

## Speculating reality: a review of Claire Coleman's *Terra Nullius*

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Fiction has the power to show the reality of people's experiences and spark emotion in those who read it. Speculative fiction especially has been used to observe our political and cultural climate and project an image of what is possible, even probable, through speculating about worlds that are unlike our own reality. My shelf is filled with speculative dystopian novels; George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, exploring surveillance and censorship in an authoritarian State, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, studying conservative approaches that tyrannize women. *Terra Nullius*, written by Wirlomin Noongar woman, Claire Coleman, sits beside these classics in its own right, detailing the dystopia generated by colonialism in Australia.

*Terra Nullius* begins to explore the violent history of Australia's colonisation through a lens of historical realism. The novel intertwines perspectives of the 'Native' and the 'Settler' to recount the harrowing experiences of stolen children, the eradication of language, frontier massacres, land theft, slavery and imprisonment. Through this, Coleman demonstrates how invasion and attempts to exterminate the owners of the land and erase their cultures was both 'immoral and criminal' (Latimore 2018).

The first half of the book is carried by Jacky, who escapes from captivity in an internment camp and establishes a legacy of resistance as he searches for his ancestral lands and an understanding of his own history. It is characters like Jacky that provide an example of the harrowing tale of the Stolen Generations and its enduring impact on the Aboriginal experience. The novel's beginning remains ambiguous enough that it feels disturbingly familiar to the truth of Australia's past, that we have come to understand. However, through the words of a fictional article from the Herald Sun in the year 2041, Coleman reveals a human/alien binary which opens a new frame to observe the impact of colonisation and sends us somewhere worryingly futurist; 'This is not an invasion...to them this is an empty planet ripe for their settlement' (Coleman 2017, p. 122).

Coleman uses speculative fiction as a frame through which to understand invasion and the colonisation of Aboriginal land. While the genre is generally characterised through aliens and advanced technology, author Samuel R. Delany claims the futuristic setting is used 'to ponder



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the future implications of society's present problems' (Morrison 2017, p. 9). Coleman's use of the genre challenges the history of British invasion to expose the devastating trauma endured by Aboriginal people throughout these encounters. Analogies to Australia's colonisation are used as a strategy to create this dystopian environment, which emphasises the violence and confusion that Aboriginal people endured. Coleman's parallels between the reality of British invasion and the dystopian experience prove to the reader that Aboriginal people are living in their own post-apocalyptic world.

Interestingly, Coleman's transition to a futuristic Australia has the ability to extend this vision of a post-apocalyptic world. To be more precise, this genre delivers a forewarning about the future. Exploring Australia's colonialist past through the lens of speculative fiction, rooted in historical realism, demonstrates that the themes of racism and Aboriginal suffering are just as poignant today. There remain lasting negative effects, passed through generations, from the disruption of Aboriginal culture and identity (Healing Foundation 2013).

Intergenerational trauma - trauma transferred from the first generation of survivors directly experiencing traumatic events to further generations - 'reduces the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to fully and positively participate in their lives and communities' (Healing Foundation 2013). This historical trauma can become embedded in the collective memory of a people, becoming normalised through generations (Duran & Duran 1995 cited in; Healing Foundation 2013). *Terra Nullius* emphasises the reality that events of the past continue to threaten the Aboriginal community of the present and future.

Stories like these, from Aboriginal authors like Coleman, are important to rebalance the story of Australia's history and acknowledged the enduring trauma of living in an apocalyptic world. For almost 250 years, Australian history has been written by the White Settlers. Stanner uses the phrase 'the Great Australian Silence' to describe the marginalisation of Aboriginal histories within the story of Australia's past. History was constructed with an 'intense concentration on ourselves and our affairs', while Aboriginal people are neglected or left merely as 'a melancholy footnote' in our history (Stanner 1969, pp. 24-25).

Therefore, it is vital that the voices of Aboriginal people are included, even privileged, in constructing the history of Australia. Indigenous voices are undervalued in the literary landscape of Australian history and politics, often discouraging people from writing. However, as Coleman highlights herself, 'Indigenous stories are fundamental to Australia's understanding of itself', and it will take time to rebalance the 'legacy of privilege' where the literary stage has been dominated by white authors for centuries (Coleman 2018). Coleman wrote the novel using the pain of colonisation, with the purpose of reaching a particular category of reader and '[provoking] empathy in people who had none' (Sullivan 2017). In fact, Coleman uses the fictional medium as a tool to open the door to a wider, mainstream population of readership. The accessible medium allows the message within the book to reach everyday Australians and promotes the understanding and respect that Coleman strives for. Moreover, as the book is released in new markets, the United States in particular, the message can reach further to encourage people to consider the experiences of their own Indigenous populations.

Overall, Claire Coleman's *Terra Nullius* is a suspenseful and intriguing piece of fiction that manages to reveal a strong vision of the truth. Using the tool of speculative fiction, she creates a world that parallels the traumatic events of Australia's colonisation and details the apocalyptic experience that Aboriginal people endured. These are the stories that need to be told as Aboriginal authors are a crucial player in creating a collective history of, and future for, Australia.

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