

Article

Unpunishable Crimes in Claire G. Coleman's Futuristic Novel *Terra Nullius*

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Abstract: Aside from being part of a vibrant corpus of Indigenous futurism, Claire G. Coleman's novel *Terra Nullius* (2017) can also be analysed as an eco-crime novel. Indigenous Australian authors of this genre (e.g., Philip McLaren, Steven McCarthy, Nicole Watson) often anchor the source of criminal acts in the theft, loss and devastation of traditional lands, which provides their crime novels with a heightened awareness of environmental issues. The same applies to *Terra Nullius*. This is, however, a novel that successfully conceals its futuristic framework until halfway through. Equally, this successfully disrupts the usual postulates of crime fiction by shifting the reader's attention from the usual "whodunnit" to the more elusive "whoizzit" mode of crime fiction. This, as the discussion reveals, means that the criminal acts in *Terra Nullius* are rendered unpunishable. This paradox, as it is argued, is strengthened by introducing the so-called "noir detective" (Timothy Morton) in the character of Father Grark, who cannot investigate that which constitutes the crime and the alibi shaping the world of Coleman's futuristic novel.

Keywords: *Terra Nullius*; Claire G. Coleman; eco-crime fiction; "whoizzit" mode; noir detective; Indigenous futurism

They came in peace, their peace. (Coleman 2017, p. 124)



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1. Introduction

Claire G. Coleman's novel *Terra Nullius* (2017) is part of a diverse corpus of Indigenous speculative fiction or Indigenous futurism. Her novel can also be analysed in the framework of eco-crime fiction in that it depicts colonial crimes against people and their land in a futuristic framework which remains carefully hidden until halfway through. In this context, the work successfully disrupts the usual postulates of eco-crime fiction by repositioning readers' attention from the usual "whodunnit" to the more elusive "whoizzit" mode, asking readers to reconsider the culprit's malfeasance and rethink the nature of these crimes which, under the law in this futuristic land, is non-existent and thus unpunishable. This paradox, as it is argued, is strengthened by the introduction of the so-called "noir detective" whose investigation is rendered ineffectual because he is unable to investigate the nature of the crime/s owing to the aporia central to the world of this novel. Thus, from the Indigenous Australian author's perspective, eco-crime fiction becomes an important tool for dismantling the fallacies of the postcolonial space in which settler-colonial past and present remain deadlocked in an irresolvable stasis.

The paper starts by discussing the tendency of Indigenous fiction in general to bend the pre-existent genres, which also includes eco-crime fiction. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* is no exception in that regard as it constitutes a hybrid work that challenges the usual structure of crime fiction by repositioning the culprit, the crime and its ecological prefix, and the investigation. A special tour de force lies in the novel's futuristic projection that appears halfway into the novel. This temporal surprise and its repercussions on the novel's textual codes are analysed by using Barthes' and Brooke-Rose's theoretical paradigms. The discussion then moves to the presence of the crime of double invasion—the eighteenth-century *terra nullius* and the futuristic *terra nullius* of the story-now—and its impact on the

environment and the Natives who are treated as part of that environment and not as its inhabitants. After considering a series of crimes legitimised by a mere act of invasion, the paper introduces the figure of the detective whose investigative tools and epistemological bedrock make his efforts futile. Finally, the discussion closes with the consequences of the unpunishable crimes of the successive *terrae nullius* and the disclosure of the real culprit, the horrific icon of the alien monster that stares back at humanity, as the novel reveals in its closing paragraph.

2. From Futuristic “Whodunnit” to Futuristic “Whoizzit” Mode

Crime fiction has long ceased to be an exclusive playground of Eurocentric detectives and criminals whose cat-and-mouse game has often evoked the stability of Western modes of rationalism. As Nels Pearson and Marc Singer argue, recent crime fiction and crime fiction studies have “refocused around fundamentally different arguments about how the genre engages structures of knowledge, especially those ‘external’ to the text” (Pearson and Singer 2009, p. 2). This becomes exponentially more apparent when crime fiction is based in contested postcolonial space and is written by an indigenous author who calls into question the dominant structures of knowledge that have shaped “mainstream” crime fiction.

Indigenous Australian fiction in general has always challenged the confines of Western literary genres and accompanying paradigms. Aboriginal fictional worlds often reveal different epistemological matrices. Necessarily, these do not converge with pre-existent literary theories arising from Eurocentric knowledge systems and conventions. In line with Tzvetan Todorov’s claim that “every work modifies the sum of possible works, each new example alters the species” (Todorov [1973] 1975, p. 6), Indigenous Australian authors have been bending and resisting their Anglo-European precursors’ genres to a greater extent than non-Indigenous authors, precisely because their writing is usually grounded in subject matter and storytelling culturally removed from the place of naissance of genre theories. The same revamping of long-established paradigms is evident in Aboriginal crime fiction, a genre that has been around from the 1990s, with Aboriginal writers such as Philip McLaren (*Scream Black Murder*, 1995; *Lightning Mine*, 1999; *Murder in Utopia*, 2007), Steven McCarthy (*Black Angels—Red Blood*, 1998) and Nicole Watson (*The Boundary*, 2011). Owing to the location of their writerly positions, Indigenous crime fiction authors often anchor the source of criminal acts in the loss and devastation of traditional lands, making their readers especially aware of environmental issues. In other words, what they refer to in Aboriginal English as “Country” lies at the core of their writing.

Since its naissance, Aboriginal fiction has been placing the conservation of Country at the forefront and raising the issue of long-term effects of human impact on the environment. In that regard, this corpus could easily fit into a relatively new hybrid genre of climate fiction or cli-fi, which, according to the inventor of the term Dan Bloom, includes novels and films “either in the past, the present, or the future”, which may be utopian or dystopian, and which in general “will take the position that climate change and global warming are real and are happening” (Holmes 2014). Owing to its ongoing environmental concerns, Indigenous Australian fiction could be seen as one of the harbingers of this new global genre.

Claire G. Coleman’s 2017 novel *Terra Nullius* is no exception. Nonetheless, as is the case with many Indigenous Australian novels, especially those coming from writers including Kim Scott and Alexis Wright, *Terra Nullius* defies simple classification as eco-crime fiction. It utilises a holistic approach to environmental issues and criminality because the novel enacts crimes against Country which are equated with crimes against Indigenous peoples. Even though science fiction/speculative fiction or Indigenous Futurism as Grace L. Dillon calls it (see Dillon 2012) would be the easiest way to classify this innovative work, as noted by reviewers of Coleman’s novel (see, e.g., Avery 2019), it is equally possible to focus on the crime and culprits in the starved landscape that underscores the novel’s storyline and argue that this novel also leans on the tendency of Indigenous Australian crime fiction to

respond to “the realities of colonisation. One of the most striking was a strange reworking of Terra Nullius itself” (Knight 2006, p. 18). Knight’s reference to Australia’s *terra nullius* and its realities are central for analysing *Terra Nullius* as belonging to the eco-crime genre despite a seemingly cryptic presence of “eco-crime” in the novel that is used to lay bare the distorted legitimacy of crimes against people and the place they inhabit.

Discussing Coleman’s novel in the context of a relatively fledging genre of eco-crime fiction stems from the genre’s obvious hybrid nature. As a much more recent offspring of mid-nineteenth-century crime fiction, eco-crime fiction has become responsive to a suite of new epistemological concerns and social anxieties. As opposed to crimes perpetrated against other people, eco-crime fiction redirects its focus to crimes against the environment and people inhabiting it. The new spectre haunting this corpus reveals environmental crises and cultural (mis-)understandings of anthropogenic climate change and other human effects on the Earth and its eco-systems. This shift becomes especially poignant when the locale of eco-crime fiction is set on a highly contested postcolonial soil such as Australia, where crime against the environment such as the theft, loss and devastation of traditional lands and its Indigenous peoples is committed “legally” by the government and its stakeholders. This paralyses the possibility of justice and restorative energy of the genre. Consequently, the quintessential detective of crime fiction whose responsibility is to find any sense of closure in what at first glance seems to be a chaotic and virtually undetectable chain of events, can hardly detect, let alone solve the entanglements because the detective’s epistemological makeup lacks the necessary cultural understanding and cross-cultural skills to do so. In other words, eco-crime fiction located in a postcolonial space such as Australia imagines a situation where the detective and the criminal share the same concept of legality because of their shared cultural background, while the victim, whose cultural code is different, remains unprotected.

Coleman’s novel is a model example of a text that disrupts the usual postulates of crime or detective fiction and uneasily unpacks the prefix “eco” in eco-crime fiction. As regards the standardised “dual” structure of crime or detective fiction—i.e., the story of the crime and the story of the investigation (Todorov [1988] 2008, p. 227)—in Coleman’s novels, these two important narrative strands do not have the necessary contact points. The major criminal act that has happened *before* the story-now and affects every facet of the storyline is never investigated because the novel lacks the restorative power of the detective. Moreover, owing to the novel’s projection into the future, the semanticisation of the key culprit demands the shift of the reader’s attention from the usual “whodunnit” mode of crime fiction into the more elusive “whoizzit” mode, which, according to Ann Thomson and John O. Thomson, can have a more diverse texture:

But what if there is something about the field of suspects itself that involves an enigma that goes beyond establishing the identity of the person whose finger was on the trigger, whose hand held the knife? What if identities within the field have themselves been doubled? What if, in elaborating the “whodunnit” aspect of the fiction, the author has found herself moving across into what we might call the “whoizzit” mode? (Thomson and Thomson 1997, p. 52)

The key enigma of Coleman’s novel is the main culprit, the “whoizzit” that remains unnamed halfway into the novel when it is semanticised as an ouroboros that devours its own tail and, in the process, devours everything that came before. Since the culprit’s highly problematic worldview spills over “the continent that was once called Australia” (Coleman 2017, p. 153), environmental crime and crime against people that make up that environment in *Terra Nullius* become *de iure* decriminalised making the agency of the detective problematic if not impossible. If the detective cannot investigate crime against nature and crime against people, the “eco” prefix and the notion of crime in general become destabilised. In this legal stalemate, Coleman introduces a detective whose neutral standpoint automatically means that he enables and perpetuates crime instead of stopping it. In the context of the Anthropocene, this tragic detective is known as the “noir detective”

whose investigation, as Timothy Morton maintains, makes for a strange loop because, from the onset, the detective becomes unknowingly complicit with the crime.

3. From a Dry Past to a Drier Future

The plot of Coleman's novel sounds familiar to any reader versed in Indigenous Australian fiction: Jacky runs away from the mission to escape abuse and find his family, while Johnny leaves the troopers following a massacre of the Natives. Their fates overlap when Jacky saves Johnny's life. Following the clash with colonial troopers, they both die together while the remaining Natives are massacred. When we add the novel's title to this storyline, the reader may easily conclude that what lies between the book's covers is a story of Australia's colonial crime that could fit into a genre broadly identified as historical crime fiction. Ray B. Browne and Lawrence A. Kreiser Jr. place special emphasis on the topic of crime within this genre that befits *Terra Nullius*:

Historical crime fiction, because it is concerned with the details of life that in the past included countless acts of violence, should be called ODCAA (One Damn Crime After Another). In the recounting, such stories teach the uninformed and remind the professionals of the details of everyday life of the past that may not be known or might have been forgotten. (Browne and Kreiser 2007, p. xvi)

The recovery of historical ODCAA is the reason why this genre flourished in Australia already in the late 1980s and 1990s with award-winning novels such as Eric Willmot's *Pemulwuy. The Rainbow Warrior* (1987), Richard Wilkes' *Bulmurn: A Swan River Nyoongar* (1995) and Philip McLaren's *Sweet Water—Stolen Land* (1993). Based on Coleman's desire to show the repercussions of historical ODCAA stemming from Australia's *terra nullius* which deprived Indigenous peoples of the sovereignty over their land, this genre would seem like a logical, if not easier, choice. However, Coleman goes for an innovative approach in the context of Indigenous writing: her novel starts as a historical crime novel only because she manages to consciously trick the reader into believing that the story-now enacts the past. To achieve this effect, she uses multiple ambiguous narratorial instances that frame a distinctive peritext of *Terra Nullius*, i.e., everything within the book "as the title or the preface and sometimes elements inserted into the interstices of the text, such as chapter titles or certain notes" (Genette 1997, p. 5). Peritexts preceding each chapter in Coleman's novel function as excerpts from an archival or historic text. There are letters from the United Graziers Association, fragments from different settler-colonial policies written by various members of colonial administration, newspaper articles, colonial reports, protest speeches, commentaries from different learned men and anonymous poems.

All the way to Chapter 10 or almost halfway into the novel, these quasi-historical commentaries act to mediate Australia's settler-colonial history, enticing the reader into believing that the story-now of the novel is a fictionalized account of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Australia. These commentaries enact such notorious long-term practises as punitive expeditions, Aboriginal children's forcible removal from their settlements and their abuse on mission stations. Further to this, every reader acquainted with Indigenous Australian fiction might have come across a similar peritext in another famous Indigenous novel re-enacting historical crimes, Marie Munkara's colonial satire *A Most Peculiar Act* (2014), in which every chapter is preceded by a corresponding excerpt from the real 1918 Northern Territory Aboriginal Ordinances Act, which reflects the novel's setting (i.e., the wider Darwin area) and timeframe (i.e., 1942), when the policy of assimilation based on the stated NT Act remained valid.

Coleman's *modus operandi* in terms of these parallel texts becomes considerably more entangled than is so in Munkara's novel. Every pseudo-historical text preceding each chapter until Chapter 10 reads as if it has been directly influenced and shaped by a corresponding authentic historical text from the era of Australia's assimilation policies, acting as its literary avatar, as it were. For example, Chapter 1 opens with a commentary by "The Reverend Mother Mary Santeslosh" who writes about her decision to save the souls of the Natives; Chapter 2 opens with a fragment from a testimonial by "Bobby Ken"

who writes about his forcible removal from his family; Chapter 3 reads as a diary entry or a statement by the one “John Farmer, Native Advancement League”, who writes about the newcomers bringing their own crops and animals, with no desire to understand the Natives’ way of life. The chapters that follow these pseudo-historical peritexts contain no hints that would signal to the reader that terms such as “Native” and “Settler”, or even the protagonist Jacky continuously on the run or sergeant Rohan who goes after him, should be interpreted other than as fictionalized accounts of Australia’s settler-colonial years. If we apply Christine Brooke-Rose’s theory of the encoded reader, Roland Barthes’ semic, cultural and symbolic codes are overdetermined “*within the text*” and in “*the reader’s interpretation*” (Brooke-Rose [1981] 1983, p. 123, emphasis in the original). In other words, for anyone versed in Australian history and literature, “Native” immediately signals Indigenous Australians and “Settler” Anglo-Australian settler-colonialists, while Jacky refers to an Indigenous Australian, since this name (and its variant Jacky Jacky) was stereotypically used by settlers as a discriminatory term to infantilise Aboriginal men. In addition, Sergeant Rohan who heads the troopers seems to have been modelled on the troopers of Australia’s colonial past. Moreover, when Rohan describes the setting as

A sun like that, heat like that – it bleached the entire sky yellow-white, nothing like the blue sky one was used to from home. It was that sky that was a warning, the yellow light a warning that this was not a hospitable place. It was the glow of pain, the glow of the end of the world. It was not a friendly colour for a sky to be [.] (Coleman 2017, p. 39)

he evokes Australia’s relentless and unforgiving landscape and climate in comparison to the “mother country”, which is one of the clichés of the nineteenth-century Australian literary canon. As a result, the implied reader ends up mapping a fictional world of Australia’s settler years packed with colonial crime.

Conversely, this is *Terra Nullius*’ key trap as it either underdetermines or overdetermines the codes or conventions that bind the horizon of the reader and that of the text. Out of the five codes—proairetic, hermeneutic, cultural, semic and symbolic—that convey the meaning(s) of the text according to Barthes, Coleman uses the last three to mislead the reader. 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. As Barthes states, all codes “endow the text with a kind of plural quality (the text is actually polyphonic), but of the five codes, only three establish permutable, reversible connections, outside the constraint of time (the semic, cultural, and symbolic codes)” (Barthes [1992] 2002, p. 30). The novel’s semic, cultural and symbolic codes undergo a strange loop in Chapter 10, which in turn affects the novel’s spatiality and temporality. The latter, as Bakhtin maintains, constitutes the primary category in literature (Bakhtin 1981, p. 85) since it defines the genre.

The primary category of temporality in *Terra Nullius*, its story-now, is revealed in the newspaper article preceding Chapter 10 wherein an “unknown author” compares the newly arrived population to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-Europeans who came armed with guns and conquered Australia and its Indigenous population. This time around, these new inhabitants have now conquered the Earth with their superior technology and there are only a few places where humans are free. The reader also learns that Australia as the hottest and driest continent in the world was the last one to be conquered, with 80% of the human population exterminated or kept in “reservations”. As in colonial times, the only safe haven in Australia seems to be the desert because the aliens do not tolerate heat. Finally, the reader learns that the date of this newspaper article is 21 September 2041. This information projects Coleman’s novel into the future and changes the semanticisation of every character, every narrative strand and the setting of the novel. Moreover, it adds a sharp twist to the very date because 21 September is celebrated in the real world as the UN’s International Day of Peace.

As a result, Chapter 10 reveals the extent to which the “[s]emic space is glued to hermeneutic space” (Barthes [1992] 2002, p. 171), since the semic configuration of the “Settlers” and “Natives” and even neutral nouns such as “ship” alter in meaning dramatically. The indices that are carefully left unspecified up to that point or inscribed with the reader’s erroneous presumptions are now provided with more specific traits. The reader learns that “Settlers” should be interpreted as aliens, also known as the Toads or “grey fellas” due to their grey-green skin, who have actually come from outer space, while the “Natives” are the Terrans. The colonising ship transforms into a colonising spaceship. Hence, a sudden ontological shift in Chapter 10 reconceptualises these motifs, the semic codes of which are suddenly transformed into commonplace tropes of science fiction, i.e., what two doyens of sf theory, Darko Suvin and Gary K. Wolfe, identify as the novum or the icons of sf, respectively.

At the same time, the cultural code is overdetermined with Australia-specific markers, as already indicated, including the indicative title that signals the beginning of Australia’s “official” history. Hence, reconstructing the cultural code is simple as utterances are “written in that obligative mode by which the discourse states a general will, the law of a society, making the proposition concerned ineluctable or indelible” (Barthes [1992] 2002, p. 100). Since the stable cultural code effects the construction of the novel’s symbolic code, Chapter 10 reveals what Brooke-Rose calls the narrator’s cheating “in the *vraisemblable*” (Brooke-Rose [1981] 1983, p. 109), i.e., that this is not a fictionalized colonial Australia after all but a futuristic post-racial Australia because the “arrival of the Toads had eliminated all racism and hate within the human species” (Coleman 2017, p. 159), and consequently, due to the colonisation of the Earth, “the people of Earth [. . .] are the Australian Aboriginals” (Coleman 2017, p. 139). In other words, halfway into the novel, “the meaning skids, recovers itself, and advances simultaneously” (Barthes [1992] 2002, p. 92). This skidding of the meaning repositions the reading of Coleman’s *Terra Nullius* as an eco-crime novel with a futuristic projection.

As aforesaid, the most productive way to discuss this work is in the realm of Indigenous futurism, science fiction or speculative fiction. The latter is increasingly used to discuss works that explore different systems of knowledge—Western scientific discourse and indigenous and other colonized systems of knowledge—as they tend to “cross-genre in this way” (Langer 2011, p. 9). Moreover, it could be argued that Coleman’s novel wittingly subverts a distinctively Australian SF genre that developed in the 1880s and 1890s—the invasion novels, whose historical source lies in the discovery of gold in New South Wales and Victoria in the mid-nineteenth century, with the arrival of gold diggers from Asia (see Blackford et al. 1999, pp. 37–46). In that respect, Coleman’s work is comparable to Eric Willmot’s *Below the Line* (1991), the only invasion novel with a futuristic projection authored by an Aboriginal author, which builds on the notion of the so-called “Yellow Peril”.¹ Catriona Ross detects one major fallacy at the very core of Australian non-Indigenous invasion sf novels: “What these texts never mention is that the nation of Australia itself originated in an act of invasion” (Ross 2009, p. 13). Willmot’s and Coleman’s sf novels are in that regard distinctive because they do not silence the first invasion; rather, they explicitly stress the notion of double invasion, and, as a consequence, they map various forms of crime committed therein. Unlike Willmot’s novel whose double invasion story is confined to Australia’s immediate region, *Terra Nullius*’ symbolic code swallows the whole planet, and the coloniser’s crime depicted in the novel becomes the crime against humans and the planet.

4. The Unpunishable Crimes of *Terra Nullius* and Its Noir Detective

Terra Nullius captures the crime of double invasion, the one done by the Terran settlers in the eighteenth century which is told and not shown and the one done by the aliens belonging to the futuristic story-now which is shown, by focusing on the topics that represent the backbone of global indigenous writing and science fiction in general. As John Rieder maintains,

enslavement, plague, genocide, environmental devastation, and species extinction following in the wake of invasion by an alien civilization with vastly superior technology—all of these are not products of the fevered imaginations of science fiction writers but rather the bare historical record of what happened to non-European people and lands after being “discovered” by Europeans and integrated into the capitalist world economy from the fifteenth century to the present. (Rieder 2005, pp. 373–74)

Enslavement and genocide in Coleman’s novel are triggered by the arrival of the technologically superior alien race, while environmental devastation seems to have started earlier. Namely, the novel reveals from the onset that the space of *Terra Nullius* is an Australia that has become relentlessly dry and hot. As one of the novel’s aliens, former trooper Johnny, reveals, Australia “was not like the other places they had colonised. It was drier, more alien an environment than any they [the alien invaders] had been to before” (Coleman 2017, p. 85), which mirrors the eighteenth-century colonisers’ accounts of Australia. The reader does not receive an explanation as to how this futuristic Australia turned into a much hotter continent or why there has been “a couple of years since it had rained” (Coleman 2017, p. 31). However, it is possible to anticipate by analogy that this is an Australia that has remained on the same path of environmental recklessness as real-life Australia. In order to imagine the relentless dryness that reverberates through Coleman’s novel, the reader does not need to imagine some cataclysmic event but rather become aware of the fact that Australia is very vulnerable to environmental problems, such as “the sensitivity of land and marine biodiversity due to changes in temperature and other climatic conditions, and the challenges of managing water and land resources to support human populations on an extremely dry continent [. . .]” (Chapman et al. 2017, pp. 117–18), and, paradoxically, that

Australia’s progress and contribution towards addressing environmental issues has been criticised for being insufficient and inadequate in comparison to other major developed countries such as China, the US and the EU [. . .]. Australia is one of the world’s highest emitters of carbon emissions per capita, ahead of most industrialised and developing countries with the exception of the US [. . .]. [. . .] Australia has been ranked last amongst 60 countries with regard to its environmental leadership [. . .]. (Chapman et al. 2017, p. 118)

If the reader is unaware of the huge gap between the growing global awareness of environmental change and Australia’s weak implementation of responses to reduce its own vulnerability or if s/he is not aware that Australia’s ruling Liberal-National Coalition has a disquieting number of climate sceptics among its politicians and broader constituency, s/he only needs a “short-term” memory to remember a series of devastating events happening in the past several years: the summer of 2018 and 2019, with record-breaking extreme heatwaves in every state in Australia, resulting, among others, in the dramatic kill of livestock and endangered wildlife, or the devastating 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires, or the recent 2022 flooding in NSW and Queensland.

The novel consciously brings to the fore Australia’s environmental predicament if the climate policies remain as they are. As asserted by the unknown Native author of the newspaper article preceding Chapter 10, relentless dryness of what was once known as Australia was the main reason for its belated colonisation by the alien Settlers, reiterating the story of the real-life Australia that was the last continent to be colonised because, from the Anglo-settlers’ perspective, it was an unforgiving land with harsh climatic conditions. The words spoken by Settler Johnny reveal that “the whole planet is too dry” (Coleman 2017, p. 200), which means that the futuristic Earth is so dry that the aliens who are “the amphibians of our world” (Coleman 2017, p. 152) are forced to build canals in order to colonise drier regions, albeit not Australia’s outback, and transport goods necessary for their survival, a story that ominously reflects real-life Australia’s colonial railway system. Canals built by the aliens only further stress water management and devastate the landscape. As the reader learns, some canals are swarming with traffic, while others have been closed off

because of freighter accidents, some of which transported agricultural chemicals deadly to swamp fauna. As a consequence, canals filled with freight and ship wreckages and dead fish are sealed off with signs evoking traffic and health hazard. While most canals have been built in the coastal areas to service the cities, others are constructed in regions where the harvesting of water has an even more detrimental effect on the environmental degradation of downstream communities of Native refugees who have fled the city. As one of the Terran characters comments, “Stupid Toads even build canals here where there is not even enough water to drink” (Coleman 2017, p. 181). This leads to dry riverbeds dotting the landscape. On the other hand, the remaining water sources are threatened by alien vines, reminiscent of real-life Australia’s fragile biodiversity often threatened by invasive species. Such unnamed and uninvestigated environmental crimes are exponentially exacerbated by another environmental crime: the continuous dumping of waste, as the invading Settlers pile up garbage on the margins of the city, the “putrid smell” (Coleman 2017, p. 94) of which spreads to nearby Native settlements.

Nevertheless, there is one type of crime that will be investigated by the arrival of an inspector, albeit nominally. This crime paradoxically fluctuates between a crime against humanity, wherein humanity denotes *all* humans, and environmental crime, if humanity as a whole equals flora, fauna and the land itself. The arrival of the Inspector, Father Grark of the First Church, is triggered by the alleged presence of slavery in the colony, and slavery, as the reader learns, has been banned by the Empire in all of its colonies. Coleman, at this point, challenges a popular belief that in Australia’s history slavery did not exist even though the first settlers arriving in Australia were in fact treated as slaves. The same applies to Indigenous peoples who were proclaimed unprotected, hence invisible, by the law which led to their ongoing systematic abuse. In Coleman’s own wording, “People don’t imagine slavery as being a part of Australia’s history, but it is clear it was. [. . .] Slavery continued throughout the colony’s development, both convict slaves [. . .] and Aboriginal slaves, taken from their country and forced to work” (Coleman 2021, p. 70). In the novel’s Terra Nullius, one of the Empire’s colonies, the Natives are viewed as “merely part of the fauna of this planet” making this “empty planet ripe for their settlement” (Coleman 2017, p. 122), as the unknown author of the peritext to Chapter 10 maintains. Indeed, before his journey, Inspector Grark reads the colony’s official paperwork which unequivocally states that there is no slavery since the Natives are not people (Coleman 2017, p. 155). Due to the alleged incompatibility between the functioning of the Empire as dictated by the First Church and the functioning of the colony, i.e., how the alien Settlers implement the law of the First Church in their lastly conquered colony on Earth, it is not clear what Inspector Grark’s agency may be. If, according to the Settlers’ worldview, slavery cannot legally exist since it applies to *people* being treated as a *de jure* form of property, are the Natives then protected as part of the native fauna since crime against them appertains to environmental crime?

The unravelling of these issues is in the domain of Inspector Grark who arrives to Earth due to an anonymous letter sent from Sister Bagra’s mission in Terra Nullius mentioning the presence of slavery. Although he cannot find any hard evidence, his thoughts reveal that he has noticed different forms of the abuse of the Natives in Terra Nullius:

They [the alien Settlers] tortured and enslaved, they seemed to have no limit to the cruelty they would use to keep their slaves under control. They stole children—that to him was the worst crime. Everybody was guilty, even those not directly involved, for they allowed it to happen, they absorbed the wealth that the system brought. The entire colony was culpable. (Coleman 2017, p. 192)

The reader can detect that much of the aliens’ crimes mirror the ones of the real-life colonial Australia, some of the worst being the Stolen Generations and the complicity of non-Indigenous Australians in colonial crimes as reflected in W. E. H. Stanner’s famous evocation of “The Great Australian Silence”. As an alien detective, Grark can only observe that slavery in all of its facets does exist—implicating everyone in charge of the colony—but that without slavery, the entire system of the colony would collapse because the Settlers cannot survive in Terra Nullius’ harsh environment and therefore need the Natives to

perform every task. The alternative would be for the aliens to invest more work, technology and money to preserve the colony. Moreover, the Settlers are in such a desperate need for slaves that they start to “breed” them by forcefully inseminating Native women, which results in robotic-like obedient humans with a “porcelain” complexion (Coleman 2017, p. 169), evoking A. O. Nevill’s ominous “breeding-out” theory. In Coleman’s novel, he appears in a cameo role under his real nickname “Devil”, as the “Chief Protector of Natives”.

Even though, from the reader’s perspective, the hermeneutic code, which constitutes a mystery that the detective should solve, appears overdetermined, hence straightforward, Inspector Grark’s restorative powers are immediately shown as totally inadequate. The moment he starts detecting abuse and slavery, he knows that “there was little he could do about it. All he could do was report it to home, let them handle it” (Coleman 2017, p. 155). Moreover, he knows that irrespective of the First Church’s supremacy, it will not enforce the ban of slavery because that would completely destroy the colony. This begs the question as to whether the Empire’s legal framework is in effect any different from that of Terra Nullius.

Grark’s only “success” is revealing Sister Bagra’s abuse of powers following the death of Sister Mel, whom she accused of sending the letter to the Empire which had brought Grark to Earth. This part of Grark’s investigative agency seems to be unproblematic, or alternatively, its hermeneutic code functions as is expected in crime fiction: it shifts from initially being underdetermined to being overdetermined, which enables the resolution of the crime. However, the only result of his investigative agency is a symbolic punitive gesture resulting in Sister Bagra’s return to her home planet to be re-educated and sent back to her convent. Everything else written in his investigative report regarding the presence of slavery in the colony is based on his observations and not on evidence, making the report itself insignificant. This leaves the hermeneutic code of this “mystery” unresolved, or alternatively, it signals that there was no mystery or crime to start with.

Father Grark’s futile investigation and naive conclusions resemble Friar William’s inability to draw conclusions in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1983), a novel that has been discussed as an “anti-detective story” that rejects “any notion of the certainty of knowledge and the unity of the human subject” (Scaggs 2005, p. 139). Unlike Eco’s Friar William who “perceives his misinterpretation of the evidence, despite reaching the truth, as a far greater failure than not uncovering the truth at all” (Scaggs 2005, p. 138), Father Grark is an anti-detective to the extent that he is not aware of his misinterpretations and naively uncovers the “wrong” truth forgetting that “Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise; and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding” (KJB Proverbs 17:28). As the representative of the Empire and the First Church, Grark should never forget the epistemological underpinnings of *their* truth. Hence, while the crime in *The Name of the Rose* only *seems* to follow the pattern of Biblical Apocalypse, the crime in *Terra Nullius*, owing to the aliens’ distorted epistemological matrix, follows what seems like an endless cycle of a far bleaker secular apocalypse. Discussing this frequent topic in Australian fiction and film, Roslyn Weaver asserts that secular apocalypse “magnifies the aspect of destruction as the primary interest” (Weaver 2011, p. 15) because, unlike Biblical Apocalypse, it is devoid of the hope provided in The Book of Revelation.

Hence, the answer to the alleged non-criminal nature of crimes in *Terra Nullius* is not just found in the Settlers’ reactions to the Natives and the documents Father Grark reads before coming to Earth but equally in a letter coming from the Bishop of the First Church stating that “Our laws and morality would demand we take some sort of appropriate action” (Coleman 2017, p. 91). The only truth is that those “laws and morality” legitimise the secular apocalypse in which Terra Nullius is embedded because no concrete action will be taken, with or without Father Grark’s report.

Thus, Father Grark is a tragic investigative figure who, on the one hand, is not particularly interested in the effectiveness of his agency and, on the other, is harshly punished for his aberration, i.e., for forgetting about the nature of the Empire's putative "truth", since he gets murdered in the end. Given the fact that his investigative rationale is defined by the very principles of the Empire and the First Church, he cannot appropriate the usual function of the detective. As Todorov argues, the second story in detective fiction concerns investigation where detectives "do not act, they learn. Nothing can happen to them: a rule of the genre postulates the detective's immunity" (Todorov [1988] 2008, p. 227). It is obvious from the narrative that Father Grark does not act, but he also cannot unlearn his epistemological conditioning to be able to learn from his observations. In other words, his semic configuration cannot evolve. To use the analogy with Edward Said's Orientalism, Father Grark is at best applying "extra-terrestrial knowledge to the terrestrial planet" thus exoticising the earthlings and their surroundings. As in the olden days, in his gaze, the Terrans are "promoted" to noble savages inhabiting an unliveable landscape. His consequential bungled agency is fragmented into multiple functions, none of which have a rehabilitating potency for the Terrans and the environment. This problematic figure of the detective reflects contemporary trends in crime fiction as propounded by Jo Lindsay Walton and Samantha Walton:

Literary detectives, of course, have not only guarded against social deviance, but have held multiple positions and narrative functions. We have the detective as villain; as accomplice; as disruptive or only grudgingly restorative force. Some detectives execute justice extrajudicially, or present solutions that are wrong, partial or come too late to change the course of events. All these slippages and putative twists to the classic formula grow in significance and centrality in the figure of the ecological detective. (Walton and Walton 2018, pp. 2–3)

Hence, Grark's titular investigative efforts are not meant to protect the Natives either as people or as part of the native fauna, which is in keeping with the colony's worldview as well as the Empire's, both of which are evident in the novel. To appropriate the words of Walton and Walton, Grark represents a "disruptive" or, at best, a "grudgingly restorative force" whose mere appearance, let alone agency, comes too late to change the course of events in Terra Nullius. In that regard, he becomes Tim Morton's eponymous "noir detective" who "begins investigating a supposedly external situation, from a supposedly neutral point of view, only to discover that she or he is implicated in it" (Morton 2010, pp. 16–17). Or, as Morton states more explicitly in *Dark Ecology*, the darkness of noir contains "a strange loop: the detective is a criminal" (Morton 2016, p. 9). As a "noir detective", Inspector Grark cannot investigate crimes that epistemologically counter the terms of his investigation.

5. The Arche-Crime of the "Whozzit" Mode

Terra Nullius is littered with crimes that are resistant to investigation and subsequent punishment. Nobody is ever inspected or held accountable for the abduction and abuse of Native children, forceful insemination of Native women or holding the Natives against their will in missions and prison camps. Massacres, including the last one that results in the death of the two protagonists, the Terran Jacky and the alien Johnny, as well as of all of Esperance's people, are reduced to a footnote stating that the "recent rebellion of the Native Jacky Jerramungup was relatively short-lived, but far too public" (Coleman 2017, p. 283). There is also no indication that Sister Mel's mysterious death and the murder of the "noir detective", Inspector Grark will ever be investigated. In the same vein, nobody is held accountable for the continuous devastation of the landscape caused by the abuse of water resources and the introduction of invasive species.

All these unnamed crimes stem from the *absence* of the arche-crime in the story. This distinctive absence, as Todorov asserts, is an important aspect of the nature of crime in detective fiction in general because crime is "in fact the story of an absence: its most accurate characteristic is that it cannot be immediately present in the book" (Todorov [1988]

2008, p. 228). All crimes in *Terra Nullius* become problematic to investigate because they bear traces of the previously committed yet absent arche-crime, crucial for explaining the problematic crime of “whoizzit” mode of crime fiction. The answer to this absence “is to be found in its analogical reference to the author’s present” (Suvin 1979, p. 78). This analogy is visible in the pseudo-historical text undersigned by the leader of the Native Delegation to the Settler Parliament, preceding Chapter 11, which reads as follows:

Terra Nullius was a legal fiction, a declaration used to justify the invasion of Australia and subjugation of its people hundreds of years ago by the United Kingdom, a more technologically advanced people. In translation from the long-dead language Latin it means “Nobody’s Land” or “Empty Earth”. There were people in Australia when the United Kingdom came; there had been for tens of thousands of years. The declaration of Terra Nullius had the direct effect of defining the Native inhabitants as non-people. I use that term now because in your colonisation you have done that exact same thing. (Coleman 2017, p. 131)

Hence, the historical *terra nullius* becomes the presence of an absence, “the mark of the here-no-longer that nevertheless remains” (Luciano 2017, p. 100), or, in Coleman’s own words, “The truth and directness sets up the metaphor, builds the foundation on which it stood” (Wood 2018). The foundation of Coleman’s *Terra Nullius* is to be found in the on-going destructive effect of the historical *terra nullius*, as Martin Crook et al. argue:

Essentially, the political economy of genocide involves a process of, first, primary accumulation, which facilitates and consolidates de facto and *de jure* control of indigenous land by creating the necessary legal and institutional architecture in the form of private property regimes and asserting the legal and political jurisdiction of the relevant settler-colonial state. [. . .] For indigenous peoples living under settler-colonial states, which have still not decolonized their relationship to the indigenous First Nation populations, in legal, political and territorial terms, such as Australia [. . .], this is a *contemporary, ongoing* lived experience. (Crook et al. 2018, p. 309, emphasis in the original)

Owing to Coleman’s projection into the future, *Terra Nullius* represents a modern parable that “fuse[s] new visions of the world with an applicability—usually satirical and grotesque—to the shortcomings of our workaday world” (Suvin 1979, p. 30). The key shortcomings Coleman detects are in Australia’s alleged postcolonial status because, from her perspective, postcolonialism has nothing to do with Australia since, as she argues, colonialism is not an event but an on-going process that in Australia has not yet ended. This is why she says that “Australia is peri-colonial, the colony is now, the colony is ongoing” (Coleman 2021, p. 71). The grotesque nature of futuristic Australia thus lies in the repetitive nature of Australia’s previous colonial tellurian crimes legitimized by the tellurian settler-colonists based on the assumption of *terra nullius*. Crimes exist to the extent that they are regulated by law. Simply put, if the law is *terra nullius*, crimes inflicted towards those unprotected by *terra nullius* do not exist and are consequently absent from the narrative irrespective of the nature of criminality stemming from the nature of *terra nullius* which may defy human reason.²

Thus, *terra nullius* is the arche-crime and at the same time the alibi, whose etymological elsewhere, according to Wendy Knepper, in postcolonial crime fiction, “may refer to a different social order as the subject moves from one interpretive framework to another” (Knepper 2006, p. 42). In Coleman’s futuristic novel, *terra nullius* receives an upgrade making the previous *terra nullius* just a beta version of the robust “new generation Terra Nullius” because, this time around, “In Interstellar terms, we, the people of Earth are the Australian Aboriginals” (Coleman 2017, p. 139).

The reader may ultimately ask who is behind this horrific arche-crime tormenting the body of Australia’s society’s past and future, the eponymous “whoizzit” of the novel. *Terra Nullius* provides a straightforward answer in the closing paragraph coming from the last peritextual commentator:

They [alien Settlers] 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 2017, p. 290)

Unsurprisingly, Coleman's futuristic novel offers the same disconcerting closure as Orwell's *Animal Farm* and reveals that, as Gary K. Wolfe argues, the icon of the alien monster is in fact one of the sf's images of humanity reminding us "of our origins, our terrestriality, or our physical and psychological limitations" (Wolfe 1979, p. 188) because humanity is in the end "the potent and threatening unknown" (Wolfe 1979, p. 224). In the commentator's final words, the semic codes of the Terrans and the aliens start to overlap, while the novel's symbolic code turns its gaze back to the Terrans. If the Terrans in the eighteenth and nineteenth century ignored the Natives in the land they invaded, as the peritext to Chapter 10 reveals, it would be hypocritical to expect anything better from the aliens in the novel's story-now. Even though the invasion is larger in its scale and does not "discriminate" among people according to their cultural and/or ethnic backdrop, since the invading force is not of the Earth, the modus operandi of invasion and colonisation and its criminality remains the same.

Moreover, the commentator's final words also address the readers of the novel, and, if we are to rely on Coleman's own claim, primarily the non-Indigenous readers (Coleman 2021, p. 182). Based on their preunderstanding of the world of the novel, readers, too, become implicated in the story either as silent accomplices to the colonisation of indigenous peoples in the world or as silent accomplices to the colonisation of Indigenous peoples in Australia. Since, for indigenous peoples in the world, colonisation is not a finished business, which explains their almost uniform rejection of the term "postcolonial" no matter how non-indigenous commentators define it, the criminal legacies of historical colonisation will keep on burdening the present, creating new neocolonial paradigms accelerated by late capitalism. Consequently, the colonisers and their colonial crimes do not solely belong to the past but also to the present and, as Coleman's *Terra Nullius* argues, to the future, as long as the initial colonisation remains unsettled. It is not surprising that according to Coleman, Australia can only be imagined as postapocalyptic and dystopian: postapocalyptic because Indigenous Australians have already survived an apocalypse set in motion by the arrival of the first white settlers and dystopian because nothing has changed dramatically for them from that moment (See Coleman 2021, pp. 95–99). This is why Coleman refers to *Terra Nullius* as her "empathy bomb" (Coleman 2021, p. 182), an oxymoron reflecting a very unsettling position of the non-Indigenous reader in relation to an Indigenous novelistic text wrapped in a double entendre.

Ultimately, from the point of view of the genre, Coleman does not go for a more well-rehearsed genre of historical crime fiction to portray colonial crimes but opts for a futuristic eco-crime novel which she adapts to suit her narrative. In that process, *Terra Nullius* does not dismantle the genre of eco-crime fiction but breathes new life into it by rearranging and expanding the tropes of this flexible genre and by situating it in the future, thus giving it a speculative prefix. The novel illustrates Todorov's aforementioned claim that each new work "alters the species", especially when written by an author not coming from the place of naissance of a given literary "species". Coleman shows that popular genre fiction, often looked down upon because of its formulaic qualities and alleged lesser concerns, can successfully perform a poignant autopsy of a settler-colonial society that refuses to come to terms with its history.

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Notes

- ¹ Australia's "Yellow Peril" reflecting the country's anti-Asian sentiment has been rehearsed numerous times in the country's history: from the early *Bulletin's* image of the "Mongolian Octopus" used as propaganda against Mongolian and Chinese immigrants, "White Australia Policy" adopted in 1901, the image of Japan during WWII, to the image of communist China after WWII and beyond. Willmot's novel revisits another historical oddity that can be related to the "Yellow Peril": the alleged plan of the first President of Indonesia, Sukarno, to create a "greater Indonesia", which was supposed to include Papua New Guinea and Australia merged into "the Republic of South Irian", ruled by Indonesia.
- ² Issues surrounding the problematic legality of Australia's historical *terra nullius* go beyond the scope of this paper, including the subsequent History Wars contained in the academic and political altercations during the 1990s Howard years, the *Quadrant*-led campaign, Keith Windschuttle's self-published book and a *Sydney Daily Telegraph* article from 30 March 2016, which reiterated the eponymous question as to whether Australia was discovered, settled or invaded by the British.

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