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ARTICLE

Reading Climate Fiction (and Nonfiction) through First Nations Cultural Genre Theory

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Abstract

For Indigenous peoples, all stories begin with Country. And as climate change reveals, all stories will end with Country too. This paper re-examines popular framings of the climate fiction (cli-fi) genre, and the ways ancient and contemporary First Nations realities disorganise colonial and western conceptions of what we call climate stories. For context, I'll first illustrate how my research project Laying Down the Lore re-organises speculative fiction (spec fic) genre theory more broadly in an indigenous cultural sense.

Keywords: climate fiction; speculative fiction; Indigenou

Acknowledgements

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I'm grateful to the Dharug, Kulin and Bundjalung nations wherein this research and writing took form, especially elders and all those ancestors, some of whom are mine too, who nourished their Countries and each other for millennia, and still do to this day, despite the last few hundred apocalyptic years. It is because of their care of Country through culture, that we are able to enjoy being here today, in spite of colonial destruction of land, water, and people's liberty and sovereignty. Yoway, I'm especially grateful to my community, the Tweed Gooris of Bundjalung jugun, who brought me up in Bundjalung culture. Bugalbeh!

Introduction to *Laying Down The Lore* research project

For Indigenous peoples, all stories begin with Country. And as climate change reveals, all stories will end with Country too. This paper re-examines popular framings of the climate fiction (cli-fi) genre, and the ways ancient and contemporary First Nations realities disorganise colonial and western conceptions of what we call climate stories. For context, I'll first illustrate how my research project *Laying Down the Lore* re-organises speculative fiction (spec fic) genre theory more broadly in an indigenous cultural sense.

I currently hold the Macquarie University Fellowship for Indigenous Research. My research project is *Laying Down the Lore: a survey of First Nations speculative, visionary and imaginative fiction*. For three years from November 2023 to 2026, I am researching and writing speculative fiction; my main scholarly output will be a monograph, the world's first comprehensive survey of our people's spec fic. Each chapter of my book focuses on a different spec fic subgenre, so I'll have one chapter on science fiction, one on climate fiction, one on ghost stories and the gothic, another on horror, one on futures of utopias, dystopias and apocalypse, and a final chapter on weird or slipstream fiction. I haven't figured out what I'll call the final chapter yet, but it concerns the stories that don't fit neatly into the other chapters. In this paper I focus on climate stories as this chapter feels the most theoretically developed.

Within each chapter, I'm developing fresh, culturally-grounded theory about these subgenres. This theory will allow scholars and general readers alike to enter our stories in their proper cultural contexts, deepening their understandings of our worldviews and cultures, as well as promoting cultural competency among the readership and fostering good relations. I plan for my book to also act as a compendium of all published works in the field, so that readers can find new texts and authors in their reading. I'll be excerpting these texts, and including close readings of key passages to illustrate genre conventions and literary techniques. I hope this will promote close reading of the blackfella, or First Nations, spec fic canon.

My preliminary research was all desk work. I created a database of every single First Nations speculative fiction text ever published, and then I closely read each text (or rather, I reread in the majority of cases), taking notes focussing on genre in the texts. There are 112 texts in my database so far, tagged by genre and other common themes, and I've read all but 3 of them. Not long to go. But it's fun work and I'm grateful I get to do it. Once all my notes are entered in I'll be compiling all the notes for each distinct subgenre then begin drafting the chapters using the texts as examples. In this way, it's a completely research-led project, where I must be methodical if I'm going to be thorough.

I'll discuss my cli-fi research in due course, but first here's some background in my reading and writing of the genre. *Laying Down the Lore* follows on from two previous projects, and extends my research and creative writing in both. In 2022, I edited *This All Come Back Now: an anthology of First Nations speculative fiction*, which was the world's first blackfella spec fic collection. In it, there are 22 stories that feature all different subgenres of spec fic, such as ghost stories, bush horror, sci fi, futurism, surrealism and satire. For the last half of the book most of the stories can be considered climate stories. *This All Come Back Now* grew out of my Doctor of Arts project at the University of Sydney from 2017 to 2021 where I created a new genre of spec fic called Goori Futurism, and in 2024, I published *Always Will Be*, a spec fic short story collection that began its life as my doctoral project. Many of the stories in *Always Will Be* are climate stories too.

Cultural genre theory in *Laying Down The Lore*

The field of First Nations spec fic has exploded in recent years. Many spec fic subgenres, such as cli fi, are appealing to our writers and readers because they allow us to consider issues from our past, present and future in defamiliarised and inventive ways. *Laying Down the Lore* investigates how and to what ends our writers are employing spec fic to tell our stories. Interrogating common

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themes and tropes through genre theory reveals important things about contemporary Indigenous cultural imagination and expression.

Now here's where things get interesting: I'm reading these texts through a cultural genre lens, not a Western one, though, of course there is some overlap. This means I'm taking a long view of First Nations storytelling traditions, rejecting the idea that speculative or imaginative fiction is new or novel to us.

If we define the speculative or imaginative as a set of storytelling sensibilities and/or literary techniques, these have always been used by First Nations storytellers. In fact, all of our ancient, cultural stories have used what would today be described as spec fic literary techniques, tropes and devices for millennia, to entertain and to educate — for example, world-altering climate change, time warps, demons, spirits and ghosts are found in many of our stories (Saunders, 2022b, pp. 8–9). Our old people always knew the value of fantastic elements for their stories and our writers today like to apply these protocols to our own contemporary storytelling practise too.

In this light, our traditional and contemporary stories must not be read as myths and legends, but as vital and relevant stories about our lives and histories that document how we've lived on our ancient lands replete with spirits, ancestors and other lifeforms and entities since the beginning of time (Saunders, 2022b, p. 9). Without culturally-informed scholarship arising around our creative work, our stories are at risk of being misconstrued and devalued, or otherwise subsumed and assimilated into non-Indigenous readings.

Bundjalung scholar Evelyn Araluen Corr concludes her recent paper by saying that "As Australian literary studies moves towards the increasing representation of Aboriginal and broader First Nations experiences, contexts, priorities and inscriptions, we must prioritise Aboriginal voices in the guidance of theories, pedagogical practice and critical terms"; she says this is because "many of these discourses have reconstituted culturally inappropriate anthropological mechanisms in their engagements with contemporary Aboriginal literatures" (Corr, 2024). Throughout her paper promoting cultural rigour Wiradjuri scholar-critic Jeanine Leane (2023) argues that Aboriginal literary movements flourish and become strong through critique and scholarship that grows with it and around it. Wulli Wulli writer Lisa Fuller (2020) agrees, and brings the two preceding arguments closer toward my specific research priorities, saying that it's important that robust and culturally-grounded spec fic scholarship develop alongside creative work in the genre so that this nascent field is nurtured within a healthy discourse.

So, what's been done? For a long time Palyku spec fic writer Ambelin Kwaymullina (2018a, 2018b) was the only local writing scholarship about First Nations spec fic, though she hasn't published in this field since 2018, meaning that many exciting recent developments largely went unreported, until a new uptake in scholarship by Arlie Alizzi on Indigenous futurisms (Alizzi, 2024a, 2024b), Alice Belette on ghost stories and the gothic (Bellette, 2022, 2024) and Karen Wyld on magic realism (2024). Additionally many book reviews of our work by our critics have been published over the last few years. Prolific critics include Alison Whittaker (2017, 2019), Jeanine Leane (Leane, 2019, 2020, 2022), Claire G. Coleman (Coleman, 2023a, 2023b, 2024) and myself (Saunders, 2023b, 2024b).

Internationally, there has been some interest in a variety of our work over the last few decades, particularly from the American Brian Attebery (2005, 2014) and the Croatian Iva Polak (2017) though both scholars have sometimes misread our work. In contrast, attention from settler Australian scholars has been uneven. Despite there being 130+ published examples of First Nations spec fic (and counting) since 1990, a hugely disproportionate amount focusses on the work of Alexis Wright, and to a lesser extent on Ambelin Kwaymullina and Claire G Coleman. But the vast majority of First Nations spec fic writers have historically received little to no critical or scholarly engagement, and even when their work is studied it is rarely read through an authentic cultural lens. A recent example of local cli-fi theory is "Author experiences of researching, writing and marketing climate fiction" (Cothren, Matthews, & Hennessy, 2023) wherein the authors interviewed sixteen Australian and New Zealand cli-fi authors. The paper acknowledges the

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importance of including marginalised perspectives, such as those of Indigenous authors, as our communities are disproportionately affected by climate change, yet the study does not include any of our authors, perpetuating this erasure.

With *Laying Down the Lore*, I want to extend and update the field, and I want to anchor our reading of black spec fic firmly in our worldview. In my introduction to *This All Come Back Now*, I wrote:

> There are so many common spec fic themes that are just stone-cold reality for us. Right now, right across this continent, we are post-apocalyptic and not yet post-colonial, so all our violent histories of invasion and colonisation must be read as apocalyptic by any standard (Saunders, 2022b, p. 9).

I also talked about how spec fic can sometimes be a problematic label for First Nations writers. Some of our writers outright reject the genre labels they've been saddled with, and I totally get it. But still, how else might we differentiate the stories which definitely, intentionally depart from rationalist materialism, and also away from the sci-fi or fantasy of white colonial imaginings? I want to argue that it's by going back to our roots in cultural stories that we might be able to feel comfortable with some of these labels, especially if we can define them on our own terms and use our own moral and aesthetic values to assert our own reckonings of genre. This is very important stuff not just for literary decolonisation, but for the literal assertion of our sovereignty. So we are not just rejecting shallow readings and colonial corruptions of our stories and their meanings, we are reinscribing our ways of telling and reading stories into the dominant discourse, which pays respect to our old people and our ancestors, and also to all storytellers here and now and yet to come (Martiniello, 2002, p. 94). This is a big claim, yes, but one which my research is slowly but surely backing up.

Let's consider something the great, late American spec fic writer Ursula K. Le Guin said: "Until the eighteenth century in Europe, imaginative fiction *was* fiction. Realism in fiction is a recent literary invention, not much older than the steam engine and probably related to it" (Le Guin, 2007, p. 84). Related, in a recent episode of *Between the Covers* podcast, host David Naimon summarises his guest Amitov Ghosh's assertion that "in older novels, the exceptional and the improbable abound, but in modern novels in contrast, the ordinary and probable are foregrounded" (Ghosh, 2024).

So: before the industrialisation of Western Europe, in all cultures around the world, non-realist or imaginative stories were the norm. We're talking fantasy, fairy stories, folk tales, myths and legends. All these terms have been denigrated and bastardised, but these were the popular modes, the serious stories. That is to say that what we deem speculative or imaginative today was once the everyday, ho hum mode for writers, readers, storytellers and listeners, and it is true of this continent too. Realism has only gained traction in the last few hundred years and it's gained literary supremacy alongside colonial expansion and its driver, capitalism. This tandem rise between the literal and the literary is no coincidence. It's absolutely symbiotic. Let's visit a little of this history now, so we can reconsider what we mean by climate and fiction.

A brief history of early Western cli-fi & the relationship between colonisation and spec fic

In *Cli-Fi: A Companion*, editors Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra (2019) say:

> Climate change fiction is a new literary phenomenon that emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century in response to what may be society's greatest challenge. Climate change is already part responsible for extreme weather events, flooding, desertification and sea level

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> rise, leading to famine, the spread of disease, and population displacement. Cli-fi novels and films are typically set in the future, telling of disaster and its effect on humans, or they depict the present, beset by dilemmas, conflicts or conspiracies, and pointing to grave consequences. At their heart are ethical and political questions: will humankind rise to the challenge of acting collectively, in the interest of the future? What sacrifices will be necessary, and is a green dictatorship our only hope for survival as a species? (i)

Writing for *The Conversation*, Bernadette McBride (2019) gets to the reason this genre is perhaps so popular:

> Cli-fi is probably better known for those novels that are set in the future, depicting a world where advanced climate change has wreaked irreversible damage upon our planet. They conjure up terrible futures: drowned cities, uncontainable diseases, burning worlds – all scenarios scientists have long tried to warn us about. These imagined worlds tend to be dystopian, serving as a warning to readers: look at what might happen if we don't act now.

Both of these statements are good starting points, but I want to reject their kind of Anglo-centric thinking in my conceptions of climate stories. Because anyway, Western climate stories are much older than this millennium, and it's not just scientists who've tried to warn humanity, but colonised people for much longer. Notwithstanding the Biblical story of Noah and the Flood being a very famous, early climate story, many of the genre's most influential contemporary works were produced between Europe's colonial heyday and its nuclear testing era, that is, in the period between the late seventeenth and mid twentieth centuries — the French Jules Verne, and later, the English JG Ballard are two good examples, and we'll discuss them soon. To me, the relationship between the rise of European climate fiction and the colonial and nuclear ages they were produced in is one of consequence and causality, not accidental correlation.

Europe has a rich tradition of spec fic subgenres — gothic, horror, climate fiction, supernatural fiction and fantasy — all of which I'm interrogating further in my research in relation to current First Nations contexts. We know that European powers competed with and influenced each other's political ambitions and literary traditions, and these trajectories are intimately tied together, so Europe is an important site for thinking about the of legacies of genre and colonialism together. Here in the Australian colony, we have inherited many of these literary conventions from our British colonisers. As former colonial powers, with strong and enduring literary traditions in genre fiction, France and Britain have a lot to say, so let's use two authors as examples.

France can lay claim to some of the earliest well-known and enduring works of Western speculative fiction, and it's widely considered that some of the world's first climate fiction come from Jules Verne. His popular adventure stories *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) *Around the World in 80 Days* (1870) and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1873) are widely considered to have laid the groundwork for science fiction. In 1883, Verne wrote *Paris in the Twentieth Century*. Set in the 1960s, the story explores a sudden and serious global temperature drop which lasts for a few years. 1889s *The Purchase of the North Pole* is a novel that explores how humanity might feel the effects of Earth's axis titling — so this is a conscious decision to make climate change the main problem in a story. These texts are considered proto cli-fi, rather than cli-fi proper, as in these stories, we are not yet seeing the actions of humanity being implicated in the issues, rather, climate events are just random things that happen, and have knock-on effects for humanity (Goodbody & Johns-Putra, 2019, p. 2). But given that climate change denialism is rife today, it's never been universally agreed that global heating is driven by humans, and particularly by the wealthy classes.

Over in Britain, in the 1960s JG Ballard wrote three novels that explored climate-induced natural disasters, writing a kind of dystopian, psycho-geographical cli-fi genre in *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Burning World* (1964) (later called *The*

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Drought). In these works, the climate scenarios are starting to get a bit too close to home and far too close for comfort, exploring territory that's uncannily familiar to us in 2025, especially in that the latter scenario is caused by humans. In this period of Ballard's writing, both the British and the French were nuking indigenous lands and people around the globe.

I won't go into the history of cli-fi that follows this period, but I want us to consider that in the 1970s the terms 'global warming' and 'climate change' really came into common usage. Before this it was mostly scientific jargon, but in 1975 Wallace Smith Broecker published the paper Climatic Change: Are We on the Brink of a Pronounced Global Warming? After this, the terms gradually became part of the public political lexicon, as the effects of fossil fuel consumption on increasing our atmospheric carbon concentrations became more widely understood. After this, more anthropocentric climate fiction began to be published.

Aboriginal cultural climate stories

Cli-fi might be a new genre for Western literature, but let's come back to this continent, and go back much further in time, to our cultural stories. The role of Country in shaping Indigenous literature is as old as time itself. All of our creation stories tell of life-giving climate change.

In the beautiful and powerful introductory chapter of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006), the ancestral rainbow serpent scores its body into the land and creates waterways and new life in its wake. If we consider that all First Nations creation stories begin in similar ways, with life-giving climate change, where ancestor spirits create waterways, animals and people from the formless void, then it would be more correct to say that the aforementioned Western writers are the first science fiction writers to explore life-*destroying* climate change. But if we want to split hairs even further, many of our ancient cultural stories do warn about what can go wrong when country is abused. A well-known is example is the Dreaming story Tiddalik the Frog (Gunnai/Kurnai), which shows the devastation that can happen when greedy entities hoard water meant for the land and all other life.

Also important for this discussion is the longevity of our stories. I wrote elsewhere that:

> Our stories are not just beautiful moral or metaphysical narratives. They are also ancient geographical histories. Some white scientists have become curious about our stories (rather than sneering at them!– as others have done) and, with permission, have used these stories as guides to investigate climate change throughout deep time. Some of these stories have been dated back to the last ice age. They document sea-level changes using narrative techniques to describe what the land once looked like and the ways in which it has changed. Professors Nick Reid and Patrick D Nunn discuss eighteen such examples in their 2015 work 'Ancient Aboriginal stories preserve history of a rise in sea level'. Though not many of these stories have made it into the public realm to be studied in this way, every community holds similar deep-time stories (Saunders, 2022a).

At this point we can confidently say that any Aboriginal story that focuses on Country deals with climate too — whether ancestral, life-making climate change or colonial-capitalism's destructive changes.

In response to common cli-fi definitions that focus on disaster, for our people climate catastrophe is nothing new, and it is not the stuff of fiction. If we take cli-fi to be any story that features a changing or threatening climate as inextricable from the story, then to Aboriginal people all stories set on the Australian continent post-1788 are climate stories. The climate grief many Australians increasingly feel in the wake of local bushfires, floods and global warming has been felt acutely by Aboriginal people since 1788, when the first swathes of forest were cut down to make houses and farmland in eastern Dharug Country, polluting freshwater, annihilating abundant

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populations fish, birds and other animals, and destroying the intricate cultural systems that kept it all in balance. For more than two centuries, Aboriginal people, in our deep relationships with Country, encompassing attendant rights and responsibilities, have seen unfathomable ecocide enacted hand in glove with our own attempted genocide and we have collectively mourned and fought for Country the whole time.

It is for this reason that the term 'Anthropocene' leaves a bad taste in my mouth. The name and concept is an insult to land-based cultures. It lumps all peoples together as the problem, a post-racial lie that suggests all people have parted ways with the planet. As an all-inclusive term, it absolves colonial-capitalism through erasure of its own responsibility, refusing to see its specific logics and actions as the cause of climate change. And this is why I want people to rethink what we mean by climate fiction.

Let's now visit some of the sovereignty-focussed spec fic stories our people have published over the last three decades, and read them alongside the climate realities of this continent.

Blackfella futurism

Portland State University academic Grace L. Dillon coined the term Indigenous futurism to describe a subgenre of spec fic that grapples with issues that indigenous peoples might face in the future (2012, pp. 1–12). In my doctoral thesis *Goori Futurism: envisioning the sovereignty of country, community and culture in the Tweed* (Saunders, 2021, 2023a) I outlined my criteria for branch of Indigenous futurism called Blackfella Futurism, introducing it as its antipodean offspring, and a sovereign-minded genre of spec fic. However Blackfella Futurism is not simply work that is authored by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and that is set in the future, although these two criteria are foundational. In line with its name, Blackfella Futurism must connect to grassroots politics; this is what makes it a sovereign-minded futurism.

I further delineate these parameters of Blackfella Futurism: to be part of the genre, in addition to being authored by a Blackfella and set in the future, stories must feature at least one identifiably Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander protagonist who is not the last of their race. Why this criteria? As Blackfella grassroots sovereignty politics is focussed on country, community and culture, I argue that Blackfella Futurism should also be concerned with the same, in the future.

One unifying aspect of Blackfella Futurism is that traditional Countries are also future Countries, reflecting that it always was and always will be Aboriginal land. Unsurprisingly, all of the Blackfella Futurism texts are concerned with Country in the future – though some texts emphasise climate change more than others and would be categorised as climate fiction in the narrowest sense of the term. But let's broaden our thinking in line with everything I've spoken about so far. Another running theme of this genre is ecocide, encompassing extinctions, extractive industries and urbanisation, and as art imitates life, in these stories the destruction of country is always correlated with colonial governance.

Global warming & country's consciousness

One issue that arises from discussions of climate is that it is difficult to talk about environmental issues without subsuming Aboriginal cultural relationships to Country into a scientific materialist paradigm that divorces culture and nature, or treats country as dumb, or worse, as inanimate. Understanding Country from a blackfella perspective requires relational thinking, which also rejects humans as the centre of the universe and has us in kinship with all life. This relational knowledge endured through contemporary Aboriginal cultures, and can be found in many of our imaginative stories.

Country has its own powerful consciousness, and our writers imagine this in different ways, as well as Country's responses to its own killing. In many of the stories Country has agency through

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weather events, the actions of animal and plant emissaries, ancestral plantpeople, and also through Aboriginal people who are human expressions of country.

The two earliest Blackfella Futurist works think about climate in their respective contexts. Munanjali and Birri Gubba author and activist Sam Watson's *The Kadaitcha Sung*, the first Aboriginal spec fic novel published in 1990, is set in an urban, dystopian Meanjin/Brisbane and relatively untouched Booningbah/Fingal Head. Climate is marginal in this story, though ancient and ancestral entities are called forth from the spirit realm of Country and step through into mundane reality to influence events. The earliest published, most explicitly Aboriginal climate fiction is Noongar Archie Weller's *Land of the Golden Clouds*, from 1998, which could be placed in the dying earth genre. The Aboriginal Keeper of the Trees community still live traditionally under the scorching sun, made so harsh through runaway global warming effected by an historic nuclear war that changed the landscape and ecosystem irrevocably (Weller, 1998, p. 56). The sun is personified as the goddess Melanoma, whose touch can be fatal for fair-skinned people as her "kisses and caresses left a body covered in ugly sores to die a painful, slow death, cooked alive by her hot love" (Weller, 1998, p. 20).

Climate is integral to the storylines in most of the more recent works, like *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright (Waanyi), where climate change has been so severe as to create a lush green swamp in the middle of the Australian continent (pp. 17–18). In this story, the eucalyptus tree cocoons Oblivia after her sexual assault, and her totemic swans are central to her journey away from the swamp and back again (Wright, 2013, pp. 7–8; 13–16).

In these stories, environmental and social catastrophes are orchestrated by white governments and corporations and if they are resolved, it is through Aboriginal community cohesion and ancestral collusion, like in Water by Ellen van Neerven (Yugambeh) which opens with "the twenty or so [Quandamooka] islands off the Brisbane coastline" about to be terraformed by "joining them to create a super island" for Aboriginal people to self-segregate onto (2014, p. 74). This is part of the government's "Australia2 project," slated for completion by 2028 (van Neerven, 2014, p. 70). In Water, country is characterised through the plantpeople entities who express distress at ecocide, one of whom cares deeply about the First Nations protagonist (van Neerven, 2014, pp. 78–80).

Ecocide, extinctions & settler-colonial climate washing

If we're talking climate, we're talking capitalism and colonial logic, and by extension we're talking about public relations. We therefore need to talk about the green washing that settler colonies do; this is evident in Australia's track record versus its image of itself. Since 1788, Australia has been responsible for around 9000 distinct species extinctions — a grotesquely disproportionate number of global extinctions for this period — which are directly attributed to ecocidal processes of colonial-capitalism such as land clearing, and development and extractive industries (Woinarski et al., 2024). Despite these facts, Australia markets itself to tourists as a pristine destination of rugged outback beauty and rare native animals. How do we reconcile this image with the facts?

Some First Nations spec fic writers expose colonial greenwashing through their work and pin the tail on the donkey, so to speak. In her most recent novel *Praiseworthy*, Alexis Wright (2023) looks at the problem of feral donkeys and cats in the north of the continent. In this story a massive, dusty, ancestral haze hangs over the town, heating everything up and driving the townsfolk crazy. This haze is understood to be a symptom of global warming — one that the town sees and feels, but the white government denies. Special Economic Zone by Kalkadoon writer John Morrissey (2023b) is named after a Northern Territory Intervention-like quarantine zone built from the spoils of an open cut mine that can be seen from outer space. The world is hot, people are controlled, are both things are related.

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Indigenous Countries suffer because degradation of people and place are inextricably linked. Colonial-capitalism not only dispossesses people of land — and land of people — but seeks to stamp out culture of both land and people. The Australian colonial carceral culture was directly responsible for ecocide - ie. keeping our people locked into reserves and missions, forced into work and stealing our children. All this theft of people and exploitation of labour enabled the theft and exploitation of land.

Two recent short stories interrogate the extinction of the thylacine on a continuum of time and imagine its resurrection via artificial surrogacy, while subtly nodding to Australia's carceral culture. Also by John Morrissey, The Rupture (2023a) is set in 2038 and imagines a Frankensteinian scientific experiment against the backdrop of Australia's semiquincentenial celebrations. Thylacine by Jasper Wyld (2022) (Martu) considers the past, present and possible future of the thylacine. Both stories meditate on the ethical and spiritual ramifications of resurrecting the thylacine considering its brutalised history, and these entanglements haunt the protagonists through their dreams.

Colonial climate violence is global, interconnected and ongoing. As polities founded on genocide and ecocide, Australia, along with the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Israel for example, have always had a problem with respecting indigenous peoples, the environment, and the relationship between both. We are seeing this tandem destruction in real time in Occupied Palestine. Like Australia did and still does, settler-colonial ethnostates like Israel market themselves as progressive in contrast with the native cultures they subjugate, but Israel is currently committing genocide against Palestinian people, as well as ecocide against their Countries. Sanabel Abdelrahman (2024) says

> Palestinian land continues to be subjected to Israeli settler-colonial violence through the uprooting and burning of trees, the contamination of water, the criminalisation of Palestinian foraging of their wild plants, throwing phosphorus in the air, and preventing Palestinians from burying their dismembered loved ones deep in the ground.

These horror stories are familiar to native peoples everywhere, and we know these stories to be the same around the planet and throughout time because they've been meticulously documented by indigenous storytellers and artists across forms and genres.

Urban Country & fascism

Australia has been an ecocidal and genocidal driver of climate catastrophe for much longer than Israel, yet it paints itself as a bush-friendly tourist destination, where authentic Aboriginality is located in the outback, and urban blacks, who are by far our largest population, are deemed inauthentic — particularly when city blackfellas are also activists. This is important for contextualising our climate situations today and in the future, especially in light of Australia's massive role in global coal, gas and uranium exports, and how black activists have always been maligned for protecting country and increasingly, white activists are being fined heavily too, rendering civil protest a dangerous thing for the average person.

Country isn't just remote or regional places, and self-determining Aboriginal people do not only live out in the desert. Ryan Griffen's *Cleverman* (Blair & Purcell, 2016-2017) and Alison Whittaker's (Gomeroi) The Centre (2018) are both set in Redfern, Sydney, which is a real-world site of Aboriginal self-determination in health, housing, law and culture, although the titular 'Centre' is also a nowhere-but-everywhere country, a virtual and augmented reality (Whittaker, 2018, pp. 136–139). The world of this story is "a continent besieged by fire, starvation and water" and "rivers and beaches variously flooded and depleted" (Whittaker, 2018, p. 136). Real-life Redfern has recently experienced a neo-colonial incursion through overdevelopment and

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gentrification, affecting the Aboriginal community's relationships to Country (Redfern Oral History). The dystopian worlds of *Cleverman* and The Centre examine these kinds of impacts through the fascism of forced segregation, and Aboriginal escapism, respectively (Blair et al., 2016-2017; Whittaker, 2018).

Hannah Donnelly's (Wiradjuri) Before the End of Their World (2018) and van Neerven's Each City (2019) are both urban short stories set in fascist versions of the future. Before the End of Their World takes place in a near future Naarm/Melbourne, where Aboriginal people have been relocated into work camps to rehabilitate Country; Tully rebels by sneaking into a field of murnong/yam daisies and digging them up. Each City follows hip-hop artist Talvan's escape from fascist Meanjin/Brisbane and their exile in another country (van Neerven, 2019, pp. 216–223). One reading of these stories, as well as in the city settings of *The Kadaitcha Sung*, *Land of the Golden Clouds* and *The Swan Book*, is that total urbanisation equals dystopia for our people (Watson, 1990; Weller, 1998; Wright, 2013).

New climate apocalypses

I want to finalise this exploration of the field of blackfella climate fiction so far with a discussion about some of our more traditional post-apocalyptic climate stories.

Krystal Hurst's Lake Mindi (2019) follows a family of climate refugees through Wiradjuri country; the travellers are sustained by each other and their memories of family and culture, and are driven on by hope for water and community. Many of my own stories from *Always Will Be* (Saunders, 2024a) are set in different climates, but four in particular are thought experiments in imagining how my community might live in extreme climate-changed futures. Terranora is a world of intense and rapidly cycling weather systems, Cyclone Season is set in a world where the oceans have risen and the community have found creative ways to live on the water; Our Future in the Stars is set just before a mass earth exodus, with the Tweed and Gold Coast hinterlands underwater and the hot, wet season has extended by months on either side of what it is now; and Cold Coast is set in a frozen world.

Despite what some doomsday climate rhetoric would have us believe, the answer isn't voluntary human extinction. Indigenous Countries were never just left alone. Land was managed through systems of law, which encodes relationships in patterns and cycles. Culture is the reason Aboriginal Countries and communities were so healthy for millennia. Our songlines — which I assert are the oldest continuing transnational literatures — are designed to conserve Country through human stewardship, and to revitalise it through ceremonial activation.

Two stories from *This All Come Back Now* (Saunders, 2022c) consider post-human futures in this way. After the End of their World by Hannah Donnelly and Protocols of Transference by Kathryn Gledhill-Tucker (Noongar) both ask important questions about who or what is considered human, and what knowledges and technologies might save our people and places from annihilation, and whether it will be too late for us.

Closing remarks

I would like to close with some thoughts about why my project is important alongside thinking by three of my favourite writers, Jeanine Leane, Alexis Wright, and Ursula K. Le Guin, all of whose work and ethics are guiding stars for my own creative writing and scholarship. Their words here in particular are lodestones for *Laying Down the Lore*. In her endorsement for my book *Always Will Be* Jeanine said:

> In post-invasion Australia it's time for a reappraisal of the relationship between realism and the speculative, especially when considering the work that First Nations writers are doing to

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> challenge oppressive lived realities through the intentional employment of First Nations' ways of knowing and being in time and place to imagine otherwise (Saunders, 2024a).

When I was applying for my research fellowship in 2023, I had to think about the importance of my project in terms of The National Research Priority Areas. These are all topics that are explored in science fiction and increasingly, in climate fiction. Both sci fi and cli fi are subgenres of spec fic, which is first and foremost a literature of the imagination. Spec fic stories are often thought experiments, asking, *if x were true, then how would y be affected?* Spec fic writers have often been the heralds of new thought and technology, and spec fic texts and scholarship have ushered in advances in innovation and culture, particularly in the realms of technology and sociology (Wyatt, 2022). For example, the sci fi genre of cyberpunk has inspired many developments in computing, including virtual and augmented reality, and social science fiction texts have had a great influence on feminist and queer theory (Pearson, 2003). However, most of the worlds contemporary creative spec fic work has been published by non-Indigenous writers.

Ursula, in her acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation Medal (Le Guin, 2014), said:

> Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom — poets, visionaries — realists of a larger reality.

Stories can influence readers in very strong ways — intellectually and emotionally – and First Nations stories have the potential to change hearts and minds with their power. In these apocalyptic times of climate and political turmoil, it is a matter of global importance that Indigenous ways of being are projected into the world. Indigenous cultures are regenerative (not merely sustainable) as attested by our successful hundred-thousand-year occupations on harsh and fragile countries. Further, although Indigenous peoples only own 5% of the Earth's landmass, our lifeways are responsible for 80% of the planet's biodiversity (IUCN, 2019). This is not a coincidence; our cultural laws encode Country's regeneration, showing that there are ways to live on this planet as symbiotes rather than parasites. A strong relationship between Indigenous arts and sciences could spread these wisdoms and technologies to wider audiences and greatly enrich environmental movements.

In Alexis' *Sydney Review of Books* essay, she talks about the challenge for writers now and in the future, and discusses my favourite thing, which is "Literature that contains well-considered ideas of a global humanity, and are planetary in scope as well as being local, and that are highly imagined" (Wright, 2019). She says:

> Storytelling in our increasingly complex world is likely to become far more difficult, as storytellers grapple with all the complexities now shaking the world in quicker succession, and they will need to become far more innovative and imaginative. The work of literature will become increasingly important, because it will be literature that is capable of offering more thoughtful scope, and far more imaginative possibilities, that will have the capability of transmitting knowledge to expand our understanding of how to think through the realities of our future times (Wright, 2023).

I hope my research can play some small part in this important and life-saving work. Bugalwan, didjirigura, thank you for your interest in my research and your presence and thinking with me today.

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Ethical standard. Nothing to note.

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Author Biography

Mykaela Saunders is a Koori/Goori and Lebanese writer and postdoctoral research fellow at Macquarie University, working on the project Laying Down The Lore: a survey of First Nations speculative, visionary and imaginative fiction. Mykaela edited This All Come Back Now (UQP 2022), the world's first anthology of blackfella speculative fiction, which won an Aurealis Award and was highly commended for the Small Press Network Book of The Year and the Booktopia Favourite Australian Book Award. Mykaela's debut spec fic collection Always Will Be (UQP 2024) won the David Unaipon Award, was shortlisted for the NSW Literary Award Indigenous Writers Prize, longlisted for The Stella Prize and highly commended for the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Indigenous Writing. Mykaela has won other prizes for fiction, poetry, essays and research, including the Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize and the Oodgeroo Noonuccal Indigenous Poetry Prize.

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