# Reworlding: Speculative Futuring in the Endtimes, in the Everywhen Jen Rae and Claire G. Coleman

*Activities by the Centre for Reworlding are made possible while living on the unceded lands of the Wurrundjeri, Taungurung, and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples. We pay our respects to their ancestors and elders past and present.*

## Introduction

In ecology, when external conditions become hostile, organisms gain a higher chance of survival in refugia. In isolation, they reorganize their biological process to increase in numbers or strength until the disturbance abates. They must evolve to survive to gain a possible future. The risk of failure is extinction.

Our moment in the spacetime of the world is one in which we as humans have failed to exist in an equilibrium with nature and in which our connections with our non-human ancestors are broken. Complex and compounding human system failures have placed our species and our non-human relations on a long march towards the next extinction event, one that we created and one that will likely lead to great suffering. Adaptation is our only recourse. We must evolve to gain a liveable future.

In our increasingly climate-change impacted future, we at the Centre for Reworlding ask:

What are the conversations that we aren’t having now that might aid us, our loved ones, and our future ancestors?

What are the skills and knowledges at the thresholds of being forever lost, overlooked, or undervalued that our future generations may need for survival?

And what are we willing to give up and/or fight for in the greatest challenge facing humanity?

Where do we begin? How will we reorganize?

We begin by reworlding.

This chapter reflects upon and weaves together some of the stories emerging from our collaboration on *REFUGIUM* (2021),[[1]](#footnote-2) an Incinerator Art Gallery award-winning short film of speculative fiction in the climate emergency context, and the activities of the Centre for Reworlding, a collective formed around our collaborative work intersecting art, disaster risk reduction, and resilience within the climate emergency context. Our practice centres First Nations knowledge systems and protocols, where time and compounding existential crises converge to delve into moral dilemmas of life and death, and where we hone in on themes of child-centred trauma prevention and intergenerational justice in the coming collapse. Speculative futuring is a way of decoupling from maladaptive ways of engaging/disengaging with the climate emergency context to reorganize our relational thinking and being.

Engaging with the discipline of the imagination allows us to take calculated risks, experiment, understand our capacities, and fail together in creative hypothetical practices so we may change course, reorganize, and hopefully create a thriving and liveable world for future generations. Failure through speculative futuring is creatively and critically holding calculated risk in one hand, adapting and preparing for potential threats in the other, and simultaneously it is an outcome to avoid at all costs.

## Reworlding

‘Reworlding’ was coined in Jen Rae’s speculative fiction story *Centre for Reworlding: Umbilica Homepage* (2020) as it relates to three Indigenous futuring and survivance relationships — rematriation, reconciliation, and resurgence — acknowledging some of the tensions and contractions these concepts have in Indigenous and non-Indigenous usage. Jen refers to Métis Elder Maria Campbell’s oration on the role of artists in reconciliation as described by Métis author Erica Violet Lee in her essay discussing Indigenous futures. Campbell says that artists and writers are mirrors to people showing them ‘we build what could have been or should have been’ prior to colonial disruption, through which Lee writes that by cultivating an understanding our relationships to histories, kin and land, we can begin to build new worlds[[2]](#footnote-3) drawing from our complex cosmologies and reconnecting storylines.

While ‘worlding’ has been explored by scholars such as Haraway[[3]](#footnote-4) and Spivak[[4]](#footnote-5), the authors of this chapter are Indigenous and write from this perspective through praxis and art as ‘this decolonization/Indigenization is necessary in order to bring Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and practices to the fore in a meaningful and ethical way’.[[5]](#footnote-6) Reworlding also considers the ‘everywhen’ — a time that is outside of time where everything can be seen at once and where nothing new can be created, only discovered — a term originally coined by anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner in his 1956 essay *The Dreaming*,[[6]](#footnote-7) a highly regarded piece of writing on race relations and Australian Aboriginal culture. The everywhen acknowledges that time is non-linear encompassing past, present, and future simultaneously and is integrated as a way of life for many First Peoples. Reworlding is an active presence of looking back to look forward, always acknowledging the eternal now. This time we live in, the Anthropocene, is therefore also part of the everywhen. The questions explored in our film *REFUGIUM* (2021) is the unearthing and what we attempt to do together through the Centre for Reworlding (C∞R) is the reorganising — refugia.

Speculative practices can provide the ability to see and shape the world in a different way — to divide our reality from our imaginings, and to decouple our history and future from time in the everywhen. The long imaginary helps us prepare, prioritize, and know what’s worth fighting for when hope becomes fleeting — as written on our first banner *COLLAPSE//SURVIVE* (2020). To collapse is to honour the bully, the colonizer, the capitalist, the future-killer, and bask in the failings of centuries of extractive genocidal mania. To survive, unfuck, and reworld is to honour resurgence, intergenerational justice, rematriation, and culture — as written on our second banner *UNFUCK>>REWORLD* (2022).

Social change has always been a topic for speculative fiction — to transcend realities and corporealities. In the climate emergency context, as global temperatures rise at accelerating rates, timescales and impacts expand and detract, and we become numb to lives lost daily from disease and disaster. Now more than ever, there is a role for arts and culture to lean into the tensions, to tell the unpalpable stories along with the rousing, and to ensure we have skin in the long game.

Exploring risk through experimental speculative practice invites failure as fodder for learning together with audience, communities, and participants. It is part of the reorganising of thinking and relations. One of the limitations and challengesof climate emergency communicationis its ‘failure to activate the public imagination to the potential risks and consequences of disaster especially in an urban context’.[[7]](#footnote-8) Whereas artists are deeply embedded in the discipline of the imagination, allowing us to see with collaborators and audiences alternate futures, delve into scenario mapping, and practice hypotheticals where the stakes are lower, risks can be explored and failures allow for course correction/re-direction.

## Backstory

To put the Centre for Reworlding in context, the impetus for us to begin collaborating began in early 2020 when we were both invited to participate in a two-week artist-exchange residency in Sydney, hosted by Sydney Festival (Australia) and Other Sights for Artists’ Projects (Canada) and curated by Vanessa Kwan, Barbara Cole, Lorna Brown, and Sunshine Frère. Sandwiched between the catastrophic Australian Black Summer bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic, *The Future is Floating* residency centred intersectionality, often underrepresented in dominant climate emergency discourses, which is now recognized as a failing in communicating to diverse publics as demonstrated in many climate emergency action plans. The residency brought together settler, Black, and Indigenous artists to connect and create a culture of exchange to discuss shared colonial histories, art, futures, and collectivity — water, sound, activism, and performance being common threads between the artists. The water on which we floated, the Parramatta River and Sydney Harbour, were poisoned, polluted, and severely wounded by the ongoing colonization event giving our works a mournful but urgent energy.

The invitation to be in ceremony and learn from Elders of the Simms, Timbery, and other La Perouse Kameygal families, the experience of being aboard the Aboriginal-owned Tribal Warrior boat for the residency events, performances, and programs, and the contested political climate in Australia left strong impressions and influenced some of the artist’s creative responses including ours. The experience of collaborative art making grew into a practice of collective protest. The making and performance became a methodology for activism. Many works developed with extinction peri-colonization as their themes.

All artists were preselected by the curators into four collaborative performance groups. We were placed in a group with Tkaranto (Toronto)-based artist-scholar-activist Syrus Marcus Ware and Dharug-Dharwal artist Venessa Possum. Claire performed a reading of *WE ARE WATER* (2020), a poem speaking about the loss of land and water during colonization, and the connection between colonization and the loss of everything that matters to Indigenous people. Central to the work was an understanding of the difference between Indigenous notions of sacred water and the failure of Western developments that see water as a commodity at best and a garbage dump at worst.

Jen performed *Sleepwalking into Extinction* (2019) as the persona Ellis, who arrives from the year 2130 with a call from the future speaking to the rise of nihilistic and fundamentalist thinking in the climate emergency. She offers do-it-together instructions on how to defeat the fanatic and halt the sixth mass extinction event. To the audiences’ surprise, the Tribal Warrior was then steered as close to Kirribilli House as possible (then Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s official residence in Sydney Harbour), blaring Jen and Marco Cher-Gibard’s sound-score *Evacuate* (2019).

*Evacuate* is an intense 12-minute journey that starts with the ‘simplicity of a beckoning church bell and builds to a maniacal cacophony of alarms, sirens, and emergency announcements […] reaching a crescendo where the mind imagines near-apocalyptic scenarios […] [until] the sound gradually subsides to the gentle lapping of water’, as described by art critic Jennifer Barry.[[8]](#footnote-9) The public audience were then encouraged by Ellis to partake in a protest stance aimed at Scott Morrison’s government for their abject failure to act on climate change and the catastrophic bushfires.

A group of people holding a banner

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceOur first collaborative banner *COLLAPSE//SURVIVE* (2020) hung from the bow of the boat (Figure 8.1) and was later carried in the Sydney Invasion Day Rally (Figure 8.2). The text highlighted the prophetic doomsday tensions present in contemporary discourses on the compounding human and ecological systems failures we now call the climate emergency or what Margaret Atwood more appropriately calls ‘everything change’.[[9]](#footnote-10) It also called for the collapse of colonial and capitalist power systems and transcending reconciliation towards Indigenous resurgence where we all have the ‘courage and imagination to envision life beyond the state’.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Figure 8.1: *Collapse//Survive* (2020) banner tethered to the Mari Nawi — Tribal Warrior boat. Photo: Vanessa Kwan. Used with permission.

A group of people marching in the street holding a large pink banner

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Figure 8.2: *Collapse//Survive* (2020) banner carried in the Sydney Invasion Day Rally on Gadigal lands, 26 January 2020. Photo: Salote Tawale. Used with permission.

The *Future is Floating* experience and the content of our respective performances aboard the Tribal Warrior led us both to commit to exploring how we might further collaborate, as it was apparent we were creatively operating within the same zeitgeist. We recognized that we are both interrogating through speculative futuring the existential crisis of the times.

The opportunity came through Melbourne performance venue Arts House, where we proposed an experimental performance work within their multiyear REFUGE program. However, due to the Melbourne COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in March 2020 and the professional impact of project suspensions, our creative development moved online and resulted in almost weekly Zoom meetings.

In April 2020, it became more evident that our future imaginings were rapidly becoming current realities thus opening new crevices to explore in our collaboration. As speculative futurists we noted that events of early 2020 and the socio-political fallout in Australia and other Western nations mirrored colonial histories and stories within science fiction films and literature (e.g. *Soylent Green* (1973)*, Foundation* (1951)*, The Sea and the Summer* (1987)*,* etc*.*).

This realization propelled us to ask in our discussions: *what are the conversations that we aren’t having now that might aid us, our communities, and our future ancestors?* Answering this question requires a preparedness mindset with many tendrils, trajectories, and temporalities. It speaks to accountability, empathy, and intergenerational justice — themes often absent in Western discourses, especially in relation to climate resilient futures.

A few months later, we both participated in artists’ Alex Kelly and David Pledger complex digital project *Assembly for the Future[[11]](#footnote-12)* for the BLEED festival — a project exploring multiple near futures*.* Claire’s provocative oration *Beyond Whiteness* — *The Rise of New Power* spoke from an imagined future about the end of racism, the beginning of a healthy post-colonial culture, and how it was achieved. Jen Rae’s ‘Dispatch from the Future’ response titled *Centre for Reworlding: Umbilica Homepage* (2020) was a short story marking the 10th anniversary of a fictional underground group of mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and aunties who mobilize in the collapse to support one another and the next generation through the practice of reworlding, an integrated practice of knowledge sharing, radical empathy, and child-centred trauma prevention.

Jen’s short story was influenced by her then present experience of living within 20 metres of Australia’s largest COVID-19 outbreak, witnessing and shielding a young pre-schooler at home to the human tragedy unfolding nearby. In hindsight, this experience and our participation in *Assembly for the Future* formed a second critical turning point in our collaboration with the lingering questions: *can we imagine a world without racism? Can we imagine a world where in one hundred years, children aren’t traumatized by the impacts of climate change as they continue to unfold as a way of life? What can we unearth from our ancestral knowledges and other overlooked knowledge systems to support a new imagining, knowing and being for the future?*

This last question references what we now call ‘reworlding’ and the conceptual framework came together in our short film *REFUGIUM* (2021).

## *REFUGIUM*

It is the end of the world as we know it. Every beginning is an ending with a backstory, a right now, the unimaginable, the inevitable, and the beyond of what might be possible. The ending teaches us where to start. Reworlding imagines a world that could have been — before colonial disruption — as our beginning. The film begins with Claire in 2042 at the age of 68 in an undisclosed bunker attempting to log into the *Bilya* portal in a futile effort to warn other reworlders about a raid.

Claire is the sentinel of the Centre for Reworlding, the last person standing per se. Everyone has dispersed and she is alone. She descends into a nihilistic spiral, half-way believing that all efforts at reworlding were for nothing. ‘We failed’, she says, and attempts to communicate with those back in 2021 to save themselves and abandon reworlding and each other. For the sake of future generations, Jen’s great-granddaughter Ellis in 2121 is tasked with intercepting Claire’s transmission, and a dialogue ensues. Difficult questions about the future are answered. *REFUGIUM* becomes a sort of Zoom call of transtemporal proportions. The audience-listener is witness and becomes implicated as a collaborator in the project by their presence. Ellis offers a blueprint for reworlding. There is a provocation, tasks, and protocols to follow, and everyone has a role.

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Figure 8.3: Jen Rae and Claire G. Coleman, *REFUGIUM* (2020), digital still. Photo: Devika Bilamoria. Used with permission.

## Centre for Reworlding — Climate Leadership and Creative + Cultural Resilience

*REFUGIUM*, when created, was intended to be a stand-alone artwork. It premiered at the *First Assembly of the Centre for Reworlding* at Arts House in April 2021. In the lead up, we asked and others asked ‘what would it take to turn this work of speculative fiction into a reality?’ and ‘how can we prepare the world to maintain culture and foster intergenerational justice in the inevitable apocalypse?’ as the film imagines. At the *First Assembly,* it became apparent that the Centre for Reworlding had already begun, albeit different than how it originates in the film. With support of the original eight reworlders and the beginnings of our Council of Grandmothers, Mothers, Aunties, and Sisters, the Centre for Reworlding is forming.

With the support of the Australia Council for the Arts, the Centre for Reworlding (C∞R) is now a collective of Indigenous, people of colour, settler, and LGBTIQA2S+ artists, scientists, thinkers, and change-makers with a track record of collaboratively working at the intersections of art, disaster risk reduction, and resilience and the climate emergency leadership. To reworld is to decolonize, Indigenize, and collectively imagine into action a ‘world worthy of its children’[[12]](#footnote-13) for the sake of all our future ancestors. Through our Creative Resilience Lab, palavers, events, workshops, and projects, the C∞R aims to bolster inclusive collaboration and creative leadership in climate emergency response and action including prioritising the mainstream integration of arts and culture in national climate emergency discourses, policy frameworks, and tertiary education.

In Melbourne, our co-curated exhibition the *Centre for Reworlding presents RESURGENCE*, at Incinerator Art Gallery (June/July 2022) offered a new provocation in the form of a second collaborative banner handmade with the assistance of another group of artists in residence at Commonground, in Seymour, Victoria. Barkandji woman, researcher, curator, and collaborator Zena Cumpston reminded us that to fast forward to reworlding means a whole lot of ‘unfucking’ needs to happen, thus the positioning of unfuck in the *UNFUCK>>REWORLD* (2022) banner that greeted gallery visitors at the entrance of the exhibition. Visitors could choose which way to enter the space, to begin with *REFUGIUM* or to end with it. The exhibition is about truth-telling, future-back stories and brave unfailing where facts reveal fictions and mnemonics help you to remember so action and relationships with others embed. It’s heavy in speculative imagining and offerings to the eye, ears, heart, and gut.

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Figure 8.4: *UNFUCK>>REWORLD* (2022), Claire G. Coleman, Jen Rae, Venessa Possum, and

Marcus Syrus Ware, fabric protest banner, Incinerator Art Gallery. Photo: Lucy Foster. Used with permission.

## Unfucking to Reworld in the Endtimes in the Everywhen

Climate/everything change is upon us.

While it is possible to imagine futures where heroes and technology ‘save us’, where Mars becomes habitable, and underground bunkers become the norm, the reality is that these visions aren’t going to do the deep work needed to ensure a liveable future for our future ancestors to thrive. The elite aren’t making decisions for the commoners, the preppers aren’t stocking for communities, and the grass is not always greener on other planets.

Only in togetherness can we unfuck and reworld. We can collectively destabilize these nihilistic and fundamentalist ambitions and powers by imagining and acting for futures we want for our young and future generations. There is not the luxury of time for contemplation. Join us. Your time begins now in the everywhen.

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