

# The Land is the Law: On Climate Fictions and Relational Thinking

Mykaela Saunders

Jonathan Kumintjara Brown, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia, b. 1960, Yalata, d. 1997, Melbourne

*Poison Country*, 1995, Adelaide

Synthetic polymer paint, earth pigments on canvas

South Australian Government Grant 1996, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

# 1. The land is the law

## 2. You are not alone in the world

—Dr Mary Graham, Kombumerri Elder and philosopher<sup>1</sup>

All stories begin with Country. And as climate change reveals, all stories will end with Country, too. ‘Cli-fi’ might be a new genre, but the role of Country in shaping Indigenous literature is as old as time. All of our creation stories tell of life-giving climate change. Our songlines—which form the oldest continuing transnational literatures<sup>2</sup>—are designed to conserve Country through human stewardship, and to revitalise it through ceremonial activation.

If we take cli-fi to be any fiction that features a changing or threatening climate as inextricable from the story, then to Aboriginal people all stories set in Australia post-1788 are climate fictions. The climate grief many Australians increasingly feel in the wake of local bushfires and global warming has been felt acutely by Aboriginal people since 1788, when the first swathes of forest were cut down to make houses and farmland in what is now Sydney. Since 1788, Australia has been responsible for a disproportionate percentage of global extinctions, directly attributed to the ecocidal processes of colonial-capitalism and extractive industries. Aboriginal people, in their deep relationship with Country, encompassing attendant rights and responsibilities, have collectively mourned and fought for Country for more than two centuries.

In Australia, there has been, historically, a lack of interrogation of the causes of climate change in a systems-thinking way. Climate is an indicator of the holistic health of Country—not just in the land and not just in the weather, or rising air and water temperatures. All of these things are affected by deforestation, for example, which has happened here on a mass scale, which in turn affects all life in the area, a cascade of cause and effect.

As the structures of Aboriginal worldviews reject oppressive hierarchies and warring dualisms, the structures of Aboriginal art tend towards the relational, which determines the form and the direction of the content. In this sense, any Aboriginal art that focuses on Country deals with climate change too—whether ancestral, life-making change or colonial-capitalism’s destructive changes.

Dr Mary Graham offers two basic precepts of Aboriginal cultures: that the land is the law and that you are not alone in the world. Through their practice, Aboriginal artists working in various media embody Graham’s two precepts, centring their work on Country and representing relationships between people that are rooted in land. They show process, connection and emergence, never just a moment fixed in time.

### Australian cli-fi futures

In art as in life, ecocide is intertwined with racial oppression. In *Fury Road*, the 2015 instalment of Australia’s most famous filmic speculative-fiction future, the only Aboriginal character is a ghost who accuses Mad Max, in his delirium dream, that ‘You let us die’.<sup>3</sup> This is an apt metaphor for our representation in so much post-/apocalyptic fiction, in which an unknown but complete artistic genocide has been performed on us. In the considerable body of creative material that is set in a future Australia, these worlds are almost always white supremacist, revealing colour blindness at best and realising fantasies of ethnic cleansing at worst.

In spite of Aboriginal peoples having lived through every major climate event in one of the most unforgiving and delicately balanced places on earth, and surviving our own ongoing apocalypse through attempted genocide, our future, according to so many writers in this field, is looking grim. Even some Aboriginal writers are guilty of not seeing hope, perhaps grappling with internalised fears about our own extinction.

Some say cli-fi has the potential to radically transform readers through the power of literature. Author and academic Tony Birch disagrees. He is ‘sceptical about what kind of impact “cli-fi” books can have on people’s opinions—let alone government policy’, and says, ‘I’ve read some really great fiction dealing with climate change and I hope the genre continues. But like any other form of communication, its impact will remain limited while we are subject to the deafening shriek of denialism.’<sup>4</sup> Birch continues:

I'm not confident that any book or piece of art has the ability to fundamentally shift many people. When people, for example, talk about climate change and the role of writers and artists—I believe in that. But if people ask, 'Do we write more climate change fiction?' I say, 'No—we fucking get down on the picket line'.<sup>5</sup>

And this is what Aboriginal artist-activists have always done.

### **Mining in Gulf Country: the Yirrkala Bark Petitions and *Carpentaria***

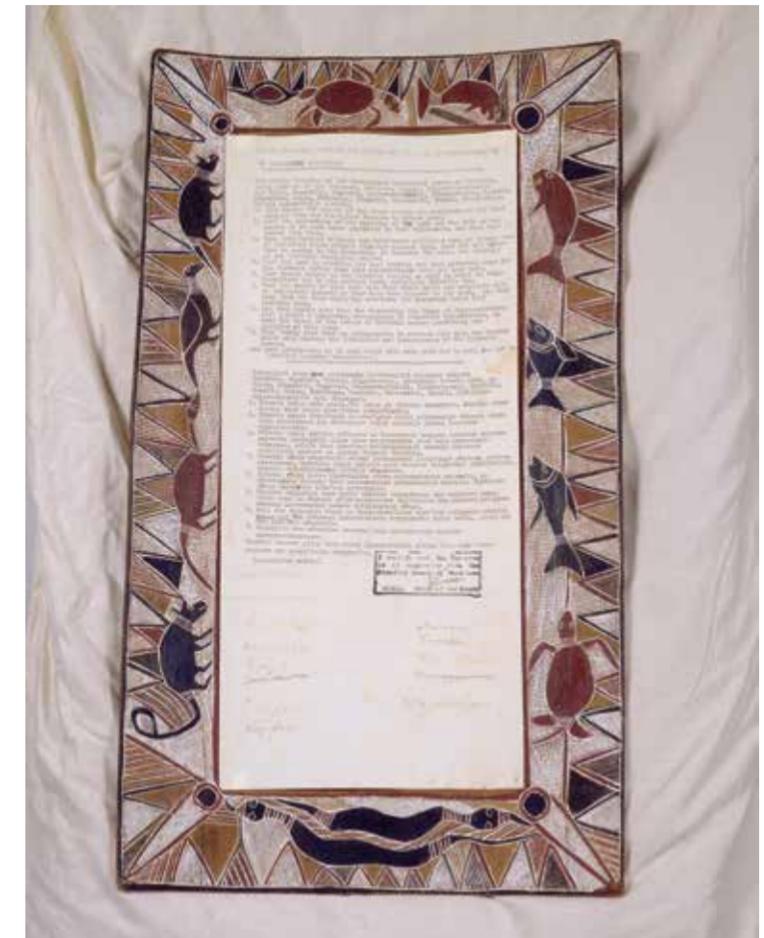
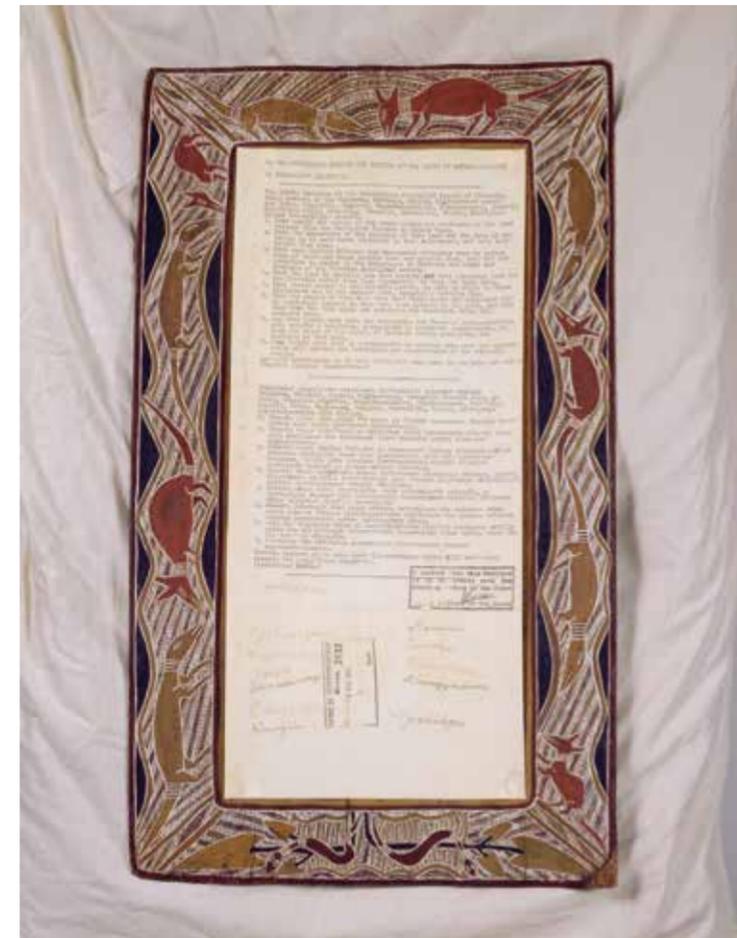
As a polity founded on genocide and ecocide, Australia has always had a problem with respecting Indigenous people and the environment. It is no secret to Aboriginal people that degradation of people and place are inextricably linked. One issue that arises from discussion regarding this is that it is difficult to talk about environmental issues without subsuming Aboriginal cultural relationships to Country into a scientific materialist paradigm that divorces culture and nature. Understanding Country from an Indigenous perspective requires relational thinking, which can be seen in Aboriginal kinship. This relational knowledge continues through Aboriginal culture.

In two examples from the Gulf Country, Aboriginal people respond to Australian government and corporate interference into traditional ownership by asserting sovereignty through kinship that extends to the non-human. The Yirrkala Bark Petitions document Yolngu ownership and assert sovereignty. The petitions were created in response to Nabalco's mining of Yolngu lands in 1963. Yolngu declare ownership through their cultural authority, framing the petition text with cultural designs and patterns that inscribe communal allodial title. This was the first document accepted by the government to assert Aboriginal ownership—and in a form that bridged Yolngu and Western law. In their 'Yirrkala Bark Petitions and Editorial', Lisa Radford and Yhonnie Scarce quote Galarrwuy Yunupingu, who says the bark petitions '... showed, in ways in which raising a multi-coloured piece of calico could never do, the ancient rights and responsibilities we have towards our Country. It showed we were not people who could be "painted out" of the picture or left at the edge of history.'<sup>6</sup>

In *Carpentaria*, set in another part of the Gulf decades later, novelist Alexis Wright explores the effects of colonial occupation and mining on one divided Aboriginal community.<sup>7</sup> The novel was conceived and written during the reign of John Howard, who repealed meaningful native title legislation and shifted the goalposts, with standards almost impossible to reach. Will Phantom, a young activist in the novel, takes on the mine, and his people engage in sabotage.<sup>8</sup> When the mine is ablaze, hellish winds roar from the site, as though Country is enacting revenge for its desecration. And if we are to read Aboriginal characters in the story as human expressions of Country, the way Aboriginal people see ourselves, then Gulf Country is sabotaging its enemies to the point of its own destruction. By working as a community—even across family feuds—Aboriginal characters are able to take down the operations. In the form of a cyclone, Country vanishes the town of Desperance, recreating the land as a *tabula rasa*, ready for Will's father and son, Norm and Bala, to walk back in from the sea hand in hand, and for intergenerational connections to move backwards and forwards through time in order to start again.

### **Maralinga works by APY artists**

One extraordinary way that Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) artists have responded to the colonial<sup>9</sup> destruction of their Country and their people is through a number of works referencing the Maralinga test bombings, between 1956 and 1963. The artists have responded to this horror story with healing artistic and cultural intercessions in various forms.



Yirrkala artists  
Yirrkala Bark Petition, 14 August 1963, and Yirrkala Bark Petition, 28 August 1963  
The works made by Dhuwa moiety and Yirritja moiety respectively  
Natural ochres on bark, ink on paper  
46.9 × 21 cm (each)  
Courtesy of the Speaker of the House of Representatives

In Jonathan Kumintjara Brown's *Poison Country* (1995), blood-coloured dirt obscures a cultural painting of his grandfather's homelands, representing the poisoning of Country and culture. In 2002, Kunmanara Queama and Hilda Moodoo painted *Destruction I* and *Destruction II*. They have been involved in the fight for justice for decades. The paintings depict mushroom clouds in their traditional style, claiming the universally recognised symbol for the APY gaze, and presenting Western destruction through a culturally specific lens.

In another medium, Kokatha and Nukunu artist Yhonnie Scarce's *Thunder Raining Poison* (2015) is an iteration of an installation series, depicting the destruction of Maralinga through the form of blown-glass yams, which bear down on the awestruck audience beneath. Ali Cobby Eckermann wrote the poem 'Thunder Raining Poison' in response to Scarce's work of the same name:

a whisper arrives. two thousand. two thousand or more. did you hear it?  
that bomb. the torture of red sand turning green  
the anguish of earth turned to glass  
did you hear it? two thousand. two thousand or more  
yams cremated inside the earth. poison trapped  
in glass like a museum. did you hear it?  
two thousand. two thousand or more<sup>10</sup>

The rhythm and repetition of the poem creates a chanting tattoo, vocalised in the communal first person to collectivise the experience of destruction for the people who belong to the place.

The work of all four artists testifies to the destruction, and the entwined desecration of place and people, brought about by the collusion of the British and Australian governments. So too are these works a testament to the sacred role of artist as witness.

#### Naretha Williams: codes of culture and blood

You kill the place, you kill the people.  
You kill the people, you kill the place.  
—Uncle Kev 'Kub Dharug' Saunders<sup>11</sup>

Climate is intimately tied to the health of Country, which depends on the intelligent stewardship of humans—encoded in Aboriginal cultures. On this continent, Country suffers because culture is the reason that they were so healthy for millennia. White supremacy has told lies for more than 230 years: that Aboriginal people didn't do anything special to the land and therefore didn't own it. Yet Country was never left alone. It was managed through systems of law, encoding relationships, patterns and cycles. Culture is the reason Aboriginal Countries and communities were so healthy for millennia. Colonial-capitalism not only dispossessed people of land—and land of people—but sought to stamp out culture of both land and people.

Indigenous peoples make up less than five per cent of the global population, but life on our lands is responsible for 80 per cent of the planet's biodiversity.<sup>12</sup> This is not a coincidence; our cultural life codes Country's regeneration, showing that there are ways to live on this planet as symbiotes rather than parasites. Naretha Williams' place-based sound practice models the way people, through art, may enter into right relationship with urbanised Country without harm or extraction. *Circle* is one iteration of her ongoing project *Cryptex*, which maps Williams' DNA sequence from her Wiradjuri, Asian, European and African bloodlines to establish a frame for the music she creates.<sup>13</sup> Because blood codes



Yhonnie Scarce  
*Thunder Raining Poison*, 2015  
2000 blown glass yams, stainless steel and reinforced wire  
Dimensions variable  
Installation view: Tarnanthi Festival Adelaide, Art Gallery of South Australia  
Photo: Janelle Low. Courtesy of the artist,  
Art Gallery of South Australia and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne



Hilda Moodoo, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia, b. 1952, Riverland, and  
Kunmanara Queama, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia, b. 1947, Maralinga Lands, d. 2009, Ceduna  
*Destruction I*, 2002, Oak Valley, South Australia  
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
Santos Fund for Aboriginal Art 2002, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide



Hilda Moodoo, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia, b. 1952, Riverland, and  
Kunmanara Queama, Pitjantjatjara people, South Australia, b. 1947, Maralinga Lands, d. 2009, Ceduna  
*Destruction II*, 2002, Oak Valley, South Australia  
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
Santos Fund for Aboriginal Art 2002, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

embody behaviour, mirroring the codes of law, this practice recognises that coding is all—it makes us bodily from the blood of our ancestors, while our culture encodes us mimetically.

Williams plays her music as site-specific rituals, activating place by inserting her blood memory into the site—thereby decolonising the space on metaphorical and metaphysical levels. These are not the sound ceremonies off which New Age hippies make lucrative careers, but intentional and beautiful works in which Country is a stage set as well as ‘... a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with.’<sup>14</sup> In *Circle*, Williams activates the bells at Melbourne’s Federation Square, using sounds mapped from sequences of her own bodily code. *Circle* is not ownership of Country, as Williams’ Wiradjuri Country is far from that of the Wurundjeri, and she acknowledges unceded Kulin sovereignty. Hers is a way of relating to Country where she was born, and where she lives and works, intended as a ceremonial intercession into an urban place in a non-intrusive, gentle, respectful way.

### The Anthropocene: natural outcome of colonial-capitalism

The Anthropocene, in process and in name, is a natural outcome of colonial-capitalism. The concept of the Anthropocene is an insult to land-based cultures. It lumps all peoples together as the problem, a post-racial lie that suggests *all* people have parted ways with the planet. As an all-inclusive term, it absolves colonial-capitalism through erasure of its responsibility, refusing to see its specificity as the cause of climate change.

In her poem ‘Anthropocene’, in her collection *Blakwork*, Gomeroi poet Alison Whittaker destroys any hope for a white supremacist future:

If I am roots  
And you are the branches the  
Trunk and the leaves then

I will suck no deeper for water

You leave here with me.<sup>15</sup>

White supremacy has always refused to ascribe any intelligence to us, but at the 11th hour many Australians are waking up to the brilliance of our cultural science: our traditional ecological knowledge and our practices of caring for Country. Is it too late? Is all hope lost? All peoples were land based, once. Those peoples who have parted ways with the planet can trace their parting personally and culturally. Those that are still land based have not parted ways, and our knowledge is still here. Nothing is lost until it is lost. As long as we are still here, everyone can be too—as long as climate action centres Indigenous peoples and our expertise.

This year, white ‘sovereign citizens’ agitate for freedom and disavow government legitimacy, wielding old European laws such as the Magna Carta to assert COVID-19 conspiracy-fuelled notions of sovereignty on Aboriginal land. Their energies are wasted by refusing to channel their power into supporting those who have a legitimate claim to sovereignty. Increasingly, there are many non-Indigenous people who do put themselves on the line for Country and culture. Imagine how far we could go towards utopia if even more white people stopped worrying only about their own rights. Indeed, Dr Kerry Arabena says that all people ‘thinking indigenously’ is what will heal people and the planet.<sup>16</sup>

When trees are prevented from holding onto each other under the ground they get sick. Sick trees will recover and thrive if they are given a community to hold onto. When trees are ripped from soil and planted somewhere new, they won’t thrive unless they are connected as a community. Like entering new communities, there must be a grafting onto existing life ways, rooted in Country. White supremacy has attempted to root into Indigenous land by displacing existing communities. Australian society swallows narratives of neoliberal scarcity about land rights, migrant jobs and toilet paper, equally, so it is no surprise that we are heading in the direction we are. Colonial-capitalism created the scarcity, and its offspring, neoliberalism, constructs its myths. But it is community cohesion that will dismantle late capitalism through mutual aid and care—as it always was and will be. In your commitment to climate justice, please prioritise the ongoing, centuries-long Indigenous efforts to assert sovereignty and protect Country. All of Australia is Aboriginal Country. Pay the rent by showing up; with boots on the ground where possible, or otherwise with financial aid.

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1. Mary Graham, ‘Some Thoughts About the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews’, *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1999, p. 1.
2. ‘Transnational’ meaning across the more than 300 nations within the continent.
3. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (motion picture), Kennedy Miller Mitchell, Producers Doug Mitchell, George Miller (dir.) and P.J. Voeten, Australia, 2015.
4. Broede Carmody, ‘How Climate Anxiety Is Changing the Face of Australian Fiction’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 June 2019, smh.com.au/entertainment/books/how-climate-anxiety-is-changing-the-face-of-australian-fiction-20190619-p51z44.html; accessed 20 August 2020.
5. Paul Daley, ‘Tony Birch on *The White Girl*: “No Aboriginal Person I know is Intact”’, *The Guardian*, 7 June 2019, theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/07/tony-birch-on-the-white-girl-no-aboriginal-person-i-know-is-intact; accessed 20 August 2020.
6. Quoted in Lisa Radford in conversation with Yhonnie Scarce, ‘Yirrkala Bark Petitions and Editorial’, *Art+Australia* Online, 2020, artandaustralia.com/online/image-not-nothing-concrete-archives/yirrkala-bark-petitions-and-editorial; accessed 20 August 2020. The quote originally appeared in Galarrwuy Yunupingu ‘Painting is a Political Act – 1988’, in Ian MacLean (ed.), *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Contemporary Art*, IMA, Brisbane, 2011, pp. 89–91.
7. Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, Giramondo, Artamon, NSW, 2006.
8. Will Phantom is based on Wright’s Countryman Murandoo Yanner.
9. I say colonial because, while no longer technically occupying Australia, the British government still employed abusive colonial tactics and it carried out its nuclear tests without the consent of traditional owners.
10. Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Thunder Raining Poison*, Poetry Foundation, 2016.
11. Wisdom from my Uncle Kev ‘Kub Dharug’ Saunders, personal communication, 2012.
12. International Union for the Conservation of Nature, ‘Director General Statement on International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples 2019’, iucn.org/news/secretariat/201908/iucn-director-generals-statement-international-day-worlds-indigenous-peoples-2019; accessed 7 August 2020.
13. Naretha Williams, *Circle*, Yirramboi Festival, 11 May 2017. See also narethawilliams.com.
14. Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra, 1996, p. 7.
15. Alison Whittaker, *Blakwork*, Magabala Books, Broome, 2018, p. 10.
16. Kerry Arabena, *Becoming Indigenous to the Universe: Reflections on Living Systems, Indigeneity and Citizenship*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2015, pp. 177–78.