point of view is prone to forgetting or ignoring the colonial origin of the dreaded catastrophe. Similarly, in her dissertation about postcolonial science fiction and its questioning of contemporary neo-colonial structures, Malisa Kurtz argues that postcolonial science fiction expresses the need for the awareness “of the ways colonialism frames sf tropes” (5). Consequently, much of the analysis in this thesis will revolve around tracing this awareness in Coleman’s *Terra Nullius* and drawing attention to the novel’s science fiction themes that expose current crises.

In order to make the links between the historical apocalypses, speculative fictional ones and the lurking futuristic ones, which inform the latter and can partly be traced back to the former, Coleman intervenes into the genre of science fiction. Dillon identifies this intervention by Indigenous science fiction writers by stating that they “sometimes intentionally experiment with, sometimes intentionally dislodge, sometimes merely accompany, but invariably *change* the perimeters of sf” (3, emphasis in the original). The ways in which Coleman changes the premises of science fiction in her debut novel can be analysed through the lens of Suvin’s novum, a concept which the scholar introduces precisely to outline the boundaries of science fiction. Accordingly, Suvin identifies novum as “*differentia specifica* of the SF narration” (63). To rephrase, as novum forms the basis for differentiating the genre of science fiction from other genres, Suvin goes on to point out that a “novum of cognitive innovation is a totalizing phenomenon” (64), one which, as Polak argues, “obliterates the SF nature of the text” if it gets removed from the narrative (Polak, *Futuristic Worlds* 52). Furthermore, Suvin clarifies his own use of the word “totalizing” and writes that a “novelty is ‘totalizing’ in the sense that it entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects thereof” (64). As it will be discussed anon, the iconography of science fiction is deliberately disguised, hidden, that is, left unspecified, or elided in the first ten chapters of *Terra Nullius*. For this reason, it could be argued that the novel lays bare the genre of science fiction.

Polak describes the first half of the book in the following manner: “*Terra Nullius* starts by luring the reader into believing that what lies ahead is an Indigenous novel mapping Australia’s settler-colonial period” (Polak, “Indigenous Futurism” 448). In other words, Coleman’s novel at first glance appears to be meeting the somewhat narrow expectations that, according to Polak, readers, publishers, booksellers and critics in Australia are likely to have for fiction labelled Indigenous (Polak, “Indigenous Futurism” 438). In another article about *Terra Nullius*, Polak explains the logic behind this “trick” by using Barthes’ proairetic, hermeneutic, cultural, semic and symbolic codes:

Out of the five codes [...] that convey the meaning(s) of the text according to Barthes, Coleman uses the last three to mislead the readers. By leaving them either underdetermined in order to conceal information or overdetermined by filling their semantic field with misleading information, the author masks the novel’s temporality, i.e. futuristic timeframe. (“Unpunishable Crimes” 5)

For example, in the first half of the book, “Settlers” are never referred to as “Toads” or “grey fellas”, which would give away their (science) fictional nature. They are rather always described as “Settlers” (as opposed to “Natives”), which is, according to Polak, immediately interpreted as Anglo-Australian colonizers and Indigenous Australians respectively by anyone familiar with Australian history and literature (“Unpunishable Crimes” 5). For this reason, the reader thus misled would not hesitate to locate motifs such as “missions” or “a murderer who killed a settler” into the settler-colonial framework of interpretation. As a result, the employment of this narrative twist, or rather the postponed introduction of the novum, leaves enough space for the author to bring to light “facts and events that have been systematically excluded from Australian history” as phrased by Billy J. Stratton in his review of *Terra Nullius* (“They [Do Not] Come in Peace”). Before revealing the invasion as an alien one in Chapter 10, Coleman thus introduces the characters and devises the narrative in such a way that it comes to

encompass documentary realist topics which would have been expected from an Indigenous Australian (fiction) writer.

If one thinks more closely about this silenced and unresolved history coexisting within the structure of science fiction, what springs to mind, is the initial role of science fiction emphasized by Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, who writes: “historically, at least the initial impulse for SF comes always from the yearnings of a repressed social group and testifies to radically other possibilities of life” (89). Polak translates the stimulus of the genre thus formulated into the context of Indigenous futurism: “indigenous authors adapt the old paradigm of SF – that is, the metanarrative of the genre – to reflect on a new stage in the development of SF, in which the novum, as the key SF trope, emerges from the necessities and urgency of the contemporary postcolonial moment” (*Futuristic Worlds* 242). In other words, science fiction becomes an essential tool for Indigenous Australian writers who seek to confront their readers with the perpetual injustice against Aboriginal Australians, injustice which has recently been further perpetuated by a no vote in a referendum that was supposed to constitutionally protect an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

Coleman discusses her drive to deliver a clear message to her audience in the Garret podcast, where she recounts how she has always wanted to tell the story of the 1788 invasion in a way that would make it more universal and understandable to those who did not have any personal or familial contact points to the invasion and the violence against Aboriginal peoples stemming from it (“Claire G. Coleman” 06:18-06:56). The author therefore opts for the genre of Indigenous futurism, which allows her to convert the story about Aboriginal peoples suffering the consequences of white settlement into the story about a kind of postracial society on Earth that has been colonized and reduced to flora and fauna by alien invaders. As a consequence, *Terra Nullius* has the potential to induce in its readers what Martha Nussbaum calls “narrative imagination” (95). Nussbaum defines the concept as “the ability to think what

it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself” (95-96). It can therefore be maintained that the genre of Indigenous futurism lends Coleman the necessary literary building blocks to put her readers in the shoes of Indigenous Australians and thus to cultivate empathy for the discriminated group. What is more, the author of *Terra Nullius* describes the novel as an “empathy bomb” herself (Coleman, *Lies* 182). To go back to Nussbaum, she elaborates on the significance of narrative imagination in an interview conducted by James Garvey by stating that: “when you deal with situations where in addition to political polarisation you have ethnic and religious polarisation, listening requires not just arguments but a cultivation of imagination” (Nussbaum, and Garvey 3). This necessity for imagination is probably also what motivated Coleman to write a non-realist novel that would, as she quite emphatically writes in *Lies, Damned Lies*, fulfil its potential to “teach wadjelas [white fellows] empathy for the fate of Indigenous peoples” (182). To go back to Polak’s conclusion, the urgency of the contemporary postcolonial moment requires more imagination than realist texts depicting the history of violence and discrimination against Indigenous Australians could offer to their white audiences.

Furthermore, in her discussion about the importance of arts and literature for educating citizens in a democracy, Nussbaum goes on to introduce the concept of “blind spots”, saying that arts and literature generate empathy on one hand, and “address particular cultural blind spots” on the other (108). According to Nussbaum, blind spots amount to “groups within their culture and also groups abroad that are especially likely to be dealt with ignorantly and obtusely” (106). Since the group identified as a blind spot in Coleman’s novel is more than evident, this thesis will aim at pinpointing some other blind spots addressed in the novel. In doing so, the spotlight will be on specific characters and themes introduced in the first half of the book and further developed once the exact nature of the invasion at hand is defogged.

2.2 Historical *terra nullius* as the history of invasion

As it previously mentioned, injustice against Indigenous Australians is still being perpetuated rather than acknowledged and fought against on a larger scale. The most recent example dates back to October 2023, when Australia voted no to the Voice to Parliament that would have allowed Aboriginal Australians to advise politicians in Parliament on issues that directly impact Indigenous peoples (“Voice to Parliament”). Moreover, the Voice to Parliament was supposed to be protected by the constitution, which would prevent future governments from abolishing it (“Voice to Parliament”). While the advocates of the yes campaign highlighted the urgency for reconciliation with the First Nations peoples, *The Guardian* illustrates how “the no campaign contends that history has little relevance to the present” (“The Guardian view on Australia’s Indigenous voice referendum”). For example, they quote Tony Abbot who cited John Howard, another former Liberal Prime Minister: “none of us can be responsible for what happened more than a century ago” (qtd. in “The Guardian view on Australia’s Indigenous voice referendum”). Given the concerning fact that opinions like this are still being perpetuated in 2023, the following section will briefly delve into precisely what happened in the past, thus demonstrating its present relevance, which adds importance to Coleman’s *Terra Nullius*.

In the preface to his seminal study of Aboriginal history after the 1788 invasion *Aboriginal Australians*, Richard Broome sums up the study in this fashion: “This is a story of how settlers in overwhelming numbers, bearing new diseases, plants, animals and new technologies, and with the blessing of the British Imperial Government, supplanted the original owners of a continent” (Broome 12). As Broome continues, these acts could not happen just like that since various images, discourses and doctrines needed to be created in order to support and account for the act of stealing (12). In his article about the legal doctrine of *terra nullius*, Stuart Banner discloses that putting *terra nullius* into practice in Australia was a deviation from

the regular way in which the British approached indigenous peoples in other places that they had colonized (95). Furthermore, Banner illustrates the reasons why the British felt justified in stealing the land from its owners, and underlines:

Europeans arriving in a new land were, of necessity, anthropologists. The first Britons in Australia, like Europeans throughout the world, had to size up the people they encountered and make judgements about what they were like, because upon those judgements would rest many of their colonial policies, including policies about land. (105)

In short, the British thought Aboriginal Australians few in number and hence with no right to claim such a large space for themselves (Banner 99-100). British settlers also perceived Aboriginal Australians as less technologically advanced than other indigenous peoples, which led them to the conclusion that Aboriginal Australians would not be able to fight back and therefore would not need to be conquered (Banner 102-103). Finally, as Indigenous Australians were assumed unfamiliar with trade, it was deemed impossible to purchase the land from them (Banner 97-104). However, the argument that agriculture was a precondition for land ownership and property rights played a crucial role in concluding that “Britons were no more bound to respect the property rights of Aborigines than they were to respect the property rights of kangaroos” (Banner 113). Broome not only debunks this perceived absence of agriculture as misinterpretation by exemplifying with hay ricks and eel farms but he also poses the question which challenges European ethnocentrism: “What makes agriculture particularly a superior economy?” (19-20).²

² In 2014, Bruce Pascoe published *Dark Emu*, a book in which he argues that Indigenous Australians had agriculture, that is, that a great proportion of Aboriginal Australians were sedentary or seasonally sedentary farmers (Coleman, *Lies* 113). In 2021, however, Pascoe’s study was placed under scrutiny by anthropologist Peter Sutton and archaeologist Keryn Walshe in their book *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers? The Dark Emu Debate* (Touma). However, the ensuing debate proved *Dark Emu* a successful challenge to the once widely accepted conception of Indigenous peoples, their culture and land management (Touma).

In this respect, Broome highlights the following point: “Aboriginal people survived for over 50 millennia with non-agricultural economy, which suited the land, and was suitable with the land” (19-20). This means that different economies across various societies around the world are tightly related to their relationships with the environment. This connection is addressed by Coleman in *Lies, Damned Lies* who compares the Aboriginal view of the environment with the Christian concept of land. In the Christian tradition, the land is treated as something subordinated to the human beings who are, according to the Great Chain of Being, entitled to use it. In contrast, as Coleman argues, to Aboriginal peoples, “environment and everything that lives on is a part of identity, a loved member of the family and something to protect” (*Lies* 250). Indigenous Australians call the place which they treat in this way Country, which should be written with capital C and without the definite article, and Coleman defines the concept in her glossary as “homeland, the place that an Aboriginal person feels connected to” (*Lies* 272). Moreover, Jukurrpa, which denotes Indigenous worldview among the Warlpiri in the Tanami Desert and is frequently known via the English coinage “Dreamtime” or “the Dreaming”, corresponds to the western concept of religion. As Christine Nicholls maintains, Jukurrpa is “grounded in the land itself”. In the words of Jeannie Herbert Nungarrayi whom Nicholls cites in the introduction: “The Jukurrpa is an all-embracing concept that provides rules for living, a moral code, as well as rules for interacting with the environment”. It is quite clear that British settlers could not come to understand those complex relationships that Aboriginal peoples nurture towards the environment by merely making biased first impressions about their looks and culture. To conclude with Coleman’s words: “it was that they did not respect land ownership other than their own” that resulted in Britain’s invading Australia and stealing the land from its initial owners (*Lies* 257).

Although the first judgements about Indigenous Australians, as Banner discusses in the second part of the article, began to change already with the first British residents in Australia,

subsequent critics of *terra nullius* were not radical or courageous enough (113-129). As Banner points out, none of the critics of the doctrine actually advocated that Indigenous Australians should be officially declared owners of their land (126). Instead, they offered two solutions to the injustice inflicted by the proclamation of *terra nullius*: “compensating the Aborigines, and setting aside parcels of unallocated land as permanent Aboriginal reserves” (Banner 126). The reason why nobody mentioned actual land rights was, according to Banner, mostly administrative in nature (129). In other words, no matter for what colonial land policy the British had opted, it would have been quite tumultuous and difficult to try to change it (Banner 131). As a consequence, *terra nullius* remained the “law” in Australia until it was overturned in 1992 (Banner 96). Regarding the historical 1992 Mabo case, Jane Robbins clarifies: “In 1992 the Australian High Court made a decision that [...] for the first time acknowledged that Indigenous rights derived from traditional practices and occupancy rights in some circumstances survived colonization” (Robbins 263).

So, the invasion of Australia was premised on the *terra nullius* doctrine, i.e. on the presumption that the land belonged to no one. However, that was just the beginning of human rights violations and violence against Indigenous Australians, some of which will be further unpacked in the analysis of Coleman’s *Terra Nullius* that follows. Still, it might be useful to outline some of the legalised discriminatory acts against Indigenous Australians at this point. In her article “Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage: A Trajectory of Indigenous Inequality in Australia”, Megan Davis claims that Australia’s waving away of its own history prevents the country from adequately compensating for Indigenous inequality, as well as from acknowledging that present disparities have been brought upon by colonization (34). To make her point, Davis goes back to the history of Aboriginal peoples from the 1800s to the present, which she divides in different periods for practical reasons (35). Davis begins with the frontier period which refers to the period from the early 1800s to the establishment of the Australian

constitution in 1901 (35-36). At that time, the British needed the land inhabited by Aboriginal peoples for the expansion of the colony, which resulted in killings and massacres of Indigenous peoples (Davis 35-36). Furthermore, when it comes to the creation of the constitution, Davis stresses that Aboriginal peoples were not only excluded from the census but were also omitted from the legal domain of the federation created out of the former colonies (36). In other words, Indigenous Australians remained outside the law, i.e. unprotected from any deeds done by the colonising settlers. Jane Robbins describes the 1901 Constitution, the founding document of the Federation, more bluntly: “it was written without any intention to protect Indigenous rights, indeed, it was ‘premised upon their exclusion, and even discriminated against them’” (qtd. in Robbins 263).

Two key words from this colonial period of Australia’s history that is frequently referred to as protection stage are missions and reserves, which were run by the Church and the state respectively (Davis 36). Every aspect of the lives of Aboriginal peoples living in those institutions was determined by their white superintendents (Davis 36). What is more, Davis makes special mention of two patronizing practices that marked the period and played a vital role in causing present Indigenous inequality: Stolen Generations and stolen wages (36). The former is defined by Davis as the policy of removal of the children of white settlers and Aboriginal women (so-called “half-castes”, i.e. Indigenous children of mixed descent) from their families to put them in already mentioned state or Church institutions (36). The logic behind this brutal policy was, according to Polak, another erroneous presupposition. It was namely claimed that full-blooded Aboriginal Australians were about to die out anyway as they could not adapt to the modern ways of living, while half-castes needed to be assimilated into the majority group (Polak, *Razvoj* 21). Stolen wages, on the other hand, refers to “government control over any wages earned by indigenous workers from 1897 to 1972” (Davis 37). Significantly, the protection period ended with the 1967 referendum, which amended the

constitution, recognized Aboriginal peoples as Australian citizens and included them into the national census (Davis 38). In addition, Broome remarks that “an amazing 90.77 per cent of Australians voted for the two changes on 27 May 1967” (234).

The referendum was followed by the period of self-determination which witnessed the implementation of the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) in 1975 and the formation of a representative body named Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 1989 (Davis 38). The Commission could, according to Robbins, not only advise the government on issues affecting Indigenous peoples but it also had more than a symbolic budget for Indigenous programmes (266). However, those positive developments did not have a long shelf life. Davis stresses that the change of government in 1996 revealed the immense vulnerability of Indigenous laws (Davis 39). To illustrate, the then elected John Howard’s conservative government abolished the ATSIC in 2005 and suspended the RDA in order to be able to declare Aboriginal land rights subordinate to the pastoral leasing rights in the Wik decision (Davis 39-40). All of this has dramatically weakened the seminal 1992 Mabo decision and the possibility of Indigenous peoples to fight for their land rights. Accordingly, Davis’ conclusion is rather bleak and leaves the reader wondering about the state and health of Australian democracy. There is no treaty between Indigenous peoples and the state of Australia, which makes Australia the only settler nation that has not signed a single treaty with its Indigenous population (unlike Canada, the USA and New Zealand). There is no bill of rights protecting civil rights and freedoms, which makes Australia the only Commonwealth country without both. Indigenous peoples’ legal inability to make any impact on public institutions and a consequential lack of autonomy are just some of the aspects that have contributed to the present inequalities (Davis 42).

Since Aboriginal Australians have never consented to the land grab and have never been offered an opportunity to negotiate it with the colonizers, the following argument by Robbins seems to be crucial for understanding the importance that the past bears for the present:

Indigenous minorities once were “nations” in their own right until they suffered dispossession by a colonizing power [...]. In this sense, the relationship between the Indigenous minority and the contemporary state can be thought of as “unfinished business”. (Robbins 259)

To finish business, Robbins strongly suggests the re-establishment of a representative body, the negotiation of a treaty or the introduction of regional forms of self-government (271). Given the fact that an attempt at an arrangement failed as recently as October 2023, it must be worthwhile to reconsider the past from the perspective of Indigenous peoples and to contemplate on the repercussions of eschewing to do so.

3. Indigenous concept of time in Coleman’s *Terra Nullius*

Following the discussion of “Indigenous” in “Indigenous futurism”, the next step is to unpack the meaning of “futurism”. Understanding how time is conceived in the context of Indigenous futurism is crucial for reading *Terra Nullius*, a novel which blurs the boundaries between different periods in time, that is, between the past, the present and one of the possible futures. In this respect, Suzanne Fricke clarifies that Indigenous futurisms do not necessarily deal with some time that is to come, but rather explore “a time outside of the timeline we are in” (116). To strengthen her point, Fricke cites Elizabeth LaPensée who maintains that “Indigenous Futurisms recognizes space-time as simultaneously past, present and future, therefore futurism is as much about the future as it is about right now” (qtd. in Fricke 118). This, however, does not have only to do with the genre of Indigenous futurisms, but also with

specific ways in which many indigenous communities imagine time (Fricke 119). For Whyte, for example, thinking about time always includes “a certain form of philosophizing about what actions we or our communities ought to take to respond to the issues and problems that characterize our current situations” (229). In other words, indigenous peoples ask themselves both how they can be good ancestors for the generations to come and how they can return the gifts that they received from their own ancestors (Whyte 229). Whyte exemplifies this kind of philosophizing by mentioning the Menominee generation of the 19th century that was faced with a dilemma whether to treat with the US in exchange for a sawmill (233). Eventually, they decided to preserve the forest although that meant turning a blind eye to the more short-lived future economic benefits of a sawmill (Whyte 233-34). This kind of thinking often echoes in works of Indigenous futurisms, for which Fricke therefore concludes that they “offer a strategy to move forward” (119).

What is more, Indigenous Australians also do not share the Western concept of measurable time consisting of the three separate – past, present and future categories (Polak, *Razvoj* 38). They rather use the category that seems to be outside of the Western meaning of the lexeme “time” as it includes the infinity or is, as W. E. H. Stanner phrased it, “everywhen” (Polak, *Razvoj*, 39-41). Stanner creates this coinage in order to explain a kind of temporality that is implicit to the Dreaming: “Although [...] The Dreaming conjures up the notion of a sacred, heroic time of the indefinitely remote past, such a time is also, in a sense, still part of the present. One cannot ‘fix’ The Dreaming in time: it was, and is, everywhen” (24). In addition, David Mowaljarlai, Aboriginal elder from the Kimberley region of Western Australia, distinguishes nine time periods that form the Aboriginal “everywhen” (Polak, *Razvoj* 43). Significantly, the ninth time period called Yorro Yorro is not the final one, but one that encompasses all the previous ones (Polak, *Razvoj* 47). Mowaljarlai thus defines Yorro Yorro as everything “from the Beginning to the present and onwards” or as “ongoing creation,

perpetual renewal of nature in all its forms” (214). The Aboriginal Dreaming is therefore, as Polak concludes, connected predominantly to the everywhen rather than to the ancient time of the creation of the world (*Razvoj* 47).

Coleman’s *Terra Nullius* can therefore be read as an example of this logic according to which the past and a spectrum of possible futures are postulated as crucial informants of our present actions. Even though the first part of the novel unambiguously reads like a historical novel, the second part of *Terra Nullius* brings forth a kind of narrative in which the future projection is repeatedly compared to past events and infused with references and allusions to both the past and the present. For example, the following passage is more reminiscent of the European colonial past although it undoubtedly appears in the context of interplanetary traffic: “Out here, the furthest colony from home, mail took many weeks to arrive. He would send his report and it would be weeks before anyone at home saw it, if it arrived at all – ships sometimes got lost on the way home” (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 196). Nevertheless, to start from the beginning, the first nine chapters of the novel outline the history of Aboriginal Australians after white settlement. Since this is a task that has not often been performed in the official history of Australia,³ undertaking it becomes a prerequisite for philosophizing about the present and the future of Australia and life on Earth.

3.1 The hows of foregrounding the history of Aboriginal Australians in *Terra Nullius*

To start with what Gérard Genette calls peritext and defines as everything that can be found in a book: its title, the preface or elements inserted into particular parts of the text, e.g.

³ To illustrate the scale of this, it suffices to look at a single fact to which John Harris points in his article “Hiding the Bodies: The Myth of the Humane Colonisation of Aboriginal Australia”. He states that the names of almost every single one of the 2,000 Europeans killed by Aboriginal people are known, whereas he could find only a few of the names of the 20,000 or more Indigenous Australians killed by colonizers (98).

chapter titles or certain notes (5), Coleman's chapters are preceded by such insertions, that is, introductory texts framing the narrative of each chapter. Significantly, those texts, albeit forged, strikingly resemble excerpts from archival or historical documents and diaries. Additionally, Polak specifies that "these commentaries enact such notorious long-term practices as punitive expeditions, Aboriginal children's forcible removal from their settlements and their abuse on mission stations" ("Unpunishable Crimes" 4). However, none of them is a real quote and in the Garret podcast, Coleman makes a point that the ease with which she does this in *Terra Nullius* shows how potentially unproblematic it is to fake history documents ("Claire G. Coleman" 34:36-34:49). Furthermore, Polak points out that the reader is more liable to being tricked by the author of *Terra Nullius* since it is not uncommon for Indigenous novels dealing with the history of Aboriginal Australians to quote real historical documents and legislations, which the scholar exemplifies with Marie Munkara's satire *A Most Peculiar Act* ("Unpunishable Crimes" 4). The reader of *Terra Nullius* is thus confronted with the first instance of such misleading peritext, which reads:

When I saw the squalor they lived in, without any of the conveniences that make our life better, dirty and seemingly incapable of being clean, I was horrified. When I discovered they had intelligence I was surprised. When I was told their souls had not been saved I resolved to do something about it. (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 1)

This particular excerpt is signed by the Reverend Mother Mary Santeslosh. Her line of thinking corresponds to the racist ideology of the late 19th and early 20th century that informed many discriminatory practices and policies in European colonies around the world, as Karen Stote discusses in her book about sterilization of Aboriginal women in Canada and Australia. Stote writes that the basic purpose of a racist ideology is "to deny the humanity of those who are being oppressed, to blame individuals for their miserable conditions and to divert attention away from those who are doing the oppressing", which is then used to justify the consequences of

capitalist expansion, be that in European cities or in the colonies (22). Furthermore, Stote emphasizes the role eugenic ideology played in serving this purpose, explaining that the term “eugenics” implies “the notion that society consisted of people(s) evolved to greater or lesser degrees in their biological, physical and moral capacities” (23). This pseudoscientific reasoning resulted in concrete practices and measures such as marriage regulation, segregation and sterilization of Aboriginal women (Stote 14) and it is precisely these violations of human rights that lead the discussion to the main issues, that is, blind spots that are addressed in *Terra Nullius*.

One of the main issues raised in the novel that especially resonates with its protagonist Jacky is that of belonging and of having a home, to which one can go back and where one’s identity is grounded.⁴ This issue, however, is deeply intertwined with the historical fact of the Stolen Generations, which, according to Payel Paul, impacted the lives of 100,000 Aboriginal children between 1905 and 1967 (178). In that respect, Jacky’s trajectory is typical for the Stolen Generations children: he is first taken away from his family and brought to a school, i.e. the mission, from where he is sent to a house to work as a servant. The heterodiegetic narrator describes Jacky’s thoughts on the mission in the following manner: “There he was to receive an education, and he did if being beaten, locked up, punished, mistreated and controlled and then finally, when broken, trained to be a servant was an education” (43). However, Jacky is brave enough to run away from servitude and maltreatment and after the escape, he is driven solely by the desire to reclaim his identity, find his parents and his home. Since the gist of the patronizing practice known under the term Stolen Generations was assimilation, it is not surprising that Jacky feels devoid of an identity of his own: “Nothing remained of the time before they gave him a new religion, a new language, a broken degenerate version of the Settler tongue he could never learn to speak well enough” (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 8). What is more,

⁴ It is noteworthy that the protagonist’s name is not random. According to Polak, the name Jacky and its different versions (Jacky Jacky or Jackie Jackie) were used by Anglo-Australian settlers to refer to Aboriginal men in order to discriminate and infantilise them (“Unpunishable Crimes” 5).

Jacky expresses not just a lack of any connection to the Native culture but also testifies to the failure of his being assimilated into the mainstream society, which hardly makes him an exception. Paul identifies the structural flaw inherent to the assimilative practices in the late 19th-and early 20th-century Australia by quoting Jeremy Beckett, who writes: “Aboriginal people were assimilated, not into the white community, but into the ranks of the oppressed, the colonised coloured people” (qtd. in Paul 178). Richard Broome arrives at the same conclusion, stating that children being raised at missions “were compelled to make difficult negotiations between the Aboriginal and European world” (167).

Nevertheless, from many missionaries’ point of view, assimilation was an adequate response to supposed savagery, infantilism and paganism of Indigenous Australians. Broome argues that those missionaries who rejected paternalism formed a tiny minority until the 1970s and concludes: “Aboriginal people on missions were generally managed, protected, taught and chastised like children, which eroded their former autonomy” (165). One of the most prominent characters in the novel representing this patronizing view, albeit not a missionary, carries the nickname of the real-life Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia A. O. Neville – Devil. In *Terra Nullius*, Devil is the Head of the Department for the Protection of Natives and his relationship to the job is illustrated in the following vein:

There was nothing to like about the job except the satisfaction he received from helping the Natives to help themselves. Natives raising their own children to the primitive ways they lived before he came was unacceptable, they would have to be elevated. The school would help elevate the Natives. (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 21)

This passage reiterates the civilised man vs. savage dichotomy, which widely rests on Charles Darwin’s theory of human development, to which he applied the theory of natural selection (Sharp 32). According to Patrick B. Sharp, Darwin’s main idea presented in his book *Descent of Man* (1871) is that “humanity had progressed along a path from humble animal origins to

total mastery of the planet”, a distinction for which the role of technology is central (4). In addition, Sharp points out that Darwin’s ideas were both internally contradictory and relatively liberal for the time as he believed in progress, i.e. in the prospect of “inferior races” to “improve”, while retaining the same static hierarchy of races with whites at the top and non-whites at the bottom as his seemingly more conservative opponents (39). Similarly to Darwin, who found pseudoscientific evidence in favour of more superior races’ supplanting inferior ones (Sharp 42-45), A. O. Neville believed that Aboriginal Australians would best be “elevated” if they were “absorbed’ into the white population through interracial sexual intercourse”, which *de facto* meant that Aboriginal physical characteristics would gradually be eliminated (Ellinghaus 190). Furthermore, Katherine Ellinghaus states that:

Neville was instrumental in the decision to include a clause in the Western Australian *Aborigines Act Amendment Act 1936* which dictated that no marriage of *any* Aboriginal person could be celebrated without the permission of the Chief Protector. (190, emphasis in the original)

Clear allusions to such marriage regulations appear in *Terra Nullius* as Devil denies a series of requests that are sent to him, some of which asking his permission to get married. Evidently, as pointed out by Ellinghaus, to implement Neville’s theory of biological absorption, it was needed both to regulate marriages and to separate people of mixed descent (191). Finally, the analysis of only two characters, that is, Jacky and Devil already demonstrates that Coleman particularly highlights the blind spots that have to do with the disciplining of the female (and male) body, as well as with the disrupting of traditional social roles in Aboriginal communities. Significantly, Stote links the colonisation of female bodies, i.e. “the ideology of Aboriginal women as ‘unfit mothers’”, with economic advantages of colonisation for white colonizers such as land ownership (42). In this respect, she paraphrases Randi Cull: “The depiction of Aboriginal women as ‘inferior’ or ‘unfit’ becomes one means of securing land ownership, of

further assimilating Aboriginal peoples into Canadian society and of denying their ability to reproduce” (qtd. in Stote 42).

That said, Coleman also underlines the nexus between the brutality of land grab and its dire consequences for the welfare of traditional Aboriginal communities. She namely composes a disturbingly vivid depiction of a massacre, in which she focuses on the victims and their familial relations. At the same time, the author introduces the novel’s second protagonist Johnny Star:

He saw a babe, taken from its screaming mother’s arms, wailing as it was dashed against a rock with a sickening thud, its head spurting blood onto the stone, its still shuddering body cast onto the flames of its burning home. Its wailing mother, falling to her knees, was unable or unwilling – he shaded eyes already blank – to resist as her throat was cut. The father – he assumed it was the father – screamed defiance right until a blade pierced his chest, screamed defiance and pain from bubbling frothing lungs. (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 59)

The description of a massacre that makes Johnny desert his position in the Troopers is a good example of how Coleman foregrounds historical brutality in such a way that she intentionally tries to provoke empathy for Aboriginal Australians in her readers. Suzanne Keen calls this type of strategic narrative empathy broadcast strategic empathy (488). According to Keen, “*broadcast strategic empathy calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing our common human experiences, feelings, hopes, and vulnerabilities* (488, emphasis in the original). Even though the basic premise of *Terra Nullius* is quite literally to put its white readers into the shoes of Indigenous Australians, the potential for empathizing with the marginalized group is clearly inscribed into the first half of the book as well. Furthermore, Keen elaborates on the ways in which broadcast strategic empathy can be employed in novels, saying that such novels tend to “offer opportunities for character

identification emphasizing the commonalities of our embodied experiences, our psychological dispositions and our social circumstances” (488).

Another example of an opportunity for such character identification can be found in the passage describing the punishment that children at the mission need to endure for stealing food:

They had only two sheds in which to lock the children so four of them, including Jacky, were chained to trees at the corners of the mission. Left there for days they were given barely enough water to keep them alive, but no food. [...] In the end the heat, the thirst, the hunger was too much for Jacky and he blacked out, unconscious, oblivious, near to death under his tree (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 79).

Obviously, a scene in which the most basic human bodily needs are denied to enslaved children, who have been forcibly removed from their families, has the potential to ignite empathy in whoever reads about it. To complement the passage with Broome’s historical insights, he states that physical punishments were common at some missions and names the example of Yarrabah mission in Queensland around 1905, where punishments included “humiliation by head shaving or being forced to dress in hessian bags, standing barefoot on a hot tin roof, pack drill, withdrawal of rations and use of nearby Fitzroy Island as a place of banishment” (168). Since Coleman makes a mention of several of the named punishment methods in *Terra Nullius*, it is clear that she always supports her empathy provoking scenes with facts.

To conclude, the author of *Terra Nullius* meticulously reveals common misconceptions and racist clichés from the historical settler-colonial period in the chapters preceding Chapter 10. She is, for example, critical of the mistaken belief that there was no slavery in the history of Australia. Jacky thus identifies certain phrases as euphemisms for slavery: “They were only children, yet they were already enslaved. It was not called that, never called that, rather it was called ‘education’ or ‘training’” (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 75). In that respect, Polak stresses the

fact that not only Indigenous Australians were treated as slaves but also the convicts, that is, some of the first settlers brought to Australia (“Unpunishable Crimes 8). In addition, Coleman also turns the perceived inhospitable nature of the Australian landscape into a leitmotif in her novel. It is therefore all the more significant that Polak identifies this motif as “one of the clichés of the nineteenth-century Australian literary canon” (“Unpunishable Crimes” 5). Sergeant Rohan, a Trooper whose task is to chase Jacky and Johnny down, thus observes: “Nothing like the green and pleasant land from which they came; this land was grey, this land was washed out by the sun. The sky bleached yellow and far too bright” (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 42). Furthermore, Laura Singeot traces the relentless landscape cliché to the colonising and assimilative practices that were imposed on Indigenous Australians by invaders:

making one’s civilization thrive in alien landscapes was also the purpose of colonizers in the eighteenth century when they set foot on Australian lands. For instance, the Australian desert and bush were part of that savage land associated with savage people, and both were to be tamed thanks to colonization and assimilation. (1)

Finally, Coleman sprinkles the narrative with some cultural and social traditions that can clearly be attributed to Aboriginal Australians, which only reinforces the reader’s presupposition that the novel is set in Australia’s colonial past. These aspects of Aboriginal culture include immense respect for the elderly or the skill of living at waterholes and are especially palpable when the story is narrated from the point of view of Esperance, a young woman who, having escaped the Settlers, lives with her Grandfather in a quite big community of free humans in the desert.

3.2 The hows of universalizing the story

Since the title of the novel undoubtedly refers to the infamous legal doctrine, it is less easy to realize that the title has a second meaning. In the podcast, Coleman reminds her audience that *terra nullius* means both “nobody’s land” and “nobody’s Earth” (“Claire G. Coleman” 38:20-38:32). The title therefore reflects Coleman’s strategy in the second half of the book, that is, from the end of Chapter 9 onwards. In other words, when it becomes clear that the story-now is not set in the past, which is paired with an unambiguous reference to that very colonial past, the novel does not lose sight of both invasions. To rephrase again, from the moment when Esperance and her community meet Paddy, a man who is forced to leave his home in the deeper parts of the desert because of the Settlers, Australia’s colonial past becomes a mirror image of the alien colonisation of the Earth in the story-now. To quote Paddy: “People from other places came before, long time ago, but they couldn’t live there, in that country. The white fellas let us have our Country because they couldn’t live there. These grey fellas, they don’t much like the hot and the dry, they like it less even than the white fella do” (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 121).

This duality of the invasion inscribed into the novel’s title is widely and most transparently discussed in the peritext preceding the chapters. These commentaries, often resembling essays, shed new light on what in the language of the West would be referred to as “discovery”. The reader is therefore invited to imagine what would happen to the Earth if there was a world of warring societies outside the only planet that is familiar to human beings. In this respect, the moment of contact is described as an apocalypse for a civilisation that simply does not need to develop elaborate technology with which to fight other nations or species. To illustrate with a passage from Chapter 12:

In the history of the world, when Europeans landed in Australia, the most isolated continent on the planet, the people there had no context in which to understand the new more powerful, warlike enemy. The mental and emotional technology of the Australian Aboriginals taught them to live in peace and harmony, to survive in the toughest natural

environment in the world. It did not equip them to defend against an attacker from outside. In interstellar terms, we, the people of Earth, are the Australian Aboriginals. (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 139)

Patrick B. Sharp analyses the context in which to understand the threat of the more powerful enemy on the example of European nations in the second half of the 19th century. He writes that in the same year in which Darwin published his *The Descent of Man*, George T. Chesney published a future-war story titled “The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer” (Sharp 64). Chesney’s story focuses on the danger that technologically more advanced nations can pose for those nations that fail to keep up in terms of military technology (Sharp 64). Accordingly, Sharp argues that Chesney’s story is driven by “the fear of being left behind in the race for bigger and better war machines” (65). An obvious response to this fear is therefore to go back to Darwin’s myth about man the toolmaker, which postulates technology “as an obvious and quantifiable way to measure the relative position of a group of people in the scale of civilisation”, (Sharp 42) and to invest everything necessary in technological development of a single nation. Even though *Terra Nullius* actualizes this fear on a larger scale and the Toads act upon Darwin’s myth and all its racist and violent implications, Coleman suggests that there are alternatives to this blind faith in technology, which she draws from the time before the arrival of the Toads, thus making it sound as a note to her readers’ present. Firstly, the author stresses the importance of human mental and emotional capacities and equates them with technology by calling them so. Secondly, in the passage above, these necessary mental and emotional tools can only be truly employed in a social climate of solidarity and friendship between different races and nations, in a society in which knowledges are allowed to circulate. Significantly, in *Terra Nullius*, one of Coleman’s focalisers in the novel imagines such a society: “No matter where they had come from before, whatever culture or ancient human race they had been part of, Esperance’s people were one mob, one people now. For all intents and

purposes they were all family” (*Terra Nullius* 164). To sum up, although the postnational and postracial society of the novel has been brought about solely by the fact of alien colonisation, its negation of the ideology of progress is both a warning and a message of hope for Coleman’s readers and their present.

Although the novel does not examine the state of human civilisation before the alien invasion, which might, since the novel is set in 2041, amount to the reader’s present, ubiquitous comparisons to the Toads are more than a telling comment on the contemporary human society. This is explicitly stated in the very last of the peritextual commentaries, which also marks the very end of the novel:

In all other ways they are more like us than we would like to admit. There is nothing in their behaviour that humans are incapable of: we have invaded cultures more peaceful than us, we have murdered and enslaved. There is nothing in their hearts and minds that does not also exist in the hearts and minds of the human species. (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 290)

These concluding words seem to bear some relevance for the contemporary moment as they sound almost threatening in their historical accuracy. Here, the alien’s cruelty, tightly related to their competitiveness and lust for new resources, functions as another mirror to the society in the 21st century. Whereas Wells in *The War of the Worlds* reduces his aliens and their physiognomy to heads and hands in order to show what might happen to humans if they continue to follow the path of technological progress (Sharp 74), Coleman’s cautionary tale has slightly different implications. Namely, *Terra Nullius* calls for caution not so much by projecting what could happen to humans, but predominantly by showing to its readers exactly where they are now in terms of multiple ghosts from the past. This way of calling for caution, as already indicated, leaves room for hope – maybe not so much in the story-now of the novel, but surely in the reality of its readers. Significantly, it is the new order of things on Earth in

2041 that makes room for hope by cancelling the human capitalist project. In other words, humans in *Terra Nullius* fuel the development of the new alien colony with their slave labour just as, according to Stote, indigenous peoples in Australian and Canadian colonies needed “to be reduced to a marginal class within the capitalist mode of production” in order for colonization to succeed (46). In this respect, humans in the novel, as well as Coleman’s white audiences, learn a lesson to which feminist Maria Mies points, namely that “progress for some means retrogression for the other side [...]” (qtd. in Stote 41). However, it is precisely these new circumstances in which inhabitants of the Earth suddenly find themselves on the other side of progress that abolish all differences among them, be that of class, ethnicity or race. To use Coleman’s words to summarize: “There was no caste or class within humans, to the Toads who now owned the planet and everyone on it all humans had the same low status” (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 159).

However, Coleman does not only give human beings the possibility to reconcile with one another but also offers them space to enter into dialogue with their nonhuman enemies. This possibility of a dialogue between the colonizer and the colonized is very often denied in mainstream science fiction. As Malisa Kurtz argues, the colonial gaze in science fiction depends on the dichotomy between human vs. alien or posthuman others (45). In this respect, the other in science fiction is typically a character marked by their difference of origin and species, who is, as Kurtz claims, “often denied the same voice or character complexity” that their human, narrating counterparts are granted (45). Through the introduction of Johnny Star as the second protagonist in *Terra Nullius*, this dichotomy is seriously challenged, if not debunked.

Even though Johnny develops a close friendship with a gang of free humans including Jacky, it is when they encounter Esperance’s mob that the dialogue across species unfolds on a larger scale. In other words, the narrator draws the reader’s attention to visible or invisible similarities between Johnny and Esperance, i.e., between grey fellas and humans. At the

moment of their first encounter, for example, it is stressed that the two characters might be engulfed by the same emotions: “Johnny Star sounded as nervous as Esperance felt” (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 238). What is more, Esperance can spot goodness in Johnny almost at first sight even though she continues to act cautiously and suspiciously: “There was something in his face she did not expect to see. She believed she could see he was a good man. Things like that turn up in the eyes of humans, yet rarely in the slimy eyes of the Toads” (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 240). Laura Singeot attributes the sudden unfolding of the dialogue to the space and analyses the desert as a place in which all boundaries, including cultural ones, blur (7). Her conclusion therefore calls for an active (re)building of solidarity with everyone, even with those who are or have been perceived as cultural others, both in the extraliterary and science fictional reality:

Transculturalism is stimulated by open space: the desert functions as a contact zone [...]. Its open-endedness and its blurring of boundaries give room for engaging with the Other, forming unexpected alliances and reconfiguring those relationships – from a common experience of place resting on struggle and imbalance to a renegotiation of interconnectedness. (Singeot 11)

In addition, in *Terra Nullius*, the overall atmosphere among the human and Settler characters in the desert is compared to the environment surrounding them: “The stifling hot air was filled with the tension of everybody, Natives and Settlers alike, holding their breaths. Even the air was silent, dead, unwilling to breathe on the land” (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 272). This quote both supports Singeot’s argument as it highlights the commonality of experience in the same space and gives an impression that everything that lives and breathes in that environment, including the land itself, forms a continuum. The latter point is in accordance with the Indigenous Australian notion of the environment, which views the land as part of the community, as a family member (Coleman, *Lies* 250). For this reason, the above cited personification of the environment can function as a reminder to the novel’s white readers that

the land and the air are also crucial components of the story, players that should not be glossed over.

4. Environmental concerns and their colonial roots

In opposition to the Indigenous concept of land stands the Christian, that is, Western one, which, as already indicated, informed the *terra nullius* doctrine. Warren Cariou and Isabelle St-Amand explicate this as they point to the close proximity between environmental concerns and settler colonial endeavours: “For more than five centuries, conceptions of the land as an empty space to be appropriated, commodified, and exploited have been called upon to legally legitimize and morally justify settlement and economic development” (10). Because of this connection, consequences of persistent colonising practices for the environment and climate in Australia find expression in numerous descriptions of the altered landscape and the heat in *Terra Nullius*. This trope of both devastating and devastated environment has multiple meanings in Coleman’s novel, which, among other things, exposes multiple layers of colonisation in Australia. Firstly, from the point of view of European settlers, and especially in comparison to their “mother country”, Australia was deemed “an unforgiving land with harsh climatic conditions” (Polak, “Unpunishable Crimes” 7). In this respect, Joëlle Gergis claims that “life ‘Down Under’ often seemed like an all-stations journey through the Apocalypse” in the eyes of some of the first colonial settlers (23). The main reasons for this were Australia’s unpredictable weather, temperature swings, summer heats and its infertile land (Gergis 13-22). Hence, this motif has, as already stated, become one of the clichés of the 19th-century Australian literary canon (Polak, “Unpunishable Crimes” 5). In addition, Australia is sometimes referred to as “the sunburnt country”, a metonymy that foregrounds the continent’s naturally relentless, dry and hot climate (Polak, *Razvoj* 208). Secondly, however, because of the novel’s futuristic timeframe, the reader of *Terra Nullius* is confronted with what life in Australia might look like

in the second half of the 21st century if greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. In her book about the history and future of climate in Australia, Gergis describes this development in quite a graphic way: “you can think of climate change in Australia as natural climate variability on steroids, with warmer temperatures artificially enhancing nature’s more extreme performances” (220). In *Terra Nullius*, this is enacted through various allusions to long-lasting droughts, dry riverbeds or probably most commonly – through all-pervading descriptions of the scorching heat: “Even first thing in the morning the heat was noticeable, and when the sun made it overhead it would become unbearable, driving everybody but the eagles into the dappled shade under the trees” (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 213). Furthermore, Coleman gives an impression of this naturally hot climate on steroids by coming up with alien, amphibian-like characters who are especially susceptible to water scarcity. The way in which the Toads deal with this issue, which people shall inevitably face in Australia of the future, does read as a comment on the contemporary society’s overconsumption in the face of proofs and visible signs of the impending water crisis.⁵ The Toads thus use water for bathing, sometimes even twice or three times a day, just to cool themselves a bit:

There would be more water for drinking, more for growing crops if there was a little less bathing. Not that he would consider complaining to home about it. Bathing was an inalienable right for his people and he could not complain when he was as guilty as anyone. (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 253)

Finally, Coleman puts so much stress on the environment to exhibit the twofold colonial origin of the climate crisis in the novel. To demonstrate the parallelism between the environmental destruction caused by two separate alien invasions, the author uses the motif of

⁵ According to the UN World Water Development Report published in March 2023, nearly 1 billion people in cities around the world deal with water stress today and the number is likely to reach between 1.7 billion and 2.4 billion within the next three decades (Harvey).

roads to stress how both Native and Settler roads irreversibly changed the landscape: “Settler roads, deep calm canals cut through the forest, through hills, caring not what damage they did. [...] Native roads – ribbons of hard black stones held together with solidified petroleum” (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 199). Furthermore, Gergis also clarifies that the rise in the greenhouse gas emissions started to assume worrying scale after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution: “The ice-core record allows us to contextualise the dramatic rise in carbon dioxide levels from about 280 ppm (parts per million) at around the start of the industrial era in the 1800, to 409 ppm in May 2017” (140).⁶ In other words, the start of this development in Australia exactly coincides with the 1788 invasion. In this respect, when it comes to more concrete changes to the environment that have come as a result of the British settlement of Australia, Gergis writes: “In the 230 years since then, we have cleared much of the land’s native vegetation and developed large-scale agricultural and mining practices that have taken a heavy toll on our soil and waters” (174). Interestingly, the influence of invasive species is granted prominence in *Terra Nullius* as well. Coleman thus describes “a thicket of alien vines” that needs so much water and space that no other plant is allowed access to those resources in the vicinity of the vines (*Terra Nullius* 172). Moreover, Whyte mentions species loss alongside other calamities that many indigenous peoples already experienced as a consequence of colonisation, while non-indigenous peoples only fear they might strike them in the future (226). In this respect, he also speaks of ecosystem collapse, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration (Whyte 226). Whyte goes on to elucidate that many indigenous peoples lost their relationships to local plants or animals or were compelled to adapt to a new climate as a result of land dispossession and forced relocation (226-27). Accordingly, the reader of *Terra Nullius* can follow how younger Natives of the Earth speak of what is everyday reality for most readers as

⁶ In order to make the numbers easier for laypersons to grasp, Gergis maintains that “the last time carbon dioxide levels were at 400 ppm was during the mid-Pliocene geologic period, around three million years ago” (143). She goes on to point out that humans did not exist at that time and that the Earth was some 2-3 degrees warmer than it is today (Gergis 143).

stories and legends. Finally, all characters in *Terra Nullius* that run from Settlers are forced to adapt to the driest and hottest of climatic conditions in order to survive. Interestingly, it is in the context of the necessary climate change adaptation that the reader finds out that Esperance is white, or at least used to be white before the Toads arrived: “She liked the peace, she liked to hunt before the sun hit the sky – it was cooler and more comfortable on her skin that humans had called ‘white’ before the Toads came, before skin colour became irrelevant” (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 257).

This awareness that the climate crisis is not a trend, or a recent development, but a series of catastrophes that have profoundly impacted both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples around the globe since the beginning of colonial practices is already implied in the very definition of the Anthropocene. Adeline Johns-Putra thus argues that “the very concept of the Anthropocene as a *geologic* time period is a reminder that human agency has assumed non-human proportions” (30, emphasis in the original). Still, the climate crisis today seems to be one collective blind spot, with which the world’s governments continue to deal ignorantly and obtusely as they widely refuse to see that the climate crisis is a crisis that needs to be seriously addressed as soon as possible even though its worst manifestations are yet to come. According to the latest Emissions Gap Report from the UN Environment Programme, “current pledges under the Paris Agreement put the world on track for a 2.5-2.9 °C temperature rise above pre-industrial levels this century” (“Nations must go further”). While the initial goal set in Paris in 2015 is the famous 1.5 °C warming limit that should be reached by 2030, Gergis argues that not even this most optimistic outcome would be enough for a safe climate on the planet because human activities started to impact global temperature rise even before the Agreement’s 1850 baseline (168). The future looks even bleaker for Australia that, according to Gergis, is the most vulnerable country in the so-called developed world because of its climate variability (219). To illustrate, Gergis quotes Peter Christoff and his colleagues, who estimated that 4 degrees

warming would be reached as early as the 2070s in Australia if high emissions continue (254). Given all that, it is not accidentally that Coleman sets her story in the second half of the 21st century rather than in a more distant future. Furthermore, Gergis also touches upon the psychology of climate change by citing Sally Weintrobe, who elucidates that “actively blocking feelings of empathy and concern to avoid psychological pain is a common human defence mechanism that is designed to protect us from becoming too emotionally overwhelmed” (qtd. in Gergis 266). In this respect, *Terra Nullius* as an “empathy bomb” once again performs the task of *showing* to its readers what scale the consequences of inaction could assume. Even though this is, as Weintrobe concedes, not easy to digest, seeing even the bleakest future scenarios in one’s mind’s eye is what the contemporary moment in history needs in order for transition and change to be first strongly advocated for and then accelerated. Finally, in the spirit of both the Indigenous Australian concept of time as everywhen and the definition of the Anthropocene as a geologic period, Coleman’s novel speaks from the past and the future to present generations who might think that the climate crisis does not or will not concern them.

5. Conclusion

Claire G. Coleman continues the tradition of tiddaism that encompasses Aboriginal women authors who have been writing (auto)biographical texts in order to process the fates of the Stolen Generations. However, Coleman devotes herself to the same topic within the framework of science fiction, that is, Indigenous futurism. She changes the basic premises of science fiction, so that they suit one of her goals, which is to expose “facts and events that have been systematically excluded from Australian history” (Stratton). What leaves enough space for the author of *Terra Nullius* to delve deep into the colonial history of Australia is the postponed introduction of the novum, i.e. of the iconography of science fiction into the novel’s story, with which Coleman *de facto* lays bare the genre of science fiction. The shift to science

fiction, which happens roughly half way through the book and which translates the story into an intergalactic setting, carries with it the second aspect of Coleman's project in *Terra Nullius*. As she mentions in the Garret podcast, one of her motives to write *Terra Nullius* was to make the history of Australia after the 1788 invasion more understandable to those fully unfamiliar with the crimes arising from the British settlement ("Claire G. Coleman" 06:18-06:56).

As the thesis has shown, the application of Suzanne Keen's broadcast strategic empathy shows how the text induces empathy for the discriminated group in white readers whose experiences are far apart from those of Indigenous Australians. Furthermore, after the novum is introduced, different focalisers in the text suddenly equate all human beings with Indigenous Australians, while also repeatedly comparing them to the Toads, the alien settlers in the novel. Coleman thus broadens the possibility for her readers to empathize with Indigenous Australians and allows them to better understand the historical invasion from the perspective of the First Australians by putting her white audiences into the shoes of Aboriginal Australians, that is, by allocating them "the same low status" in the new hierarchy in the novel's story-now (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 159). In other words, Coleman tries to make her readers see the political situation in Australia haunted by colonial ghosts very clearly, a situation in which not only politics but also racial and cultural differences play their parts and in which therefore, as Martha Nussbaum argues, "listening requires not just arguments but a cultivation of imagination" (Nussbaum, Garvey 3). Coleman also comments on the state of the contemporary society as the Toads and their blind faith in technology and lust for new resources bear many resemblances to the current state of human civilisation. In this context, it is significant, that in *Terra Nullius*, a kind of society in which racial and class differences cease to play any role, can surface only if the human capitalist project is cancelled. On the one hand, this is another cautionary lesson from the past for Coleman's white readers since humans in the novel, as well as Indigenous Australians in colonial Australia, need "to be reduced to a marginal class within the capitalist

mode of production” in order for colonization to be successful (Stote 46). On the other hand, the postracial and postnational society that is imagined in *Terra Nullius* corresponds to what Darko Suvin defines as “the initial impulse of SF”, namely to offer “radically other possibilities of life” from the perspective of a repressed group (89). In this respect, as the thesis argues, Coleman’s ideas about radically different possibilities of life for everyone on the planet boil down to the importance of new alliances across races, classes and species, which favour “mental and emotional technology” over war machines and the desire for profit, thus allowing knowledges from various cultural sources to circulate and to positively impact everyone (Coleman, *Terra Nullius* 139).

Similarly, when it comes to the environmental concerns, the novel conditions the possibility of hope on a radical change in the current, extra-literary state of affairs. However, rather than imaging a utopian future in which the consequences of changing climates have been prevented, the novel confronts its readers with a far bleaker and a more realistic scenario. In this respect, Coleman once again employs narrative imagination to sketch the consequences of ongoing burning of fossil fuels that in Australia dates back to the year of the invasion. Reminiscent of the goals set in Paris in 2015 to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees by 2030, Coleman describes the scorching heat and long-lasting droughts in a 2041 Australia. Furthermore, many situations in which the human characters in the novel find themselves resemble the experiences of indigenous peoples around the world who have already been forced to adapt to new ecosystems and climates as a consequence of a series of Western colonial practices such as land dispossession or forced relocation. In addition, against the backdrop of the second apocalyptic invasion in the novel’s story-now, the author is careful to highlight that the climate crisis has been triggered centuries before the arrival of the Toads, who only bring it to an extreme with their utter carelessness.

Finally, with its emphatic and productive challenging of its white readers' privileged position of passivity, Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* provides the readers with a lot of food for thought, as well as with sufficient reasons to try to become more attentive and active citizens. This first applies to the question of the rights and autonomy of Indigenous Australians, who were only recently denied a participation in political decision-making that directly concerns them. Secondly, this equally applies to the present urgency to ambitiously tackle the climate crisis now in order to avert the most disastrous effects of human activity on Earth, towards which we are actually heading with the current scale of the fossil fuel emissions.

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Abstract and key words

Terra Nullius is a debut novel by Claire G. Coleman, who belongs to the latest generation of Indigenous Australian authors who have been opting for Indigenous futurism, i.e. changed perimeters of mainstream science fiction in order to address a series of issues that are of both historical and contemporary relevance for Indigenous Australians. The novel's innovativeness and political importance rests on a narrative twist that defogs the science fictional time frame and nature of the story-now as late as in Chapter 10. The thesis thus argues that the shift is employed in order to strategically target a wider audience against the background of perpetual racism in Australia and the global climate crisis. Additionally, the author herself describes *Terra Nullius* as an "empathy bomb", which is one of the reasons to apply Suzanne Keen's broadcast strategic empathy in the first part of the novel that foregrounds the history of Aboriginal Australians. Moreover, the shift from Indigenous Australians to human beings in general not only universalizes the story but also directly corresponds to Martha Nussbaum's narrative imagination defined as a means of imagining what it might be like to be in the shoes of a disadvantaged social group, which further informs the discussion of how *Terra Nullius* tries to provoke empathy for Indigenous Australians in its white audiences. Finally, the thesis analyses the complex environmental theme that functions as a leitmotif in the novel and claims that the author both points to the colonial origin of already present climate crises and uses narrative imagination to make the case for urgent action in the present for the future. Furthermore, the discussion also looks into the non-linear concept of time in the context of Indigenous futurism, as well as its complex meanings for various indigenous communities, including Indigenous Australians; and the suggestive inclusion of Indigenous culture and "forgotten" historical facts into the narrative in order to dispel common misconceptions from Australia's colonial history.

Key words: *Terra Nullius*, Claire G. Coleman, Indigenous futurism, science fiction, narrative imagination, broadcast strategic empathy, climate crisis