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# The Swamp and Desert Tropes in Post-Apocalyptic Australian Indigenous Fiction: *The Swan Book* (2013) by Alexis Wright and *Terra Nullius* (2018) by Claire Coleman

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- 1 The harshness of the Australian landscape and of its inhabitants' life was a prevalent inspiration for the genre of science-fiction in Australia. This trend harks back to colonial history and this first eurocentred perception of Australia as a hostile environment, according to Roslyn Weaver in her seminal book *Apocalypse in Australian Fiction and Film*:

The European imagination [...] imagined the land as a place of punishment and dystopia. These images contributed to an apocalyptic tradition in the early period, before the English even colonized the country, which would later play a significant role in the nation's imagination. The apocalyptic ethos would recur in Australian fiction, appearing in the guise of nuclear war, invasion, technological or environmental catastrophes. (2011, 52–53)

- 2 The desert usually functions as the privileged trope of a post-apocalyptic future to such an extent that it has become an iconic SF *topos*: deserts are ecosystems that members of different civilizations have to tame in order to colonize new spaces. Having said that, making one's civilization thrive in alien landscapes was also the purpose of colonizers in the eighteenth century when they set foot on Australian lands. For instance, the Australian desert and bush were part of that savage land associated with savage people, and both were to be tamed thanks to colonization and assimilation. Because of this similarity in purpose and narratives, science-fiction heavily relies on colonial tropes, as Grace Dillon reminds her readers:

[it is] a genre that emerged in the mid-nineteenth-century context of evolutionary theory and anthropology profoundly intertwined with colonial ideology, whose

major interest was coming to grips with – or negating – the implications of these scientific mixes of ‘competition, adaptation, race, and destiny.’<sup>1</sup> Historically, sf has tended to disregard the varieties of space-time thinking of traditional societies, and it may still narrate the atrocities of colonialism as ‘adventure stories.’ (2012, 2)

- 3 As inheritors of the oldest enduring civilization and living culture on earth, Aboriginal Australians have more often than not been relegated to a primitive past, without ever being included in a common present by colonizers – let alone a future. Consequently, their own writing of science-fiction may be an act of deliberate contestation. As Grace Dillon writes: “Sf provides an equally valid way to renew, recover, and extend First Nations peoples’ voices and traditions” (2012, 1–2). This article will consider this renewal in two works of Australian speculative or science-fiction, *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright and *Terra Nullius: A Novel* by Claire Coleman. In both novels, the respectively Waanyi and Noongar authors reformulate issues of race in their own terms. As facing scorching heat and extreme conditions of living in the desert or swamp inhibits differences between races or species, it finally generates a common ground, where they meet and help each other: the stress is put on the experience of place as a creative way of reaching beyond racial, cultural and species boundaries.
- 4 This article will demonstrate that Indigenous science-fiction disrupts the conventional Western sense of time and place. For when speculation becomes rooted in reality, the future engages with history in a very specific and unsettling way: far too recognizable and yet remote, the stories all encapsulate redefinitions of what it means to live on one same soil, and even on the same planet. The desert seems to be a privileged *locus* to let this happen: its vastness becomes the perfect setting to stage a temporal continuum from past to future. This is already what Aidan Tynan pointed out when he reformulated the notion of “devastation” in spatial and temporal terms in a way that makes it impossible somehow to distinguish them:
 

‘Devastate’ comes from the Latin *vāstare*, meaning to lay waste. [...] [D]evastate combin[es] the senses of *waste* with those of *vast*. This etymological fact is important because it links time and space: *waste* is that which is no longer of use from the perspective of human temporality and intentionality, whereas *vast* suggests the spatiality of this temporal condition. In the desert, time in-itself as both eternity and passing-away seems to be manifest. (2020, 23; original emphases)
- 5 Consequently, in *Terra Nullius* and *The Swan Book*, the “desertscape”<sup>2</sup> works as the spatial epitome of devastation, which informs a new way of rewriting or “rethink[ing] the past in a new framework” (Dillon 2012, 2), in so far as these novels claim desertscape should not be understood as permanent and stable or never-changing places but rather as vibrant places where new connections are woven to eventually redefine community and form a global network of relationships. The first part of this article will focus on the poetics of devastation, which blurs temporal and spatial boundaries. The depiction of the desert as a place where time and space coalesce also makes it possible to reflect on those ethics of devastation, since it is a place where constant changes in scale pave the way for a call for equal relations associated to a cultural paradigm shift. Eventually, the politics of devastation includes an ontological questioning, which leads to the redefinition of community relying on common experience and transculturalism.

## The poetics of devastation: two chrono(dys)topic novels

- 6 In his definition of the term “devastation,” Aidan Tynan states that vastness comes into being thanks to a constant movement of expansion which finally makes the temporal and the spatial dimension coalesce; spatiality and temporality intersect in what seems to be the privileged setting for most of the action taking place in the novels – deserts or wetlands. Other places that are part of the action, such as the Sisters’ mission in *Terra Nullius* for example, can be understood as heterotopias, or “other spaces” according to Michel Foucault’s theory (1986, 27). *Terra Nullius* opens up on Jacky running from the mission he has been kept in ever since he was a child: during his journey, he has to avoid being brought back by Troopers and he eventually becomes part of a group of black and white Australian dissidents. From the beginning, the Sisters’ mission from which Jacky escaped stands out as a space of its own in the economy of *Terra Nullius*, since it is clearly separated and autonomous: it follows a specific set of rules governing every single aspect of the children’s life in this micro-society run by Sister Bagra. However, the desert, where members of the resistance are chased, resembles more what Edward Casey calls an “atopia,”<sup>3</sup> that is to say a “strange place.” (1993, x) The characters experience their environment in its utmost intensity, since they are on the verge of dying from extreme heat and dehydration. Paradoxically it seems, the desert is a space that grounds the narration but simultaneously lacks anchoring since it mostly exists through its being criss-crossed and the way it is perceived by people traveling through it, to such an extent that characters “[are] in place and ‘out of place’ simultaneously” (Gelder and Jacobs 1998, 22). The dissidents’ camp is left behind in no time when the elders think it would endanger the community of refugees to stay there (Coleman 2018, 18, 99–100). The dwelling in the desert can only be ephemeral, and regularly changes because of threat or of lack of resources. In *The Swan Book*, protagonist Oblivia has to leave the swamp where she lives when Warren Finch, the first Black Australian President-to-be comes to marry her, to fulfill the decision the elders took when they were children. Warren takes Oblivia away from the swamp and they first cross the desert before they reach Warren’s city. The characters experience the desert as a transitional place that comes to exist through a nomadic experience, even though they dwell in it for a while. And yet, time seems to take on another dimension: days come and go, but the temporal dimension becomes indefinite and seems to expand. Warren, his three bodyguards and Oblivia reach “a night world [...] after driving hour after hour through flat and wide country to reach a place where the winds collided and spun the soil into clouds of dust” (Wright 2013, 67). In the bodyguards’ country, the temporal dimension takes an indefinite turn: after the second day, described in detail, expressions such as “the nights [...] were spent,” “at night,” “by morning he would” (74–75) make it impossible for the readers to keep track of time. Even after they leave their camp, the narration fails in finding temporal anchoring: “in the days that followed” (75).
- 7 Consequently, as Foucault argued that heterotopias always go with heterochronies (1986, 26), here, we can argue that the temporal dimension goes hand in hand with achrony. As defined by Mieke Bal, achrony is
- a deviation in chronology. [...] [A]lthough we may see clearly that we are dealing with a deviation, either the information cannot be sorted out, or there is too little

of it to define the deviation further. [...] An achrony [is] a deviation of time that cannot be analysed any further. (2009, 96)

- 8 In both novels, time goes by but readers do not have many clues other than just the succession of nights and days. In the first half of *Terra Nullius*, Jacky runs from dawn till dusk:

The first moment it was light enough to see, just light enough to avoid walking into the bruised, twisted trunks of the trees, Jacky was away again [...]. He ran the day through, [...] he ran on as the sun wheeled overhead, staggering with unacknowledged fatigue. He ran again until it was too dark to keep running. (Coleman 2018, 29–30)

- 9 One could argue that characters are not only “in place and out of place,” but they are also simultaneously in time and out of time. In one of her interviews for *The Garret*, Claire Coleman claimed “[she] used a destabilised idea of time [...], unmoored the reader in time by unmooring [her] story in time” (2019). She was mentioning the temporal twist in her novel since at first the readers have the feeling that they are reading a story set in Australian colonial times. However, in chapter ten, they understand that it deals with a second colonization set in 2041, during which London fell into the clutches of The Toads who took over most of the planet, with the exception of the deserts where they cannot survive. Paradoxically, that treatment of time conveys a sensation of atemporality and continuity, or of “eternity and passing-away” (Tynan 2020, 23). Quite strikingly, in *The Swan Book*, Oblivia does not seem to feel the passing of time: from the beginning when she is saved from the trunk of a eucalyptus tree, in which she remained for years in a slumber that recalls that of fairytales, to the end when she goes back to the swamp, she remains “a little girl” (Wright 2013, 12, 170). Bella Donna, who adopted her, explains why time does not seem to leave its imprint on her:

It was the principle [...] of the haphazard way [...] sanity and madness were reaped from her having been gang raped physically, emotionally, psychologically, statistically, randomly, historically, so fully in fact: *Your time stands still*. (49; original emphasis).

In *Terra Nullius*, Jacky’s relation to time seems quite the opposite. Time has taken its toll since he has features that are usually the preserve of older people: “A young man, not much more than a teen, he was scarred like an old soldier. He had a young face, if you could see past the habitual look of pain that belonged on the features of a much older man” (Coleman 2018, 7).

- 10 Furthermore, protagonist Jacky also seems unmoored in space: in the desert “he felt lost even though he was not. It was always a problem for him defining ‘lost’; he had a vague idea where he was but he had no real idea where he was going. [...] He was not lost, his destination was” (Coleman 2018, 29–30). Jacky’s destination as well seems unanchored and retroceding further as he slowly moves on. Time and space are already tightly linked in the narration: Jacky is running, always on the move but stagnates at the same time: “[he] was running. There was no thought in his head, only an intense drive to run. There was no sense he was going anywhere, no plan, no destination, no future” (4). If the first three terms of the enumeration refer directly to space (“anywhere, no plan, no destination”), the last one, however, shows that the spatial dead-end has shifted on to another plane, that of time, or rather lack of “future.” Despite constantly moving, he seems stuck in both spatial and temporal terms, since the desert is ever-expanding in front of him and becomes linked to the impression that time is as well: there is no future anymore, but an on-going present from which there is

no escaping. In *The Swan Book*, the same idea applies to the refugees who “travelled towards the uncertain future” (Wright 2013, 117). The temporal and spatial borders are blurred to such an extent that, from the beginning, traveling in space becomes synonymous with traveling in time during Oblivia’s drive through Country<sup>4</sup> to get her out of the swamp and away from her people:

They passed through old times, coming through hillock after hillock covered in spinifex, of Country that had a serious Law story for every place, and of everything belonging to that place like family. [...] While the genies were drifting even further back into ancient times with their name calling, Warren Finch was making the equivalent leap into the future, and impatient to get a move on and back to his job of bloody well running the country [...]. (Wright 2013, 105)

This excerpt encapsulates the very specific bond between space and time: Country testifies to “old times” through its names, strongly associated with traditional knowledge and Law. However, Warren’s presence feels jarring, out of place and out of time since he counterbalances this engraving of old times in Country by “making the equivalent leap into the future.” Whereas Jacky was running deep into Country to escape from the Troopers in *Terra Nullius*, here, Warren just wants to move on and get out of it, in order to “run” it and control it. As a gateway, the desert expands but it also seems to be the place where different times collude and merge: “the equivalent leap in the future” marks time as a continuum<sup>5</sup> here, unfurling in the desert.

- 11 In both novels, protagonists seem to have this strange connection with time, bending it or distending it: the conception of the time-space binary and its link to the characters strongly diverges from the conventional Western notion of the chronotope in literature. In “Forms of Time,” Bakhtin defined the chronotope as

the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. [...] In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (2004, 84–85)

- 12 This implies that time, space and characters function together and form an inseparable whole whose interactions make the action unfold. However, it seems that the novels under scrutiny deform and reconfigure the chronotope to such an extent that one may call it an “a-chronotope,” encompassing simultaneously atopies and achronies, or “destabilized” time and place: devastation relies not only on ever-expanding – and sometimes ungraspable – desertscape, but also on temporal openness. Consequently, devastation as portrayed in both novels may perfectly embody that “dystopia of dysfunction” that is referred to in *The Swan Book* (Wright 2013, 79): as time and place “dysfunction,” generating this “a-chronotope,” dystopia takes over through the tropes of climate change or invasion. However, this blurring of the temporal and spatial dimensions opens further the narration: devastation is not only about vastness but also about details and this enables changes in scale to occur.

## Interconnections of the local and the global

- 13 In both novels, the destabilization of temporal and spatial markers, leading to that unmooring of chronotopes, results in the blurring of other boundaries: the narration is permeated with changes of scale from the local to the global, which already foretell the

integration of those localized stories in one global network. This constant zooming in and out, or telescoping, constitutes one of the features of the desert as Roslynn Haynes declares, since to her observing deserts triggers a “rare sensation of seeing both an immense distance and minute detail” (1998, XIII). This idea is directly transcribed in *The Swan Book*, with “[the] bushland so vast in its sameness, that only the traditional owner could read the subtle stories of its contours” (Wright 2013, 74; emphases added). The association of never-changing vastness and minute detail also inform the poetics of devastation throughout the novels. In *Terra Nullius*, the safest place on earth has become the “deep desert,” where the Toads cannot survive (Coleman 2018, 119). This expression which is repeated throughout the novel recalls best the main attribute of devastation, that is the vastness that it denotes, because of the long vowel /i:/ associated with the stressed alliteration in /d/ which asserts depth or expanse as an intrinsic quality of this landscape. Nevertheless, in the desert, surviving also means paying attention to details and to hidden resources that are first invisible if you do not know where to look. This is typically the strategy used in *Terra Nullius*: water is hidden in the trunks of trees (53–54) or fruits in the middle of poisonous vines (83) while Esperance regularly reflects on the camp’s resources, going to the waterhole every morning, “now dried to nothing more than a slight darkening in the sand, shaded by overhanging trees, invisible to anyone who did not know where to look” (17). This trend is further illustrated by the perception and use of the term “nothing”: recalling the controversy about the expression *Terra Nullius*, which was but a “legal fiction” or “lie,” as Marcia Langton wrote (1998 ch. 2.1), the term “nothing” is used to delineate that subtle change in perception, showing that the Indigenous Australian understanding of Country and its resources does not match the European (mis)conceptions of “nothingness”: “They [The Settlers] would say there is plenty of nothing out there in Country” (Coleman 2018, 59). The contrast between “plenty,” expressing a positive quantity, and the negation of existence implied by “nothing” is also a seeming paradox present in *The Swan Book*, when the refugees, after eating their last cow, “had nothing. Not anything. [...] They were surviving on nothing” (Wright 2013, 117; emphasis added). This semantic instability is also present in the change of scale, which is combined here with a change in value between “something” and “nothing,” as part of the Indigenous Australian perception of the world and the elements composing it. As Deborah Bird Rose explains: “Queensland people [...] have a saying: ‘Nothing is nothing’. The corollary to this profound statement is that *everything is something*” (1996, 23; emphases added).

- 14 This very distinctive shift in scale also recalls Jacky frequently zooming in and out of consciousness, oscillating between slumber or unconsciousness because of lack of food, and acute awareness of his surroundings correlated with renewed desperate strength to escape from his pursuers. His vision becomes blurry if he gazes in the distance before fainting, having the impression that he will never get to Jerramungup because of the vast expanse of land before him. Yet, it can also be extremely focused on minute details that can lead him to survive another day when he spots the vine and its fruit (Coleman 2018, 83) for example. This narrative telescoping reaches another level in *The Swan Book* since the narrator changes and integrates this scale effect within the narration itself: the prologue is narrated by Oblivia herself, and is set in her mind, overwhelmed by the virus, that must be the tiniest element mentioned in the novel. However, the rest of the story is told by a heterodiegetic narrator as if the narration had zoomed out of Oblivia’s mind, to follow another universal point of view. In

“Country and Climate Change in Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book*,” Jane Gleeson-White’s close reading directly links those constant narrative changes in scale to that between the local and the global:

*The Swan Book* registers these “derangements of scale” in the range of its focus, which moves from the very small and unperceived (a virus, swans, a polluted swamp, a mute girl) to the planetary (global weather systems, mass movements of people), and “Internationally Warren” himself. (2016, 33)

- 15 The story constantly stages Oblivia’s awareness of the contrast between her own very localized story, that of the young girl imprisoned in the tree trunk in the swamp, and Warren’s international and global world. This discrepancy will reach its paroxysm when he finally destroys the swamp and the camp so that Oblivia cannot go back. Oblivia herself strongly feels this clash between stories and different senses of belonging to the world, when she scrutinizes the snowballs at Warren’s parents’ house:

After exploring all of these little scenes that had been created by months of labour, she had found no eucalyptus tree trunk with strange writing in the dust, no swamp lined with people guarded by the Army. She could not understand why this history did not exist in this world of creation. It was incomplete. Wrong. [...] She moved on with the knowledge that there was no link between her and Warren Finch’s world. (Wright 2013, 86)

However, the resolution of such a clash between stories and worlds seems to happen at the very end of the novel, when she goes back to the swamp where birds make the final transition between localized language and a global one, linking the Indigenous story of the swamp to the international story of global warming:

From a safe distance, you could hear these birds swearing at the grass in throwback words of the traditional language for the country that was no longer spoken by any living human being on the Earth. [...] You had to hear these soothsaying creatures creating glimpses of a new internationally dimensional language about global warming and changing climates for this land. (125)

The strength of this passage rests on the same scale effect, from “the traditional language for the country” to “a new internationally dimensional language,” which also leads to a questioning concerning the conception of community itself. The blurring of the temporal, spatial and narrative frontiers of both texts also enables changes in relations between people, integrating them in networks of renewed cultural exchanges on a global scale.

## The ethics of devastation: the redefinition of a transcultural community

- 16 Those constant changes in scale constitute the basis of the redefinition of community: from the individual to the group, reaching beyond the local camp to include all human beings – even sometimes other species. The desertscape seems to make all boundaries irrelevant, from temporal to spatial or even ontological and cultural. It functions as a great leveler, as a common ground in order to recreate new sets of relations, based on some equalizing dimension of experience. That erosion of differences is rooted in the same physically painful and ontologically dangerous experience of place. In the desert, all frontiers seem to become as blurry as mirages and this proves first to be true on an ontological level, as in Oblivia’s nightmares about being raped:

She remembered [...] being joined together with [the boys] as firmly as a ball of animals rolling over wet ground. She saw through them as they were falling in,



over, above, coming through her in sepia-coloured waves of brown, grey and red. They rolled in desert wind over the surface of the land, and down the green and yellowing spinifex smothering the hillocks that rose and fell into valleys of lily-coloured skin, and over the distances of salt marshes. (Wright 2013, 109–10)

The claustrophobic dimension of the landscape is visually embodied by the nightmarish overgrowth embracing her. Another set of boundaries is blurred there, that of Oblivia's being, whose limits become porous, transfixed by the boys who are "in, over, above, coming through her": that closeness of bodies and of beings, as she is "joined together with them as firmly as a ball of animals" is finally transferred to the desert. It eventually gives the impression that the desert itself either becomes part of this ball, personified thanks to the expression "lily-coloured skin" or that the rape is inscribed all over the landscape, forever rolling over this vastness, which also here symbolizes the vast expanse of Oblivia's memory, focusing on this simultaneously very detailed and remote experience. It is not the first time that the desert defines Aboriginal characters' beings and belonging though. When the Swamp people compare Warren Finch to themselves, he seems completely devoid of connection to the desert, as it is not part of his being: "*His skin is not permeated with the dust of our plains. [...] Now he was a total stranger. Nobody knew him at all.*" (Wright 2013, 77; original emphasis) In *Terra Nullius*, the natives are literally part of the environment according to the Settlers: "We [Natives] sometimes fail to act brutally enough, a collection of *ethics* we call 'humanity' tempers our reactions. They [Settlers/Toads] have no such compulsion, we are not their equals; to them, we are merely a part of the inhospitable environment they are trying to tame" (Coleman 2018, 93; emphasis added). Once more, the novel plays on colonial imagery, based on the comparison between natives and animals, which is eventually debunked by Johnny Star, the runaway Toad ("the outlaw," 156) who refused to perpetrate any more massacres: "I realised we were killing *people, not the animals* I was taught you were. [...] The very next day I ran. I would have died from heat exposure, from the dry, if Tucker here hadn't done a *humane thing, a very human thing*, and saved my life. Your people are better than mine – mine are *monsters.*" (157; emphases added). This taxonomic shift will reach its climax, to Esperance's surprise, when Jacky, who is arrested at the same time as Johnny's team of native outlaws, declares: "I will stand by *this Toad's... this man's side*, stand with his friends. They risked death, risked their freedom for me" (159; emphasis added). The ellipsis leading to the redefinition of the Toad as a man shows how fluctuating identities may be according to relations and points of view. This reflection paves the way for the characters' alliance later in the chapter even though trust will be hard-earned on the part of Johnny. In his final moments, to Esperance's eyes, Johnny becomes human, because of the pain that she can read in his expression (180). The very last paragraph of the novel puts Toads and humans on an equal footing, both groups having colonized others and having the same emotional and intellectual capabilities:

We think of the Settlers, who we call Toads, as inhuman. They are not – what they are is nonhuman. In all other ways they are more like us than we would like to admit. There is nothing in their behaviour that humans are incapable of: we have invaded cultures more peaceful than us, we have murdered and enslaved. There is nothing in their hearts and minds that does not also exist in the hearts and minds of the human species. (190)

Consequently, these two works of Indigenous literature come to reflect on creating new relations between communities and on the ways of doing so, which is once more moored in the desert.

17 This “ethics” of devastation generates a new modeling of community, whose attribute is “humanity,” integrating the individual in a vast network of equal exchanges and relations, reaching beyond national boundaries. Country is considered as home<sup>6</sup> and characters belong to Country in the novels as well, which defines their identity and their being. In *The Swan Book*, the genies come “home at last. [...] They spoke to the country. Let the country know they had come home” (Wright 2013, 67). For them, Country is that “desert homeland” (107). The constant unmooring of markers in *Terra Nullius* is overcome when the characters kindle a fire, which operates as the quilting point where the notions of individual, community and Country merge: “To his Native friends fire meant home, one was not really at home until a fire was lit. Sitting by the burning dung, for the first time [Johnny] understood: fire gave a sense of place, a feeling of home” (Coleman 2018, 50). However, this feeling of belonging to Country cannot be separated from that of belonging to one community since people gather around this ephemeral anchor that is the fire. Reciprocally, those connections eventually come to define oneself as Claire Coleman argues in her 2019 interview about speculative fiction: “a person is the interactions, the interactions of all you. [...] We are all our interactions with each other. We are a place of community and that fits back to the Indigenous Australian idea of what a person is, that a person is not an individual but they are a point in a matrix of relationships and that’s all we are” (2019). Ironically enough, this sense of community is derived from that “second colonization” that occurred before the beginning of *Terra Nullius*; it erased all differences due to skin color, as an old man explained to Jacky:

Humans had once enslaved other humans, deciding their fate based on the colour of their skin. Racism, the old man had called it. [...] The arrival of the Toads had eliminated all racism and hate within the human species. [...] Humans had in the past sought to assimilate all humans into one group – to breed out colour, destroy other cultures. Where they had failed the Toads had been successful. (Coleman 2018, 104–5)

In adversity, humans became equal, not because they fought together against the assailants, but rather because they all became enslaved and were considered as similar. Since color did not matter to the Toads, differences in skin tones became “irrelevant” (168). One could argue that this is a way to advocate not only transindigeneity, since the gang of outlaws includes Indigenous Australians from different backgrounds, but also transnationalism: all are Australians and considered as “natives” by the Toads, including white characters such as Esperance. This paradigm shift relying on a change in scale is emphasized by the direct comparison made with history, in what is presented as a testimony from a Rear Admiral:

In the history of the world, when Europeans landed in Australia, the most isolated continent on the planet, the people there had no context in which to understand the new more powerful, warlike enemy. [...] In interstellar terms *we, the people of Earth, are the Australian Aborigines*. (93; emphasis added)

This change in scale from the “history of the world” to an “interstellar” macrocosm is also what enables another change in scale: from transnationalism to transculturalism, going beyond the boundaries of the state. Indeed, Esperance, a human character, reflects upon the apparent similarity between Toads and humans: “There was too much death; it painted the ground beneath her feet, it filled the air with a red mist. We all bleed the same colour, Toads and us, we all bleed the same colour – it looped through her brain.” (180) The difference is not physical anymore and lies elsewhere: the questioning has reached a different plane altogether, that of cultural differences, which

are also jeopardized, or at least not an obstacle to coexistence and alliance anymore, since a Toad joined their group.

- 18 In *The Swan Book*, this seems first to find its counterpart in the different Indigenous groups that are being kept together by the army at the swamp, and it is repeated at the end of the novel when refugees come back with Oblivia. They form together another trans-Indigenous and transcultural community:

*We are Aboriginal herds-people with bloodlines in us from all over the world, [Half Life] added, and dreamily listed all the world's continents that he could remember being related to these days, Arabian, African, Asian, Indian, European all sorts, pure Pacific Islander - anywhere else I didn't mention? Well! That as well! Wherever! Even if I haven't heard of it! No matter - we got em right here inside my blood.* (Wright 2013, 120; original emphases)

That fluid and vibrant landscape that is the desert or the wetlands, seems to annihilate all differences between those different cultural groups. Warren Finch, the first Indigenous President, tellingly called “the President of Humanity” (107), appears as the paragon of such transculturalism as well:

He was the lost key. He was *post-racial*. Possibly even *post-Indigenous*. His sophistication had been far-flung and heaven-sent. Internationally Warren. Post-tyranny politics kind of man. True thing! (51)<sup>7</sup>

Not only do all the refugees share the same bloodlines, but more importantly it seems, just like in *Terra Nullius*, the protagonists are “post-racial.” As the refugees share the same experience of struggle, community is thus redefined or at least calls for its redefinition. Transculturalism is stimulated by open space: the desert functions as a contact zone and creates networks of relations between people who cross it. Its open-endedness and its blurring of boundaries give room for engaging with the Other, forming unexpected alliances and reconfiguring those relationships – from a common experience of place resting on struggle and imbalance to a renegotiation of interconnectedness. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, when defining environmentalism, Ursula K. Heise advocates this shift and emphasizes the necessity of focusing on processes and relations: “Rather than focusing on the recuperation of a sense of place, environmentalism needs to foster an *understanding of how a wide variety of both natural and cultural places and processes are connected and shape each other around the world*, and how human impact affects and changes this connectedness” (2008, 21; emphasis added). Heise mentions this interconnectedness as being also inherently linked to natural and cultural places. Here, it takes all its meaning in the fact that the desert is not only seen as a natural but also as a cultural place, mostly thanks to Indigenous Australian presence and culture.

## Conclusion: the politics of devastation

- 19 If Heise relied on this shift from a “sense of place” (or of Country, here) to a “sense of the planetary” and on the subsequent prevalence of connectedness to define what she termed “eco-cosmopolitanism” (2008, 10), here, the ethics of devastation calls for the development of a “cultural-cosmopolitan awareness,” that is to say the acknowledgement of those cultural exchanges and processes shaping the world, which, rather than being exclusive, highlight an all-encompassing experiential and performative drive – the politics of devastation. Cultural exchanges may stem from the specificity of localized landscapes that are the desert, the swamp and Country, but they are not bound to ethnic or even national considerations. On the contrary, they expand

on a global scale, using “deterritorialization” or what Coleman has termed “unmooring,” as the harbinger of the redefinition of community as a transcultural one in both novels.<sup>8</sup> To borrow once more Heise’s words, Claire Coleman and Alexis Wright may be said to “explore via innovative [...] narrative forms how local ecological and cultural systems are imbricated in global ones” (11). They even expand this community of experience outside their literary works, in order to include the readers. In her interview for *The Garret*, Coleman asserts that she used the temporal twist in *Terra Nullius* because she wanted “to find a way to universalise the experience of being colonised. And by making it an interplanetary invasion story, that universalised it for [her] audience. They could hopefully see themselves as the invaded, not as the invaders for a change” (2020). Both authors aim at producing a transcultural perspective and community, not only in but also outside their novels. As far as Wright is concerned, she mentions a similar global approach in her work:

With *The Swan Book*, I’m not just talking about the small world of one place – that is, the swamp where the story is centred and begins. I’m talking about the whole country and the whole world. So there are a lot of things impacting on the story because it’s set in the future; it’s looking at issues like climate change, people becoming stateless and homeless. [...] It’s not a simple thing like going out into the backyard and seeing a hornet’s nest – it’s describing the hornet’s nest of the world. (Wright and Zable 2013, 28)

- 20 Just as the image of the hornet’s nest illustrates, one may argue that Indigenous futurisms may not focus so much on the future as they do on the present: the apocalypse that happened before the beginning of the novels finally assumes a revelatory dimension, in so far as it leads to the redefinition of community as transcultural and eventually calls for the recognition of equal networks of cultural exchanges.

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## NOTES

1. Dillon here quotes Rieder 2008, 1-2.

2. The term “desertscape” is used here to support the idea that “deserts” are very varied in forms, as opposed to European misconceptions likening them to “wilderness – vast, empty, monotonous” (Haynes 1998, 1). In *The Swan Book*, the swamp will also be considered as part of this “desertscape,” since the term derives “from the Latin *desertum*, meaning ‘abandoned’” (Haynes 2013, 7), which could define most wetlands. However, the novel goes against this image as well, since the swamp is home to refugees. Haynes insists on the “amazing variety of the desert” (1998, XII), stating: “In our collective imagination the site of ancient myth, of spiritual dimension and cultural rebirth is peculiarly the desert, a landscape that for more centuries than European civilization can lay claim to has symbolized the land’s endurance, provoking creative reappraisals of our place in Nature and the meaning of our existence” (1998, 1-2). For further detail concerning the misuse of the term “wilderness” to describe what Indigenous people sometimes call Country, see Langton 1998.

3. I borrow this idea from Jane Stadler, who uses this term of “atopia” and quotes Casey as well as Gelder and Jacobs (Stadler 2019, 340) in the context of Gothic Australian landscapes as they are represented in Australian cinema.

4. In *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*, Deborah Bird Rose explains, “Country [...] is a nourishing terrain. [...] Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. [...] Country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind, and spirit; heart’s ease” (1996, 7). This agency is also explained in *Terra Nullius*: “Country chooses who can live there and punishes those who don’t belong” (Coleman 2018, 59).

5. The acronym mentioned earlier could also be understood here as some kind of diachrony.

6. In *Desert, Nature and Culture*, Roslynn Haynes evokes this ambivalence of deserts: “Deserts also threaten the inner self. [...] [But] for many indigenous peoples, desert is home” (2013, 8).

7. However, quite ironically, Wright also provides the reader with the flip side of this notion of transculturalism, leading officials to appropriate Warren’s body, in a rewriting of nineteenth-century anthropological drives to appropriate the remains of Indigenous people: “Anthropologists, lawyers, and other experts like archaeologists, sociologists and historians were called to examine the genealogies of these people. An emergency legislation was bulldozed through parliament in the dead of night which claimed that Warren Finch was the blood relative of every Australian, which gave power to the government to decide where he was to be buried” (111).

8. Indeed, Heise argues that “deterritorialization also implies possibilities for new cultural encounters and a broadening of horizons” (2008, 11) as it is notably a prevalent process at the core of “the increasing connectedness of societies” (11).

## ABSTRACTS

Focusing on *The Swan Book* (2013) by Alexis Wright and *Terra Nullius* (2018) by Claire Coleman, this article demonstrates how Aboriginal science-fiction rests on a creative temporal continuum as the logical sequel to Australia’s history of colonization and its present Indigenous people’s struggle, whether it be cultural or political. Both novels claim desert and swamp should not be understood as permanent and stable or never-changing places but rather as vibrant places where

new connections are woven to eventually form a global network of relationships relying on transculturalism.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Aboriginal science fiction, devastation, transculturalism, community, local and global

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