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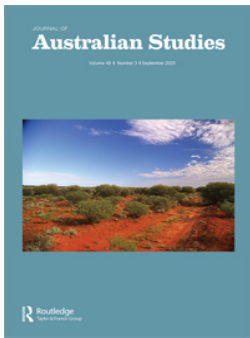
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George Turner's *Down There in Darkness* and the Future of Humanity

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes that Australian author George Turner's posthumous novel *Down There in Darkness* (1999) belongs to the category of science fiction novels recently labelled "critical dystopias" by Tom Moylan. I argue that Turner's novel can be situated in the context of the Anthropocene in its exploration of the disappearance of the human both to climate catastrophe and to our own technologies in storytelling inspired by events occurring during Turner's own lifetime. I then explore Turner's novel in the context of the "postcolonial turn" to show how it anticipates many aspects of the critical dystopian trajectories explored by Indigenous science fiction writers today.

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Today we are living in the posthuman age of the Anthropocene. It is an era of increasing precarity not only for the human race but also all forms of life in the universe's only known blue planet. The headlong depletion of the world's natural resources, along with the destruction of the plant species and forests that absorb carbon dioxide, particularly since the 1970s, has contributed to a crisis in global warming that is poised to worsen with the rapid rise of AI technology and its voracious consumption of electricity and water. Amid the spectre of looming apocalypse, a number of scholars have pointed out that humanity's increasing reliance on machines, computers and bots to increase labour productivity cannot be separated from the extractive project of global capital, which has in turn fuelled social inequality. Such scholarship recognises that the technologies of White global capitalist colonialism, including the slavery economy, wrought environmental and cultural destruction on a scale that has precipitated the current ecological crisis characterised as the Anthropocene.¹

As Diletta De Cristofaro argues, contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction intervenes in this problem by bringing to the fore the "global networks of (neo)colonialism and

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¹For example, Janae Davis et al., "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, ... Plantationocene?: A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises", *Geography Compass* 13, no. 5 (2019): e12438, <http://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12438>; Emma Gattey, "Global Histories of Empire and Climate in the Anthropocene", *History Compass* 19, no. 8 (2021): e12683, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12683>; Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne, eds., *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis* (Routledge, 2015); Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative", *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 62–69, <http://doi.org/10.1177/2053019613516291>.

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capitalism that lie at the heart of the Anthropocene, highlighting the legacies of a long history of imperialist practices of exploitation in the environmental risks of today's globalised world".² De Cristofaro shows how contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions confront the prospect of climate breakdown through patterns of repetition that link environmentally devastated futures to the colonial past. In the broader postcolonial scholarship on post-apocalyptic fictions, critics foreground the role that posthuman technologies are likely to play in attempts to intervene in climate catastrophe. Among such critics are those who maintain the genre of science fiction is uniquely positioned to engage with the way in which human technologies that are deeply implicated in creating racial distinctions are profoundly changing what it is to be human in an increasingly barren world.³

In this article, I situate Australian science fiction author George Turner's novel *Down There in Darkness* as an early precursor to contemporary work exploring the intersection of race and technology in the Anthropocene. I argue that Turner's 1999 novel is an example of a "critical dystopia" on the cusp of a postcolonial turn in science fiction in Australia. As Tom Moylan explains, "critical dystopias" are narratives that offer the hint of utopian promise amid bleak dystopian future worlds.⁴ In Turner's fiction, human reproductivity is remade through genetic-engineering experiments on a dying planet, recalling the White eugenic project that sought to control Indigenous fertility while also destroying Indigenous family connections. However, in Turner's novel, the consequences of genetic engineering are recalibrated toward a different, more hopeful, future that seeks to resolve the deep racial inequalities that continue to define and haunt our historical present. Turner's critical dystopia is an imaginary exploration of the disappearance of the human both to climate catastrophe in the age of the Anthropocene and to the posthumanist project of genetic engineering, in which human reproduction is regulated to produce a racially hybrid population better adapted to a changed climate.

In what follows, I outline the circumstances that led Turner, in his late science fiction writing, to break with the modernising narratives of progress in favour of the very different modes of knowledge associated with non-modern and Indigenous societies, focusing particularly on aspects of his family background but also on the cultural developments occurring in Australia and science fiction writing especially in the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, as an extension of this, I show how the novel anticipates many aspects of the critical dystopian trajectories being explored by Indigenous science fiction writers today in combining the traditional culture and beliefs of Australia's First Peoples with post-Enlightenment forms of thinking associated with posthumanism and the Anthropocene.

²Diletta De Cristofaro, "Patterns of Repetition: Colonialism, Capitalism and Climate Breakdown in Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Fiction", *Parallax* 27, no. 1 (2021): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2021.1976462>.

³For example, Mabel Gergan, Sara Smith, and Pavithra Vasudevan, "Earth Beyond Repair: Race and Apocalypse in Collective Imagination", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38, no. 1 (2020): 91–110, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818756079>; Gaia Giuliani, *Monsters, Catastrophes and the Anthropocene: A Postcolonial Critique* (Routledge, 2020); Audra Mitchell and Aadita Chaudhury, "Worlding Beyond 'the' 'End' of 'the World': White Apocalyptic Visions and BIPOC Futurisms", *International Relations* 34, no. 3 (2020): 309–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117820948936>; Missy Molloy, Pansy Duncan, and Claire Henry, *Screening the Posthuman* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁴Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Westview Press, 2000), 106, 196.

Turner's *Down There in Darkness* as Critical Dystopia

Literary utopias present readers with visions of a better world than the one of the present. Literary dystopias, by contrast, take those aspects of the present thought to be problematic to the continuing survival or wellbeing of humankind and extrapolate them into the future to see what sort of world will result if those same trends continue.⁵ According to Tom Moylan, the “critical dystopia” arose in opposition to the unreservedly nightmarish dystopias of the 20th century. He adds that a salient characteristic of the novels belonging to this category is that they “refuse to allow the utopian tendency to be overshadowed by its anti-utopian nemesis” by adopting “a militant stance that is informed and empowered by a utopian horizon that appears in the text—or at least shimmers just beyond its pages”.⁶ Describing the narrative pattern that critical dystopias typically assume, Moylan notes that such texts “reach toward Utopia not by delineation of fully detailed better places but by dropping in on decidedly worse places and tracking the moves of a dystopian citizen as she or he becomes aware of the social hell and—in one way or another, and not always successfully—contends with that diabolical place while moving toward a better alternative, which is often found in the recesses of memory or the margins of the dominant culture”.⁷

Most of Turner's science fiction novels, including *Beloved Son* (1978), *Vaneglorry* (1981), *Yesterday's Men* (1983), *The Sea in Summer* (1987), *Brain Child* (1991), *Genetic Soldier* (1994) and the posthumously published *Down There in Darkness* (1999), can be said to broadly correspond to the “critical dystopia” category outlined by Moylan. This is because although the dystopian impulse predominates, there nonetheless exists a utopian impulse that takes the form of fortuitous narrative solutions to the problems plaguing the future societies depicted. The last two novels arguably come the closest to Moylan's definition since they alone feature antagonists who draw on their memories and the cultural margins of Australian society to develop a utopian vision of the future.

In *Genetic Soldier*, for example, Turner presents a utopian solution in the form of a future world dominated by the genetically bred descendants of Indigenous Australians, who are the only group of humans capable of surviving the catastrophic effects of climate change.⁸ The utopian aspect of this novel suggests racial reconciliation through miscegenation: the Indigenous survivors mate with the White-skinned occupants of a spaceship, which returns to Earth centuries after being sent off into space during Earth's overpopulated days. This intermingling signals the end of the social and racial tensions caused by White supremacy that both groups recall were a lasting legacy of Britain's colonisation and settlement of Australia. In *Down There in Darkness*, we are again presented with a protagonist who draws on both his memory of the past and the margins of Australian culture to imagine a better future than the posthuman one depicted. However, he also looks to the Aboriginal Dreamtime for what is essentially a spiritual solution to the

⁵As noted by Mathias Thaler, it is a widely shared view in utopian studies that dystopias perform an “extrapolation from the present that involves a warning”. He adds that “dystopia's cautionary pedagogy can only gain traction insofar as its dark vision of the future is recognizable as an extension of lived experiences here and now”. Mathias Thaler, “Warning Through Extrapolation: On the Practical Aims of Dystopia”, *Utopian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2022): 91, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/855917>.

⁶Moylan, *Untainted Sky*, 106.

⁷Moylan, *Untainted Sky*, 106.

⁸Judith Buckrich, *George Turner: A Life* (Melbourne University Press, 1999), 133.

problem of imagining a utopian future, a move that I would argue not only radically distinguishes this novel from *Genetic Soldier* but positions Turner outside the mainstream of Western science fiction writing and closer to those Indigenous Australian writers who are using the genre to point to the important role that the traditional knowledge systems and scientific methods of Indigenous peoples might play in saving humanity from destruction.⁹

The Novel's Dystopian and Utopian Elements

In *Down There in Darkness* we are presented with two narrators, the first of whom is a police detective by the name of Harry Ostrov. The other is a security man called Gus Kostakis whom Harry has hired to help him solve the mystery of a murdered man (here it is worth noting that like *Brain Child*, the genre is part detective novel and part futuristic tale). The murdered victim is an Indigenous Australian man who belongs to a group of men with special powers, known as Kurdaitcha (sorcerers).¹⁰

Harry and Gus learn about the man's murder while they are witnessing a scientific experiment being conducted on two men (an artist and a criminal) by a large international drug company that is tapping into the dark, mysterious depths of the brain on a quest to discover the secret of telepathic communication. The two men are present when the criminal wakes up in a petrified state from the deep sleep that the scientists had plunged him into. He is terrified because while asleep he had heard the screams of the Indigenous man as he was being murdered. To prevent knowledge of the experiment and the murder from becoming public (the dead man was murdered by an associate of the scientists), the scientists put Harry and Gus into an extremely long sleep.

The first part of the story is set towards the end of the 21st century and is told by Harry, while the second part, which is set a further one hundred years or so into the future, is told by Gus since he was first to waken from the deep sleep into which they had been plunged, and because he is also the only one who survives to tell the rest of the tale. Thus, it is from Gus that we learn about the new genetic complex in which the two sleeping men are kept for over a century by the scientists and where they also awaken. The founder and director of the complex is Abel Wishart, a member of the callous transglobal super wealthy class now controlling the world. Both he and his scientist granddaughter, Dr Valda Wishart, have managed to prevent themselves from ageing with the help of rejuvenation treatments. It is from Wishart that Gus learns what caused the collapse of the old civilisation from which he and Harry had been so rudely plucked. He learns that while he and Harry slept, global climate disasters had dramatically escalated until the world's population had finally reached the point where it had run out of food and could no longer be sustained. A major cull of humanity was deemed necessary, so Wishart's laboratory created an infertility virus that infected all but a small number of people whose genetic makeup singled them out as being able to survive

⁹It is important to note that not all First Nations people feel beholden to save humanity, particularly after the devastation of colonisation. This is arguably reflected in the greater priority that some writers place on sovereignty or self-determination. It is also reflected in Mykaela Saunders's observation that not all the stories in *This All Come Back Now: An Anthology of First Nations Speculative Fiction* (University of Queensland Press, 2022) are utopian in outlook.

¹⁰This word is also spelt gadaidja, cadiche, karadji, kadaitcha, or kaditcha. It refers to a type of shaman with special powers who was called on to punish a guilty party by death in a ritual practice known as bone pointing.

even the harshest of physical conditions. Before long, Gus finds himself being sexually seduced by Dr Valda who has discovered that he belongs to this special group of people because he carries the special Aboriginal DNA needed to carry on the race and she is in the business of collecting this DNA for the company's artificially produced children. At the same time, Gus befriends the Aboriginal medic Sammy, who introduces him to his immediate family and relatives. When Sammy becomes the target of a bone-pointing episode and stops eating, it is Harry and Gus who save him by uncovering the real perpetrator of the crime that Sammy had been accused of. Gus eventually finds himself spending less time with the genetic scientists who are harvesting his DNA and more with the adults and children of the nearby Aboriginal community with whose leader he and Harry had managed to forge a covenant of understanding.

Near the end of the narrative, Harry's unwillingness to adapt to the new world in which the two men find themselves and his hatred of the elite, selfish class of people who have engineered it into existence is such that he has a violent fit that leads to his being killed, leaving Gus as the only surviving human from the old world. Although he lives to tell the rest of the story, there is no getting around the fact that even though he is resigned to the sparsely populated and barren world of the future, he feels he does not belong in it. The novel strikes a note of poignancy when he confides to the reader, "What I think about most is old Melbourne, the sleazy part of it where I was brought up—the big tenements and the crowds of people and their noise. And the smell of them that I never really noticed until taken away. And Sally and the boy [the wife and his son he left behind in the old Melbourne]. This New Age is all right as far as it goes, but it isn't mine and never will be. It's empty."¹¹

Despite Gus's melancholic yearnings for the more unregulated and populous world of the past, his story ends on an optimistic note. This is because one day in the wastelands beyond the old city limits, he encounters something he had only ever heard about from reading books but never seen—a swagman. This man conforms in every way to his imagined idea of what a swagman should look like except for the fact that he is Koori.¹² The swagman is also a Kurdaitcha of the contemplative class that Bill Gordon, the local Aboriginal leader, had promised Harry he would bring together to create a community of people whose telepathic powers might produce a more spiritual and humane society than the one created by Wishart and his scientists. Gus confides that the swagman stirred something in him. He says, "The sudden arrival of the kurdaitcha man set me thinking: What if it was all true and the world mind could be opened to men and women? I saw in my mind's eye a building somewhere on a hilltop, above the flurry of the world ... And inside ... the contemplatives plunged deeper and deeper maybe into the world mind, finding new marvels, things we had never dreamed of, maybe even the beginning of thought or the Koorie Rainbow Serpent at creation's edge."¹³

In *Genetic Soldier*, Turner emphasises the genetic merging of Indigenous Australians and Europeans. By comparison, in *Down There in Darkness*, as this passage suggests, we are presented with more than just a merging of different people's DNA; it is also a cultural joining that is envisioned by Gus, one that opens out into the Aboriginal

¹¹Turner, *Down There in Darkness* (TOR, 1999), 349–50.

¹²The term *Koori* describes Aboriginal people from southeastern Australia, specifically from Victoria and parts of New South Wales. It originates from the Awabakal language and means *man* or *people*.

¹³Turner, *Down There in Darkness*, 351–52.

Dreamtime, but also to all the world's different religions, including those from earlier times, as implied by the concept of the "world mind".¹⁴

What Turner meant by the "world mind" is not clear, but one possible explanation relates to a book that was published on the eve of the World War II out of a sense of the impending doom to humanity that another world war would likely unleash.¹⁵ This was *World Brain* (1938) by H. G. Wells, a science fiction writer whose works Turner deeply admired. Wells had lived through the horrors of World War I and, as early as 1914, he had predicted the invention of the atom bomb,¹⁶ so he had good reason to believe that for humanity to survive into the future a change of direction was imperative. According to Wells, the term "World Brain" describes a synthesis of all the world's most fundamental and important knowledges gathered into a single world encyclopaedia that "would do just what our scattered and disoriented intellectual organizations of today fall short of doing. It would hold the world together mentally",¹⁷ and by enabling better understanding, its creation would be "a way to world peace".¹⁸ Wells added, "It may be objected that this is a Utopian dream. This is something too great to achieve, too good to be true ... [but] what I am putting before you is a perfectly sane, sound and practicable proposal".¹⁹ He went on to stress its urgency, saying, "New world or nothing. We have to make a new world for ourselves or we shall suffer and perish amidst the downfall of the decaying old. This is a business of fundamentals in which we are all called upon to take part, and through which the lives of all of us are bound to be changed essentially and irrevocably."²⁰

As with Wells, Turner's main purpose in writing *Down There in Darkness* and all his other science fiction novels was to encourage his readers to reflect on their and their children's future. How serious he was about this aim is suggested by the reflective tone of the passage with which he ended the memoir he published in 1984, not long after he made the switch to science fiction writing: "With or without reason, I do care for the future, enough to be frightened for it. After an egocentric, selfish lifetime I find, to my surprise, that I care very much what may be the shape of the world I will not see."²¹

Gus's "world mind" is arguably a new version of Wells's "World Brain", one that has been updated to address what Turner saw as the greatest threat facing the world and humanity in the 1990s. However, like Wells's "World Brain", Turner's "world mind" is based on nothing more real or tangible than a hope. This is clear from his allusion to the starships "Search" and "Kiev". Where Wishart had described these starships as having failed to find another habitable planet on which humanity might live and start over again, Gus's dream about the school of philosophy on the hill presents the reader with a much more inspiring scenario: "I don't know what put the starships 'Search'

¹⁴Turner, *Down There in Darkness*, 351.

¹⁵The "World Brain" idea was first postulated in a series of lectures that Wells delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain, 20 November 1936, and published in essay form in 1937.

¹⁶In his 1914 novel *The World Set Free*, Wells imagined a grenade packed with uranium that "would continue to explode indefinitely" (68). He even thought it would be dropped from planes. It was an idea likely inspired by Frederick Soddy's book *The Interpretation of Radium* (1909) and a number of other scientific developments occurring in the early 20th century. H. G. Wells, *The World Set Free* (Hogarth Press, 1927).

¹⁷H. G. Wells, *World Brain* (Double Day, 1938), xvi, 21.

¹⁸Wells, *World Brain*, 88.

¹⁹Wells, *World Brain*, 88.

²⁰Wells, *World Brain*, 47.

²¹George Turner, *In the Heart or in the Head: An Essay in Time Travel* (Norstrilla Press, 1984), 230.

and ‘Kiev’ into my head right then, but I thought of them out among the light years, settling men on new planets where, it might be, new world minds would form. And in the end the whole galaxy, the whole starscape would end up as a single universe of thought.”²² Gus is here embellishing his otherwise relentlessly dystopian vision of the future with a tiny but nonetheless bright flash of utopian imagining. This is because in his mind’s eye, he envisages the starships not returning to earth but landing safely on planets where humanity could start again, only this time in a new way, one that, unlike the current civilisation, does not come to grief.

Noting Gus’s emphasis on the Dreamtime and on spirituality, Judith Buckrich observes that the novel’s ending has a resoundingly religious ring to it, one that she says is “surprising for a man who did not believe in God”.²³ While I agree, I suggest that it would be a mistake to think Turner, in this moment, was referencing Christianity rather than the spiritual and religious systems of knowledge belonging to non-Western and premodern societies. While Gus has no choice but to remain in a barren world that offers him only momentary flashes of hope and joy, Turner’s readers do have a choice. They can continue down the path to the largely joyless future confronting Gus, or they can address the flaws plaguing humanity before it is too late. This is the position taken by Wells in *World Brain* and it is also arguably the position of Turner himself when he penned his last novel. The fact that the story begins in a historical period that is close to that of the novel’s readers and Gus says it is the “sleazy” part of Melbourne where the ordinary working-class people like himself once lived that he misses most, and that given the choice he would return to the world as it existed prior to the apocalypse, arguably reinforces the idea that Turner’s “world mind” idea was not just inspired by Wells’s book, it was also a response to several real-world events that had emerged since the publication of the latter and which were of increasing concern to Turner in his later years.

Posthumanism and the Anthropocene

Two of those events concerned the increasingly dire state of the planet and the threat to the human race posed by modern-day science and technology. The events of *Down There in Darkness* are set in a posthuman future, in which human sexual reproduction has been genetically engineered through scientific intervention in human DNA, irrevocably changing what it means to be human. Insofar as its plot marks a recoiling from longstanding Enlightenment notions of the human and the fundamental epistemology of reason that has led to scientific hubris, the novel also invokes the concept of the Anthropocene.²⁴ In *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, John Rieder explains that the Anthropocene refers to “the epochal, geological impact of human activity—especially of Western industrial capitalism—on the planet in the form of climate change and species extinction”.²⁵

²²Turner, *Down There in Darkness*, 352.

²³Buckrich, *George Turner*, 184.

²⁴I am not the first to suggest that Turner’s late science fiction works can be read productively through the critical framework of the Anthropocene. See, for example, Andrew Milner et al., “Ice, Fire and Flood: Science Fiction and the Anthropocene”, *Thesis Eleven* 131, no. 1 (2015): 12–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513615592993>.

²⁵John Rieder, “Theorizing SF: Science Fiction Studies Since 2000”, in *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, ed. Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 749. Further to this, Jay Clayton notes, “Literary theorists of the posthuman typically trace their lineage to a few foundational sources: Foucault’s late lectures on biopower,

What is now called the Anthropocene is the culmination of a set of developments whose effects had become evident to many climate scientists during Turner's lifetime. They include the damage to the world's forests, rivers and oceans caused by environmental pollution and the realisation that modern industrialisation is powerfully contributing to global warming.

Turner's narrative exploration of scientific manipulation of human genetics presents but one aspect of the dystopic posthuman future that could be imagined after the real-life discovery of the double helix structure of DNA by Crick and Watson in 1969, which led to the sequencing of the human genome. Another aspect of the posthuman future appearing in Turner's novel was inspired by Alan Turing's invention in 1991 of the modern computer and Tim Berners-Lee's invention of the World Wide Web in 1989. Wells's choice of a multi-volume encyclopaedia that he called the "World Brain" reflects the fact that he was writing well before the invention of computers; but this was not the case with Turner. In his novel, there is a passage in which Harry speculates on what the technological invention of the World Wide Web might mean for the future of humans. On the upside, he sees it connecting everyone in the world, but on the downside, he sees it leading to the loss of privacy and individuality: "You must realize that the twenty-first century was the age of information, an age that began triumphantly with the gathering and storage of data worldwide and its almost immediately availability to all—via the network at first known as the superhighway and later contemptuously, as the snitchline. Technology outsmarted itself, not for the first time; electronics coupled with microengineering to create systems whereby personal privacy became impossible."²⁶

Like Wells, Turner seems to have regarded humans as flawed creatures who were nevertheless capable of attaining if not perfection, then at least considerable improvement. For Wells, humanity's flaw lay in the evolutionary possibility of degeneration, and he initially proposed that this could be overcome by pursuing the low-tech selective breeding program known as eugenics. However, as demonstrated by his "World Brain" project, he eventually came to reject eugenics altogether and to believe that the real key to improving humanity, so as to forestall the imminent destruction of the human race, lay in educating the masses and convincing them of the importance of world peace.²⁷ Like many before him, he regarded modern science and reason as leading the way. This was not the solution proposed by Ursula K. Le Guin, the other major science fiction writer whose influence can be discerned in Turner's novel. Writing more than 30 years after Wells, at the height of the Vietnam War and the nationwide protests against environmental ignorance marked by the first Earth Day, Le Guin, by contrast, looked to the West's adoption of non-Western philosophical and religious traditions (primarily Taoism) to both constrain humanity's more destructive impulses and

Donna Haraway's writing on transgressive, hybrid creatures (both cyborg and transgenic), and N. Katherine Hayles's work on the interpenetration of the cybernetic with the human". Jay Clayton, "The Ridicule of Time", *American Literary History* 25, no. 2 (2013): 320–21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43817572>.

²⁶Turner, *Down There in Darkness*, 85.

²⁷For an account of Wells's somewhat complicated position on eugenics, see Maxim Shadurski's essay "H. G. Wells's Interwar Utopias: Eugenics, Individuality and the Crowd", *Sydney Studies in English* 40 (2014): 31–32, <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/SSE/article/view/8319>. Like John Partington, Shadurski argues that H. G. Wells initially believed eugenics was a positive tool for physical, educational, cultural, mental and attitudinal improvement, but that when he became "afflicted by a knowledge of the death camps operating in Central Europe during the Second World War", he felt compelled to repudiate it. Shadurski, "Interwar Utopias", 32.

rebalance its priorities. In *Down There in Darkness*, Turner seems to have put his own spin on Le Guin's idea in the form of Gus's dream of a powerful school of philosophers whose beliefs at many points resemble the Indigenous Dreamtime, with its wholly different way of apprehending time, space and the place of humans in creation.²⁸ For him, as for Le Guin, transforming humans into better versions of themselves involved recognising that the so-called "light" provided by Enlightenment reason has its limitations. No less importantly, improvement of the human race in Gus's dream does not involve genetic manipulation, cybernetics, informatics or what N. Katherine Hayles describes in her book *How We Became Posthuman* as "the systematic devaluation of materiality and embodiment".²⁹ Rather, it is envisaged purely as openness to and acceptance of alternative forms of knowledge and ways of looking at the world. In the case of Turner's narrative, nowhere is this radical change better captured than in Gus's description of the alternative worldview that had been envisioned by Harry to rival and hopefully replace the genetically engineered, class-ridden and spiritless worldview created by Wishart and his colleagues.

Thus, it is by remembering both Harry's vision of a school of culturally diverse and possibly even mixed-race contemplatives and his own meeting with the swagman that Gus comes to imagine a new and better type of human, one in whom the flaws of scientific hubris and the lust for power over the natural world and other people have finally been replaced by the less destructive traits of humility, sharing and cooperation.

Developments in the environmental and biological sciences and cybernetics were not all that Turner's novel was responding to, however. Yet another important global event catalysing the novel was what Turner viewed as the moral corruption of society's ruling class and the concomitant rise throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s of the neoliberal economic model, with its emphasis on globalisation and dismantling of the welfare state. Although Turner was reasonably well educated by Australian standards, his parents' early divorce meant that in order to support himself, he had to take paid employment in a range of occupations unrelated to writing.³⁰ A lifetime supporter of the Australian Labor Party, he also continued to hold to the working-class ethos and identify with society's underdogs, and this is reflected in Gus's nostalgia for what he calls the "sleazy" parts of Melbourne and his preference for the company of Sammy and his relatives as opposed to Abel Wishart and Dr Valda.

²⁸There are many understandings of the religious philosophy known as "the Dreaming"; however, generally speaking, it refers to the very beginning of time when the land and people were created by the spirits. For Koori/Goori and Lebanese writer Mykaela Saunders, for example, the Dreaming is an English term for the cultural authority that goes all the way back to when time began. She writes, "Aboriginal laws were created at the beginning of time in the creation period commonly translated into English as the Dreaming. These laws were created by the ancestor spirits, who taught them to Aboriginal people, who have passed these laws down through history, through education and ceremony, right up to the present day." Mykaela Saunders, "Blackfella Futurism: Speculative Fiction Grounded in Grassroots Sovereignty Politics", in *The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms*, ed. Taryne Jade Taylor et al. (Routledge, 2023), 102. For fiction author Mudrooroo, "the Dreaming" or "Dreamtime" is a "psychic state, in which or during which contact is made with the ancestral spirits, or the Law, or that special period of the beginning". See Mudrooroo, *Us Mob* (Angus and Robertson, 1995), 41. Turner's character Gus appears to be using the Dreamtime philosophy to point to the idea of the interdependence of the material and the spiritual worlds and that survival depends on respecting the laws and processes governing the world's creation.

²⁹Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literatures and Informatics* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 48.

³⁰For details of Turner's early education and the various forms of employment he took while writing his novels, see Judith Buckrich, "George Reginald Turner (1916–1997)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 21 June 2025, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/turner-george-reginald-31464>. See also Turner's autobiography, *In the Heart*, 29, 44.

The final real-world event impacting the novel occurred in the last decades of the 20th century when the persecution of racial and cultural minorities finally gave way to “the repudiation of racial prejudice”.³¹ In the United States, this development was sparked by the civil rights movement of 1955, which in turn paved the way for the Indigenous renaissance of the late 1970s and 1980s. Yet these events were likely not the main motivation for Turner’s privileging of Australian Indigenous culture in his last two novels. A more important influence was the real-life events taking place closer to home. As noted by Iva Polak, these included Indigenous Australians’ “experience of terra nullius and its horrific offshoots: the Stolen Generations, nuclear tests on Aboriginal land and the treatment of Indigenous war veterans”.³²

Australian Science Fiction and Indigeneity

In an essay titled “Aboriginality in Science Fiction”, Brian Attebery remarks, “Australian SF writers have long struggled to incorporate native peoples and their traditional stories and ways of life into distinctively Australian Futures.”³³ He points to three different historical phases of this struggle, where the first phase represents “the Bad Old Days” in which “Australia’s First Peoples were regarded primarily as a problem: holdovers, like the marsupials, from some earlier stage of evolutionary history”.³⁴ Next, he says, came “the Hopeful Moment, a brief period in the 1970s when the emergence of Aboriginal writers such as Kath Walker, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and of the Aboriginal civil-rights movement signalled the possibility of imaginative rapprochement between societies”.³⁵ Attebery cites the World Science Fiction Convention that was held in Melbourne in 1975 as a major impetus behind the raised cultural awareness of Australian science fiction writers. The guest of honour was Ursula K. Le Guin and she brought “broader cultural perspectives, especially non-European perspectives”,³⁶ to the genre. He adds that her example together with the residential workshop she conducted encouraged further workshops and the production of stories involving alternative visions.³⁷ Finally, Attebery says, “there is the Troubled Now, a time in which there is no safe way for a non-Aboriginal writer to tackle Aboriginal issues and yet when the discourse of sf offers a number of innovative ways to reframe ideas of race and cultural difference”.³⁸

Turner’s story, with its positive embrace of Indigenous society and its Dreamtime philosophy would seem to belong most obviously in the second of Attebery’s phases, yet it possibly also shares some features of what he describes as his third phase. Here it is worth noting Buckrich’s comments about Turner’s family history, particularly the photographs he possessed of his mother and grandmother, which “show them to be

³¹Jay Clayton, “The Ridicule of Time”, *American Literary History* 25, no. 2 (2013): 320–21, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajt005>.

³²Iva Polak, “Native Apocalypse in Claire G. Coleman’s ‘The Old Lie’”, *Humanities* 9, no. 3 (2020): 69, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h9030069>.

³³Brian Attebery, “Aboriginality in Science Fiction”, *Science Fiction Studies* 32, no. 3 (2005): 385, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sfs.32.3.385>.

³⁴Attebery, “Aboriginality in Science Fiction”, 387.

³⁵Attebery, “Aboriginality in Science Fiction”, 387.

³⁶Attebery, “Aboriginality in Science Fiction”, 396.

³⁷Attebery, “Aboriginality in Science Fiction”, 96.

³⁸Attebery, “Aboriginality in Science Fiction”, 387.

elegantly dressed nineteenth-century ladies, with dark skin and possibly Aboriginal features”.³⁹ That Turner himself thought there was Aboriginal blood in the family is clear from his autobiography, where he recounts that his grandmother made “casual mention of a Samoan gentleman two or three generations back—far enough back to gloss miscegenation as romance. Indeed there was a dark gentleman, but he was no Samoan: inspection of Grandma’s broad nose, and the splayed nostrils of at least three of her children, tells with certainty that he was an Australian Aboriginal”.⁴⁰ Noting this observation, Lucy Sussex argues that the racist attitudes that prevailed at the time towards anyone with Aboriginal ancestry had a profound effect on Turner’s science fiction. She writes, “Racism, for Turner, was personal ... but it meant George wrote sympathetic and interesting depictions of Aboriginal people in his later novels.”⁴¹

In a similar vein, Paul Kincaid has recently said of Turner that he “loudly and repeatedly promoted a native strain in Australian sf”.⁴² While this is correct, it arguably does not go far enough in describing Turner’s achievement. The extent to which Turner can be said to have moved Australian science fiction in a wholly new direction can be gauged by comparing *Down There in Darkness* with one of the most revered examples of Australian science fiction writing—Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw’s *Tomorrow, Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, which was originally published in 1947 but republished because of popular demand in 1983. This novel portrays Australia’s First Peoples as “gone, completely and utterly, nothing was left of them but a few Rock Drawings, a few spearheads in rosy quartz, some patterns incised in wood, the words of some songs, soft, melancholy, their meaning forever sealed. Their dust was in this dust, nothing more. In the north, where they had not perished but had been absorbed, their docile blood had mingled without trace and no overt memory of them remained”.⁴³

That Turner felt strongly about the fact that this representation, and others like it, could still go largely uncensored as late as 1983 is suggested by the fact that in *Down There in Darkness* it is the White race that is on the verge of extinction, while it is the enormous vitality and resilience of Indigenous Australians that is celebrated. Indeed, the privileging of their genes and the adoption of their cultural traditions and beliefs are portrayed as essential to the futurity of the entire human race. Seen like this, might the murder of the Kurdaitcha man with which the story begins be read as a metaphor for the genocide that the White settler populations have visited upon Indigenous Australians, a genocide whose legacy was still very much apparent in the racist attitudes that had continued to linger on in the Australian society in which Turner himself was writing? More positively, might this metaphoric reading also explain Gus’s joy in encountering the Kurdaitcha swagman—because in his lonely imaginings, this man’s hybrid appearance signals a future moment of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians? Such a dream of reconciliation arguably also forms part of Gus’s fantastic vision of the school of philosophy on the hill.

³⁹Buckrich, *George Turner*, 8.

⁴⁰See Turner, *In the Heart*, 26.

⁴¹Lucy Sussex, “An Anthropocene Tale and Its Writer: *The Sea and Summer*”, *Sydney Review of Books*, 6 June 2017, 3, <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/anthropocene-tale-writer-sea-summer/>.

⁴²Paul Kincaid, “A Mode of Head on Collision”, *Science Fiction Studies*, 33, no. 3 (2006): 449, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sfs.33.3.438>.

⁴³Quoted in Attebery, “Aboriginality in Science Fiction”, 391.

Here it is perhaps instructive to recall that the mid-1990s, when this novel was written, was also the time when the utopic dream of reconciliation was a major topic of discussion in the Australian media.⁴⁴ Extending this idea further, it is possible to see Turner's novel as attempting to do within science fiction writing what a longstanding tradition of Australian scholars have attempted to do in the more formalised space of history writing. Dan Tout, for example, has recently pointed to the "persistent historiographical tradition that responds to the continuing crisis of settler-national belonging and legitimacy by attempting to incorporate the historical depth of Indigenous occupation into its own national, nationalising narrative, and so to indigenise the settler nation as a whole".⁴⁵ According to Tout, within this historiographical tradition, what he calls "Deep Time Dreaming" has contributed to a significant tradition of Australian cultural reflection and interpretation, one that might also be said to extend to many members of the Australian public.⁴⁶ It is likely that it was this growing public recognition of the way that the historical depth of Indigenous culture contributes to Australians' sense of identity that Turner was aiming to tap into when in the later 1990s he penned the optimistic and arguably utopian ending to his novel. On the other hand, given Turner's beliefs about his family's ancestry, and his emphasis on Indigenous practices and beliefs as providing humans with a blueprint to future survival, it is no less important to ask what connections if any might be drawn between this final science fiction novel by Turner and the science fiction texts being produced by contemporary Indigenous Australian writers. How closely, and in what ways, might his novel be said to align with their novels?

It is apposite at this point to refer to Grace Dillon's idea of "Indigenous futurism", the term she coined to signal the unique form of science fiction writing developed by Indigenous authors in the 21st century that draws on aspects of traditional culture not just to identify but to also imagine a post-apocalyptic future built around decolonisation and sustainability. In her introduction, Dillon says, "Sf provides a valid way to renew, recover, and extend First Nations people's voices and traditions."⁴⁷ She goes on to explain that science fiction functions as a space of liberation for Indigenous writers. Not only does it offer them "room to play with setting character and dialogue" and "to stretch boundaries", most significantly, it "invites discerning readers to realize that Indigenous science is not just complementary to perceived Western Enlightenment but is indeed integral to a refined twenty-first century sensibility".⁴⁸ Asked in a recent interview what is meant by Indigenous science, Dillon has said, "It is knowing how to

⁴⁴The Aboriginal Reconciliation Act was passed in 1991. There followed the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) whose vision was for "a united Australia which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all". 1996, the year in which Turner wrote *Down There in Darkness*, saw the launching of Australia's first National Reconciliation Week. See "Reconciliation Timeline: Key Moments", Reconciliation Australia, 1 December 2024, <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation-timeline-key-moments/>.

⁴⁵Dan Tout, "Dreaming of an Indigenised Australia", *Journal of Australian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2024): 135–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2023.2291651>.

⁴⁶Tout, "Dreaming of an Indigenised Australia", 148. Tout makes the point that because it is related to colonisers' need to "belong" in a land that is not their own, this kind of dreaming is not to be confused with the Dreamtime of Indigenous Australians, which dates back some 60,000 years, is foundational to Aboriginal religion and culture, and tells the story of how the universe and humans came to be.

⁴⁷Grace L. Dillon, "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms", in *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, ed. Grace L. Dillon (University of Arizona Press, 2012), 1–2.

⁴⁸Dillon, "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms", 3.

live in a place sustainably.”⁴⁹ In the same interview, she says that it is based on a body of practical environmental knowledge learned and communicated over generations that is unique to each Indigenous group, hence her claim that there are multiple Indigenous sciences.

A recent science fiction novel that is very much in this mode is Claire G. Coleman’s *Terra Nullius*, which recasts the invasion that occurred in 1788 as directly leading to the environmentally decimated conditions of the late 20th century. In an interview, Coleman explains that when she came to write Chapter 10, the part of the novel that plunges the reader into the far future, she drew on H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*, which portrayed the event of the British invasion in terms of aliens and humans clashing following an extraterrestrial invasion of Earth. Coleman goes on to say, “I read that *The War of the Worlds* was inspired by a discussion that Wells had with someone, where he was trying to explain the situation of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. *The War of the Worlds* and *Terra Nullius* are approaching the same question from opposite sides.”⁵⁰

Terra Nullius tells the harrowing story of young Aboriginal boy Jacky, who is desperately searching for the home from which he has been cruelly torn. His is a story that emphatically provides Australians with an alternative view of the history of colonisation, but, like the critical dystopias outlined by Moylan, it also offers readers a glimpse of a more positive the future in the form of a levelling out of class relations through dialogue with “the other”. This is in line with Rosalyn Weaver’s observation that for both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous reader, “Rewriting history transforms traditional beliefs about white–Indigenous relations, and speculating about the future allows new visions of renewal and reconciliation.”⁵¹

While it would not be unreasonable to view Turner’s novel as overlapping at many points with the Indigenous futurism described by Dillon, there are, I believe, several major differences that should caution us against fully aligning Turner with contemporary Indigenous Australian writers like Coleman. One is their very different understanding and treatment of apocalypse. For Turner, as for most White science fiction writers, this is something that belongs in the future. For Indigenous writers, however, it is portrayed as something that belongs to the present. This is because, as Dillon and Pedro Neves Marques explain, the decimation of Indigenous people under colonialism has meant that they have been facing the ending of the world for a long time.⁵² This helps explain the characteristic compression of time characterising many Indigenous science fictions, including *Terra Nullius*.⁵³

⁴⁹“Taking the Fiction out of Science Fiction: A Conversation About Indigenous Futurisms: Grace Dillon and Pedro Neves Marques”, *e-flux Journal* 120 (2021): <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/120/417043/taking-the-fiction-out-of-science-fiction-a-conversation-about-indigenous-futurisms/>.

⁵⁰Veronica Sullivan, “Speculative Fiction Is a Powerful Political Tool: From *The War of the Worlds* to *Terra Nullius*”, interview with Claire G. Coleman, *Guardian*, 22 August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/australia-books-blog/2017/aug/22/speculative-fiction-is-a-powerful-political-tool-from-war-of-the-worlds-to-terra-nullius>.

⁵¹Rosalyn Weaver, *Australian Fiction and Film: A Critical Study* (McFarland and Company, 2011), 143.

⁵²Dillon and Marques, “Taking the Fiction out of Science Fiction”, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/120/417043/taking-the-fiction-out-of-science-fiction-a-conversation-about-indigenous-futurisms/>.

⁵³Dillon refers to this time compression as “the Native slipstream”. This is her term for “several ways of thinking and writing about space-time—not as separate subjects, like ‘now let’s talk about space’ and ‘now let’s talk about time’, but rather as space and time flowing together, like currents in the same navigable stream”. Dillon and Marques, “Taking the Fiction Out of Science Fiction”, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/120/417043/taking-the-fiction-out-of-science-fiction-a-conversation-about-indigenous-futurisms/>.

Another important difference is Turner's very different treatment of genetic engineering. In *Down There in Darkness*, the practice of genetic engineering is portrayed in much the same way it is portrayed in science fiction texts by Western writers—that is, as manipulation of the germ line aimed at the creation of a biologically superior human to the one of the present, one who might be able to survive harsh environmental conditions or outlive ordinary humans by a few centuries as in the Lazarus Long series of science fiction works by Robert Heinlein; or be abnormally intelligent as in Olaf Stapledon's novel *Odd John* and the nursery children of Turner's novel *Brainchild*.

The genetic-engineering project in *Terra Nullius*, by contrast, is more explicit in its reference to the historical eugenic practice of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families as part of the colonial government's official policy of assimilation. This policy aimed at the gradual breeding out of Aboriginal genes from the nation's population, a genocidal practice that has inflicted enormous pain, grief and trauma upon Australian Indigenous peoples. The "visceral reaction" of readers to the events in *Terra Nullius* may be interpreted as a response to reader identification with an Indigenous-coded main character in the form of the young boy Jacky, who is the target of the kinds of eugenic policies that the White settler state historically deployed against Aboriginal people in Australia.⁵⁴

Weaver describes Sam Watson's novel *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990) as another powerful example of a text with an Indigenous character that generates conflicted empathic feeling in White readers who recognise their complicity in histories of colonial violence. Adding to this effect, she says, is Watson's reliance on stark oppositions. As she notes, the arrival of the British on Australian soil is rendered, in this novel, as an apocalypse, while pre-colonial Australia is portrayed in biblical terms as a paradise or promised land. Colonisation is a sin that, as the novel's hero declares, can "never be expiated".⁵⁵ Indeed, it was as a result of colonisation that the country became a dystopian nightmare. Where before colonisation it was a fertile landscape characterised by "rich veldts" and "lush valleys", it was now a "bloody wasteland".⁵⁶ Watson, like Turner, deploys both the Kurdaitcha and Rainbow Serpent motifs, but unlike Turner, he uses these to produce a narrative that pits Indigenous Australians against White Australians. Thus, in his story, White Australians are the evil savages and Indigenous Australians are the righteous. The main character, Tommy Gubba, reinforces this idea when he says, "No migloo who walks on this land is innocent. They are all guilty! And they shall all be punished for what they have done."⁵⁷ Watson himself has described his novel as "a hard-hitting message" that is aimed at getting "into the hearts and minds of the great unwashed, white Australian masses".⁵⁸ The implication here is that repositioning White reader identification with

⁵⁴See, for example, the review by Jane Churchland, "Harrowing and Hopeful: Claire Coleman's 'Terra Nullius'", *TGC*, 29 March 2018, <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/book-review/harrowing-hopeful-claire-colemans-terra-nullius/>. Churchland refers to the book producing a "visceral reaction in me".

⁵⁵Sam Watson, *The Kadaitcha Sung* (Penguin, 1990), 241.

⁵⁶Watson, *The Kadaitcha Sung*, 156.

⁵⁷Watson, *The Kadaitcha Sung*, 131.

⁵⁸Weaver, *Australian Fiction and Film*, 151. Two further futuristic science fiction works aimed at changing White readers' attitudes towards Indigenous Australians using similar narrative techniques to Dillon and Watson are Archie Weller's *Land of the Golden Clouds* (Allen and Unwin, 1999), which is set 3,000 years in the future, and Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (Giramondo, 2023). Written as early as 1980, Weller's work, an extract from which appears in Dillon's *Walking the Clouds* anthology, may have influenced Turner's vision of an apocalyptic future since it features a group of people from various civilisations who, in order to survive, must overcome their prejudices. Wright's novel explores

a Black protagonist might serve as a catalyst for change and reconciliation. It is an idea also explored by Allison Mackey, who, in an article on “The Affective Climate of Global Anthropocene Fictions”, asks if “good might come out of bad feeling”. She writes, “The affective force of these narratives invites readers and viewers to consider whether the ability to feel responsible—understood fundamentally as being able to respond—points toward negative affects as potentially generative and collective, rather than negative and individualizing.”⁵⁹

Conclusion

Like the Wells of *World Brain* and the Le Guin who wrote science fiction novels and stories that reflect on the precarity of human life and how humans might be changed for the better, Turner, in his last critical dystopian novel, pursued an epistemology aimed at radically changing the way people live together. He achieves this by presenting us with a lead character who is not so much physically altered by posthumanism and the epochal changes wrought by the Anthropocene as altered mentally and emotionally by these phenomena. The fact that Turner portrays this change as resulting from the main character’s dialogue with Indigenous Australian beliefs and customs suggests that he himself had not only come to identify culturally with Indigenous Australia but had come to see traditional Indigenous cultures as playing a vital role in any sustainable future and also in any future understandings of what it means to be human. On the other hand, the fact that the protagonist takes on board only some elements of traditional Indigenous knowledge arguably positions Turner, if not exactly in the company of the growing ranks of contemporary Australian Indigenous writers who are using dystopian narratives to rewrite colonial history, then at least as nearby as is possible to be for a science fiction writer whose education, upbringing, economic background and social connections meant that he remained ostensibly a White, middle-class European.

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an alternative future in which the original inhabitants of the Australian continent are struggling to regain the environmental balance of their former homeland. The flora and fauna are dying out under the impact of Western colonisation and its exploitative treatment of natural resources. But this is not all that is under threat, for the colonisers, too, are displaced and suffering from their actions.

⁵⁹Allison Mackey, “Guilty Speculations: The Affective Climate of Anthropocene Fictions”, *Science Fiction Studies* 45, no. 3 (2018): 530, <https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.45.3.0530>.