What is Social Alternatives?
Social Alternatives is an independent, quarterly, multi-disciplinary, refereed journal. It analyses, critiques, and reviews contemporary social, cultural, economic, and ecological developments to determine their implications at local, national, and global levels. Because we value artistic endeavour, we publish short stories and poetry.

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Each issue typically focuses on some particular matter of current concern or public debate. Past issues include matters such as peace and conflict, social welfare, sexism, social movements, the media, racism, Indigenous rights, social justice, inequality, mental health, crime and the law, and the environment. We also publish important articles outside of the theme for each issue.

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Social Alternatives Vol. 28 No.3, 2009
Since Thomas More’s first use of the word utopia in 1516 it has conjured multiple and ambiguous connotations. Utopia and its defining antithesis dystopia can be articulations of what we wish to become or to avoid becoming, an investigation of hope and the potential for transformation. Utopias can evoke dichotomies between the liberal realisation and the impossible ideal (Kumar 1991); or a contrast between the concrete and closed social plan as opposed to the impetus toward hope in the small details of various cultural contexts (Jameson 2006).

Because utopia and dystopia are impossibly large concepts this edition of Social Alternatives does not argue for a common specific definition of either. This edition simply seeks to revisit the themes of utopia and dystopia. Firstly, it focuses on literary and cultural expressions of utopianism rather than practical or political expressions, although the literary becomes a vehicle for social and political change. Secondly, this issue deviates from focus on more typical utopian and dystopian genres such as Science Fiction (SF) to examine new contexts such as post-colonial fiction, American modernism, culture, young adult fiction, neo-Marxist aestheticism and hyperrealism. Oscar Wilde said ‘Literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose’ (Wilde 1997, 25). As such, literature is a utopian focus whereby we can assess the potential for change through creative imagination.

Utopian thinking has been criticised for masking suspect ideological certainties, for example the George W. Bush presidency has been criticised for its own utopian and authoritarian delusions. Sheldon Wolin (2008) argues that Bush’s inverted form of utopian totalitarianism does not demand that the lives of the people are drab, dedicated to an ideological struggle (unlike mass totalitarianisms of the mid-twentieth century). But poverty is exported from the richer countries, and freedoms are sacrificed on the altar of ideological neo-liberalism masquerading as utopia. Conversely, the utopian impetus has been viewed as absolutely necessary in the twenty-first century, to answer the ‘universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible’ (Jameson 2007, 232).

There are multiple ways in which utopia, or perhaps more accurately in this context, utopianism has been expressed. Andrew Milner categorises the utopian into textual (philosophical and literary) and practical, such as intentional communities (Milner 2006, 132). Another way in which we might see two different modes of ‘descendency’ within utopianism since Thomas More’s work is the ‘program’ versus the ‘impulse’ (Jameson 2007). These two forms are Jameson’s interpretation of the distinction between more traditional understandings of utopia on the one hand and Ernst Bloch’s more fluid use of utopian impulse on the other. While this edition is mostly focused on the latter, it is useful to outline the former as clarifying counter point. The program is determined by Jameson as space and the city, intentional community, revolutionary praxis and the text (Jameson 2007, 3-4). Utopian programs are defined by closure (Jameson 2007, 5). We might simplify closure, for the purposes of this edition, to a radical breach with the known, whereby the utopia (or by implication the dystopia) is independent, self sufficient, and conscious: a total vision for how life may be lived. Programs may include consciously imagined new worlds composed of alternatives to all contemporary institutions (fictional or actual) with fundamentally different forms of governance and economic structures. Program models of utopia include intentional socialist, anarchist or feminist communes such as William Lane’s socialist communalist ‘New Australia’ colony in Paraguay, 1893-1909 (Milner 2006, 132).

Arguably, utopian societies in SF are examples of the programmed form of utopia. Think of the highly complex new world, Annares in Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia, with its brilliant imagining of an anarchist society based largely on the writings of Peter Kropotkin. Annares has language free of gendered and possessive personal pronouns. It has no central government, work is self-chosen and rotating and communal living rather than familial structures order the private sphere. But it begins most distinctly with a wall, to keep Annares in and all else out (Le Guin 1974).

The utopian impulse on the other hand can be defined as lacking closure. This does not mean that the utopian impulse is inauthentic, the non-real swindle as opposed to the practical and full program (Jameson, 2006:4).
Bloch is able to see the human utopian impulse of hope as erupting in many cultural spaces (Bloch, 2000).

Bloch’s understanding of utopia as the impetus toward hope in art and culture can be developed through addition of Jameson’s focus on the importance of utopian ‘disruption’. Utopianism may not always provide a concrete alternative to the sufferings of today. Such expectations of a clear and fool proof plan arguably fuel the apathy intrinsic in what Peter Sloterdijk has called the ‘voyeurs of the decline’, a term defining those on the right who firmly assert the necessity of capitalism and the irrelevance and automatic failure of any alternative (Sloterdijk in Daniel and Moylan 1997, viii). Utopianism, which is thinking about utopia, may not be a complete image of life after the utopian ‘disruption’. Utopian thinking may possibly liberate us from the constraints of the given here and now by pushing consideration of a break with that very given. Some attempts at ideological cementing of utopian vision risk dystopian realities: many have argued dystopia as the logical fulfilment of the fixed utopian realisation (see for example Jacoby 2005).The gesture towards utopian imagining, exploration of the utopian disruptive moment and critical examination of dystopian reality all may allow for movement toward an alternative, a liberating transformation: all have potential to force us to reconsider the intrinsic safety or necessity in the way we live.

The impetus toward hope and focus on the moment of utopian disruption provide a unifying lens through which to view the articles in this collection. This vision enables an escape from the popular imagining of utopia as ‘unrealistic imaginings of improved world orders which when tested against the real politic of pragmatism collapse into ineffectuality’ (Bradford et. al 2008, 2). As Peter Fitting has argued, the focus on the non specific utopian disruption can be ‘frustrating [for] those readers looking for a solution or a particular strategy, who wonder how utopian disruption is meant to replace or supplement more traditional forms of political activity’ (Fitting 2006, 49). Yet the political is implicit in all discussions in this edition. Fictional and cultural texts can offer political comment on various states of being in open ways: a ‘social dreaming’ (Tower Sargent in Bradford 2008, 2) where dreams and nightmares act as political examination and catalyst for change.

**Utopian Potential**

There are many intrinsic contradictions within utopian thinking. Bill Ashcroft uses Ernst Bloch’s framework to discuss three of the central contradictions implicit in thinking about utopia: ‘the relation between utopias and utopianism; the relation between the future and memory; and the relation between the individual and the collective’ (Ashcroft 2009). The first contradiction Ashcroft introduces, that between utopias and utopianism, is crucial to many of the articles in this collection. Ashcroft points out that utopia can degenerate into dystopia—that is lack of freedom. Yet without thinking about the utopia/s not yet achieved, freedom is impossible.

Similarly, Ashcroft uses Bloch to point out that while utopia suggests an impetus toward the future world, utopias are founded on memory. The final contradiction Ashcroft raises is that between the individual and the collective; present because while collective unity is crucial to the utopian dream ‘the collective is always inimical to individual fulfilment’ (Ashcroft 2009).

Ashcroft discusses utopian contradiction in order to discuss textual moments of resolution in post-colonial fiction (see also Pordzik 2001). The post-colonial text presents a creative response to problems of a reality where past is unknown or traumatic, present is frequently disempowering and the future is frightening. Here the imagined space can be collective as a recuperative and cathartic act rather than as threat to individual freedoms. Similarly, the recovery of the past and the negotiation of memory and future worlds can be reconciled through the productions of new possibilities, new understandings of the past. Ashcroft’s focus is on the transformative potential of Caribbean fiction and poetry, but his work will have relevance to a great many texts. Magic realist moments in Indigenous Australian and North American fiction novels spring to mind. Ashcroft offers new critique of the increasing significance of utopianism to post-colonial fiction as rejection of an essentialist idealising of the past and a celebration of a continuing and complex subjectivity.

The debate about subjectivity is constant in discussion of utopia. There is questioning of whether the utopian impulse results in change in human nature (Fitting 2006, 46). Anne Maxwell explores this question in new ways. Maxwell’s analysis of the significance of Ursula K Le Guin’s 1975 novel New Atlantis comes closest to generating a response to the SF genre in this edition, with its examination of a world ravaged by the correlations between science, technology and capitalism. New Atlantis is, however, situated in the very near imagined future of Portland, Oregon and thematically is exploring the utopian impulses within a dystopian space of environmental collapse and subsequent totalitarian rule. Despite the use of torture, authoritarian rule, deprivation and environmental degradation the human need to imagine and envision new worlds is ever present.

Maxwell clarifies some mechanisms through which fiction can conjure the utopian impulse. The impulse in Le Guin’s work is quite literally the vision or dream, where characters perceive an entirely different image of
the real in a non-waking state. In addition, there is music in the lives of the characters and the characterisation of human ethical conviction as true beauty. Maxwell also demonstrates Le Guin's effective rendering of the utopian moment through poetic narrative modes within the novel form. Maxwell suggests this literary work, despite its lack of hope and brutal reality, may be a positing of the power of the imagination to redeem 'the increasingly autocratic and toxic world spawned by capitalism' (Maxwell 2009).

Lesley Hawkes takes this discussion of the vital human capacity to dream and honours foci on hope as a utopian impulse. She notes the place of hope in canonical American literature, most particularly F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1925 novella The Great Gatsby. Hawkes points out that while many have seen hope or the Great American Dream undermined as illusory in this work; hope is also simultaneously rebuilt as it is dismantled (Hawkes 2009). This tidalike movement of evoking hope in the moment of crushing pessimism finds parallel in the recent political discourse of Barack Obama. Hawkes argues Obama used Jay Gatsby's discourse of hope to bring unity to the United States marking a shift from the Tom Buchanan-style materialism, and the aggressive nationalism of the previous administration. But Obama also represents an extension of Gatsby's form of utopian hope for total transformation. Unlike Gatsby, Hawkes argues, Obama combines word, image and voice in a collective dream for the future. It is an unfinished vision, which is part of its effectiveness.

Like Ashcroft, Hawkes discusses momentary resolution of the utopian contradictions between memory/future and collective/individual. Hawkes suggests that through revision of The Great Gatsby we can see Obama’s use of hope as drawing on the wrongs of the past in order to suggest promise for the future. Also like Ashcroft, Hawkes discusses Caribbean author, Derek Walcott, an artist on Obama’s reading list. Hawkes highlights Walcott’s particular poetic form as a retelling of history and story to include alternative readings: a practice clear in Obama’s rhetoric.

The way the past can be retold and used to recuperate the traps of the present is further explored in Jeff Archer’s exploration of John Berger’s neo-Marxist aesthetic novel, Pig Earth. Archer is looking at ‘survivalism’ as anti-utopian. His anti-utopian stance may be understood as a reading of utopia co-opted by ideology, such as the twentieth century utopian totalitarianisms of Fascism (Schapiro 1972) or those of today.

In questioning the false utopian impulse to perfection, survivalism is not future focused or an ideal. Archer’s discussion explores alternatives to the problems of modernity and capitalism. The creative and redemptive impulse here is the imagined peasant space where work is sacred and where environment and community are one. The past in this space is eternally reconstructed in the present. It is reconstructed in peasant story telling, remembering, gossip, and repeated work traditions. As with Ashcroft, Maxwell and Hawkes' discussion of hope and desire for an alternative, it is literature’s self-reflective tendency to comment on the power of art itself which is crucial. The city by contrast to the peasant village is the place of the mirror within the mirror, dangerous and empty (Archer 2009).

**Dystopian Warning**

This image of the vacuous and threatening mirror in the contemporary mainstream is literalised in Vivienne Muller’s discussion of the dystopian potential of that servant to consumerism in the west: the changing room mirror. Muller points out that that consumer practice is complicit in the mirror acting as dystopian lens of female disassociation with the body. The change room mirror, as demonstrated by the prolificacy of blogs discussing its fragmenting and disassociating nature, is part of a mechanism whereby women define themselves against external and impossible perfection. When looking in the mirror, many women experience not a presence or identifiable corporeality, instead they see monstrous gap; an *other* to the female ideal overwhelmingly conjured by the media.

The common dystopian trope of monstrous unreal bodies and constant surveillance are alluded to in the bloggers’ responses to the changing room mirror. But here the surveillance is negative self-surveillance and the monstrous body is a distortion of the self. Muller does not leave us with this dystopian mirror as inescapably hopeless. Muller explores a range of new mirrors used to evoke female agency and self-determination, such as use of the speculum in performance art.

Lara Cain-Gray argues for perception of another area, Young Adult (YA) fiction through dystopian lens. Cain-Gray is not the first to perceive the utopian and dystopian potential of children’s and young adult (YA) literature. Bradford et. al. assert that children's literature offers an advocacy of utopian possibility through a ‘refusal of closure’ (Bradford et. al 2008, 3). Dystopian critique and utopian potential ‘doesn’t have to be located in a far-distant hope for a better place... it can be part of the transformation of the now’ (Levitas and Sargisson in Bradford 2008, 4). So despite earlier assumptions about the bourgeois leanings of realism for Marxist utopian analysis (McNeill 2006, 67) realism can fruitfully comment on utopian imagining or in this case dystopia banality. The source of the dystopian world here lies in the relationship between the present and the future. Dystopias are evident in futures significantly
worse than the hoped for or expected (Sargent in Cain-Gray, 2009). Following this, Cain-Gray argues that the continual thematic suggestion that the destinies and transformations hoped for by the characters will be replaced by a continuation of the social bleakness and restriction of the suburban mundane is dystopian.

In this work of gritty YA social realism, Cain-Gray argues that the dreams of the characters are not redemptive moments of creative imagination as in Ashcroft and Maxwell's discussions. Rather they are overwhelmingly unlikely and pathetic hopes for the extraordinary, fuelled by a television culture that seeks to normalise the trajectory from obscurity to notoriety to such a degree to make banal existence automatic failure. The article comments on a wider debate on what young people should be reading, and perhaps in understanding the dystopian qualities of this work we are able to see how such works are not simply disillusioning the young but act as warning for our capable and critically literate youth.

The final article in this edition is Eleni Pavlides' analysis of the dystopian quality of Christos Tsiolkas' 2005 hyperrealist fiction Dead Europe. Pavlides continues discussion of how realism can offer dystopian warning about the threats of today. The work uses the common Australian literary quest motif to negotiate discussion between old and new Europe. Pavlides reveals three ways in which Tsiolkas presents a dystopian present: the startling motif of photography; the traumatic and unsettling depiction of anti-Semitism and the conflating of past and present time in the novel's structure to reveal how little we have moved beyond the dystopian traps of mid-twentieth century Europe. These three literary motifs reveal the horrors of Europe that are hidden beneath our consciousness.

Pavlides reveals the way in which hyperrealist fiction can use the pilgrimage motif to show us heading towards a future that is a haunted by the sublimating death drives of the past. Her discussion is part of large debate about the motif of anti-Semitism in the novel, and offers complex new reading of this motif as an expose of racist realities in the dystopian present, rather than reinforcement of such prejudice. Pavlides argues that Tsiolkas' collapsing of two narratives detailing past and present further emphasises how little we have escaped the spectres of the past.

This edition of Social Alternatives will provoke more debate about potential futures, our hopes for progress and transformation and our fears of nightmarish regress. It explores momentary resolution to utopian contradiction in post-colonial fiction and the imaginative act as confronting the horrors of environmental collapse and totalitarianism. There is examination of how literature offers alternatives and hope in the context of hyper-consumerism, and other problems of the metropolis and modernity. There is critique of various new dystopian contexts, including hyperrealism and YA fiction all constructing warning for today. This edition of Social Alternatives will ignite thought on the role of literature in extending political debates on what is possible, what is practical and what we must avoid.

References

Muller, V. 2009. ‘The dystopian mirror and the female body’ Social Alternatives 28:3.
Why Australia?

...this hills hoist
formidably crooked
frayed and full with plastic pegs,
primitive in metal, weathered and smooth.

I do not miss you, clothes drier.
The clinking of your zippers and the thudding of your weight,
the smell of electricity clinging to each sock.
I've lived long enough to know
that this is a metaphor for something.

...this hills hoist,
it rotates in front of me,
dancing to the birds that chatter in crowds,
basking in the radiance of a three o'clock sun,
celebrating a wind
I've only ever felt in spring.

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Endnote

1 Note, that the text is a counterpoint novel, presenting an open-ended debate about utopia as the central protagonist, Shevek, visits various worlds and ideological positions. The explication of the term of 'program' here is limited to Shevek’s, home planet, Anarees, to which he ultimately returns.

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HEATHER JOHNSON
ADELAIDE, SA
THE AMBIGUOUS NECESSITY OF UTOPIA:
POST-COLONIAL LITERATURES AND THE
PERSISTENCE OF HOPE

BILL ASHCROFT

This essay hinges on the paradox that becomes increasingly obvious in post-colonial literatures: while all achieved utopias are degenerate, without utopian thinking liberation is impossible. The discussion looks at the ambiguous philosophical relationship that has existed between utopias and dystopias since Thomas More’s seminal classic, and the argument is advanced through the foundational Marxist utopian theory of Ernst Bloch. Paradoxically, only the thinnest of lines separates utopia from dystopia and the slippage from one to the other hinges on three kinds of ambiguity—three contradictions which demarcate the very thin line between them. Wherever utopias occur these contradictions emerge, in: the relation between utopia and utopianism; the relation between the future and memory and the relations between the individual and the collective. While these ambiguities are present in all utopian thinking, the particular ways in which post-colonial writers and thinkers negotiate them tell us a lot about their distinct form of cultural and political hope.

The nagging question hovering around Thomas More’s *Utopia* is: “What did he mean by it?” C.S. Lewis regarded it as an elaborate joke and Stephen Greenblatt pointed out that every rule or amenity for the ideal life in the book turns out to be fatally flawed (1980, 40-1). Did More really mean it to be the picture of an ideal society? Is it a satire or a serious proposal for social improvement? The debate over whether Utopia is a playful satire or a serious proposal for an ideal community persists to the present day, and is reflected in the perpetually ambiguous relationship between utopias and dystopias in literature.\(^1\) Thomas More unleashed an idea that has remained a critical focus of all visions of a better society. For most contemporary utopian theory Utopia is no longer a place but the spirit of hope itself, the essence of desire for a better world (see for example, Jameson 1971).

There are forms of ambiguity inherent in this Utopian idea that ‘keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is’ (Jameson 1971, 110-11). Wherever utopias occur three key contradictions emerge: the relation between utopias and utopianism; the relation between the future and memory; and the relation between the individual and the collective. The dominant utopian literary form from about the mid-twentieth century has been science fiction. Yet there is a quite distinct literary form that explores these ambiguities in different ways. The particular ways in which post-colonial writers and thinkers negotiate such ambiguities create a distinct form of cultural and political hope. The forms of utopianism emergent in post-colonial writing—a utopianism almost completely devoid of utopias—gesture toward a resolution of utopian contradictions dialogically.

Utopias and Utopianism

Primarily, everybody lives in the future, because they strive ... Function and content of hope are experienced continuously, and in times of rising societies they have been continuously activated and extended (Bloch 1986, 4).

To emphasise this Bloch explicitly separates utopianism, which he sees as a universal human characteristic, from utopias, which, as playful abstractions, are pointless and misleading – a parody of hope. Limiting the utopian to Thomas More’s island:

... would be like trying to reduce electricity to the amber from which it gets its Greek name and in which it was first noticed. Indeed, the utopian coincides so little with the novel of an ideal state that the whole totality of philosophy becomes necessary ... to do justice to the content of that designated by utopia (15).

It is more than a little odd that Bloch spends almost no time on utopias themselves, and in fact disparages them in this way, since their one common feature—a characteristic of all modern utopias—is that their inhabitants hold all things in common. Commonwealth
and common ownership are the feature one would expect the Marxist Bloch to most eagerly embrace. But Bloch's major premise is the energizing of the present with the anticipation of what is to come. For him, utopias are pipe dreams. Without utopianism, however, we cannot live. We can see this confirmed in the fact that all 'achieved utopias' (Third Reich, Stalinist Russia, the Cultural Revolution, neo-liberal Capitalism) including the utopian achievement of post-colonial independent states, are degenerate, or failures (catastrophic failure in the case of Zimbabwe) or outright swindles. But despite these failures and the ambiguous relationship between utopias and dystopias, utopianism remains necessary. Utopianism is a deep and growing aspect of post-colonial literatures and it appears to trace a different trajectory from the Marxist utopianism that has dominated contemporary utopian theory.

Bloch indicates the depth and prevalence of hope in its progress from the curiosity and craving of childhood to the constant presence of mature desire. Urging, longing, craving, wishing, imagining, dreaming—the Not-Yet lies deep in human consciousness and is characterised by daydreams, which are nothing less than hope reaching out of itself. People have always dreamed 'of the better life that might be possible. Everybody's life is pervaded by daydreams' (Bloch 1986, 3). Not only the emotion of hope but thinking in and of itself, for Bloch, a projection towards the future because it is a constant 'venturing beyond' that never dissolves into fantasy, 'merely visualizing abstractions ... Real venturing beyond knows and activates the tendency which is inherent in history and which proceeds dialectically' (4).

Daydreams focus that element in thought that constantly projects consciousness forward. But it is the perception that real 'venturing beyond' activates the historical tendency that is of most interest in considering post-colonial utopianism. Fully worked out utopias of the More variety are rare in post-colonial literatures. Unlike Science Fiction in which the staple motif is the imagining of future utopian worlds, these literatures locate the present as the crucial site of the continual motion by which the New comes into being. In such transformative conceptions of utopian hope the In-Front-Of-Us is always a possibility emerging from the past. In traditional post-colonial societies the radically new is always embedded in and transformed by the past.

**Memory and Utopian Futures**
A second area of ambiguity in all utopian thought that is treated differently in post-colonial literatures is the relation between the future and memory. While utopias are often set in the future, utopianism cannot exist without the operation of memory. This transformation of the new by the past involves what appears to be a deeply ambivalent dimension of utopian hope—the relation between memory and the future. One of the major features of dystopias is the occlusion of history. The Controller in Huxley's *Brave New World* intones the 'great Ford's' mantra: 'history is bunk' (Huxley 1927: 34). The two things abolished in Oceania in Orwell's 1984 are memory and writing and when we see the function of memory in post-colonial utopianism we understand why: memory is not about recovering a past that was present but about the production of possibility. In the sense that memory is a recreation, it is not a looking backwards, but a reaching out to a horizon, somewhere 'out there'.

Ernst Bloch is fascinated with the cyclic continuity between the past and the future in the present, providing a framework in which we might think beyond the teleology of the eschatological—to the interpenetration of past and future. This polarity between past and future often seems insurmountable in European philosophy. For Plato, says Bloch, 'Beingness' is 'Beenness' (8) and he admonishes Hegel for whom the concept of Being overwhelmed becoming. The core of Bloch's ontology is that 'Beingness' is 'Not-Yet-Becomeness': 'From the anticipatory, therefore, knowledge is to be gained on the basis of an ontology of the Not-Yet' (13). We can see why Bloch is disinterested in utopia as location. Utopianism is fundamental to human consciousness because humans are always striving forward, anticipating, desiring. While utopias exist in the future, utopianism, anticipatory consciousness, is heavily invested in the present. In Bloch's re-interpretation of Marx his ontology of becoming has a political, liberatory dimension. The energy of the masses in the German (1525), French and Russian revolutions "were attracted and illuminated by a real future place: by the realm of freedom" (143). Bloch's cyclic theory is of the future in the past and this is a characteristic he allocates to Marxist philosophy itself (9).

**Post-Colonial Memory**
The past in general and memory in particular become central in post-colonial utopianism through the prevalence of what may be called the Myth of Return which takes on various forms dictated by culture and history. The dominant version in Indian writing, for instance, is the redeployment of Hindu myths in contemporary literature. The utopianism of the Pacific, represented in Fijian writer Epeli Hau'ofa (1995), is predictably Oceanic, intercultural and embracing, relying on the rich cultural resources of the Pacific to reinvigorate a present that has been depleted and destabilised by a colonial history. African literature, on the other hand, is energised not simply by a nostalgic memory of the pre-colonial but by recovering a forgotten history as we see in Ayi Kwai Armah's novels, or by...
reimagining the ‘past in the present’ through the kind of exuberant mythic language deployed by Ben Okri.

The return to the past in this form of post-colonial utopianism comes not from the atavistic desire to retrace the path of history, that is, it is not so much dominated by a concern with time, as with an overwhelming concern with place. In this respect it can appear to be returning to More’s view of Utopia. But the idea of utopia can be an image of possibility rather than a place:

With Thomas More the wishland was still ready, on a distant island, but I am not there. On the other hand, when it is transposed into the future, not only am I not there, but utopia itself is also not with itself ... but in that we travel there the island utopia arises out of the sea of the possible—utopia, but with new contents (Bloch and Adorno 1975, 3).

In the unrealised possibility of utopia the myth of return resembles something like More’s desire for a possible ideal place. The utopianism of the past is therefore not only an attempt to disrupt the dominance of European history, but an attempt to reconceive the present, a place transformed by the infusion of a cultural past.

But acts of memory are always vulnerable to nostalgia, which, rather than stimulating change can paralyse transformative action. In its most extreme form, the myth of return could be described as the desire to retrieve some essential authentic cultural identity that existed before colonisation happened. For this reason, the myth is part of a larger argument about the nature of resistance. Is resistance always simply implacable opposition? Or does it leave room for the appropriation of colonial cultural capital? In which case, culture, which is always changing, may change with the agency of individual and perhaps particularly creative subjects. It is this second form of transformative resistance that gives memory its peculiar power—memory does not reverse history or idealise an Arcadian past so much as it reinvigorates the present.

The myth of return in Caribbean literature is a cultural strategy of identity formation in which ‘memory’ plays an important role because it must be created. Although return is impossible, the African past transforms the present in a particularly potent way. The myth of return is a myth, but it is about the future and about the transformed nature of self. In Rastafarianism, for instance, we see a powerful example of the transformative energy of Caribbean identity formation. Robbed of a past, a history, a culture, the descendants of the slave labour of sugar plantations have developed a culture that draws its ontological energy from the very fact of displacement, of homelessness, heterogeneity, syncreticity. In this, the Rastafarian myth of return embodies a Caribbean identity par excellence.

In fact, return is not a return at all but a future horizon within which the difference of Caribbean identity can be developed. One of the most common, and popular, examples of this is the limbo dance, a performance of slave history, which re-enacts the crossing of the Middle Passage in a continual reminder of memory, survival and cultural resurrection. As Kamau Brathwaite puts it:

Limbo
Limbo like me
Long dark deck and the water surrounding me
Long dark deck and the silence is over me
(Brathwaite 1969, 35).

The dancer goes under the limbo stick in an almost impossible bodily contortion, emulating the subjection of the slave body in the journey across the Atlantic but rising triumphant on the other side. The performance of memory is a constant reminder of a future horizon, a ‘return’ that performs each time the ‘rising’ of the slave body into a future marked not only by survival but also by renewal, hybridity and hope.

While the limbo performs the act of historical and cultural memory, the woman in Grace Nicholls’ “One Continent / To Another” finds memory embodied in the unborn child:

From the darkness within her
from the dimness of previous incarnations
the Congo surfaced
so did Sierra Leone and the
gold Coast which she used to tread
searching the horizons for lost moons
(Thieme 1996, 582).

There is perhaps no better figure of a future inspired by memory than the unborn child. But performed or embodied, memory becomes a profound orientation to the future.

The myth of return transformed into the horizon of future identity sums up the most important cultural effect of slavery and slave-descended populations in the Caribbean. For if there is no return, there will be no rescue. And so, gradually, this region has developed some of the most profoundly transformative concepts of cultural living: hybridity, creolisation. Kamau Brathwaite is one of the most thoughtful celebrants of Caribbean
transformation and in the poem “Islands” we see this affirmation of the hope for a different future in a way that reveals the interpenetration of history and geography, of memory and place:

Looking through a map of the Antilles, you see how time has trapped its humble servants here. Descendants of the slave do not lie in the lap of the more fortunate gods. The rat in the warehouse is as much king as the sugar he plunders. But if your eyes are kinder, you will observe butterflies how they fly higher and higher before their hope dries with endeavour and they fall among flies.

Looking through a map of the islands, you see that history teaches that when hope splinters, when the pieces of broken glass lie in the sunlight, when only lust rules the night, when the dust is not swept out of the houses, when men make noises louder than the sea’s voices; then the rope will never unravel its knots, the branding iron’s travelling flame that teaches us pain, will never be extinguished. The islands’ jewels: Saba, Barbuda, dry flattened Antigua, will remain rocks, clots, in the sky-blue frame of the map.

(Brathwaite 1969, 20).

The poem is a celebration of transformation: from displacement to a place humanised by its occupants; from exile to hope; from the grim history of sugar production to the possibility of beauty. These islands—this ‘place’—are not More’s utopia but the location of the spirit of hope. Hope for Brathwaite, the kind of hope that sees a future grounded in memory, is not an optional choice for the West Indian, but a necessity. It may be an ambiguous necessity—the butterflies ‘fly higher / and higher before their hope dries.’ But in a performance of Ernst Bloch’s conviction, that hope, that anticipatory consciousness, is fundamental to human life. History teaches, says the poet, that when hope splinters then the rope of historical enslavement and oppression will never unravel its knots. The hope for the region is the hope of a vibrant cultural complexity and creolisation, a hope often belied by the grim realities of politics, but a necessary hope best imagined by its poets and writers.

I and We

It is perhaps no accident that the first modern dystopian novel was Yevgeny Zamyatin’s We. The relation between the individual and the collective continues to be one of the most vexed issues in utopian thinking because while the equality of the individuals in the collective is a fundamental principle of utopian thought, the collective is always inimical to individual fulfilment. The mobilisation of society for the betterment of all, for the ‘common good’ is virtually indistinguishable in utopias and dystopias. In utopias it is assumed that the improvement in life will automatically ensure the cooperation of the individual in the perfection of society. In dystopias the fulfilment of the individual is always denied as a condition of a collective utopian dream. Individuality seems an unlikely player in visions of socialist utopias because it is so evocative of the kind of bourgeois self-fashioning nurtured by capitalism. However, the danger inherent in the destruction of individuality occupies a very prominent place in nineteenth century thought, one extended by Ernst Bloch in his allusions to Marx.

Oscar Wilde makes a robust defence of individualism in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, the central thesis of which is that the abolition of private property will enable people to return to their own individuality, to ‘be perfectly and absolutely’ themselves. Society ‘corrupted by authority’ has lost the ability to ‘understand or appreciate Individualism’ largely because of ‘that monstrous and ignorant thing that is called Public Opinion’, and because individualism has become dependent on private property:

With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all (Wilde in Project Gutenberg).

At first glance Oscar Wilde and Ernst Bloch make strange companions. Wilde relies upon examples of independently wealthy writers to argue against property. But the struggle between the individual and the collective
also becomes a key feature of Ernst Bloch's conception of the utopian striving, a feature that remains largely unresolved because he recognises the dystopian potential for a tyrannical 'collectivity'—an inauthentic 'We'—to dominate social life. This, for Bloch, requires a subtle balancing act in negotiating the relationship between the individual and the proletariat:

... the ideal collective is never again one of the herd, the mass, and certainly not of the business concern, it works precisely as inter-subjective solidarity, a many-voiced unity of direction of wills which are filled with the same humane-concrete goal-content (1986, 969).

The many-voiced unity of the collective bears a remarkable resemblance to James Gilroy's "convivial multicultural democracy" (2004)—the complex intersubjectivity of a post-imperial cosmopolitan world. We might therefore look beyond the utopia of the proletariat to which Bloch clings, or at least see it differently, as a totally heterogeneous 'smooth space' (see for example Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 475, 528) in which cultural individuality defines the multicultural collective. The intersubjective 'we' can be defined in terms of cosmopolitan ethics as not so much a collectivity as a shared, 'convivial,' openness to the other.

Bloch negotiates the ambiguity between the individual and the proletariat by asserting that in socialism: "An arc will be described between I and We... when the individual is no longer the individual capitalist or an obstructive quibble. When instead the collective has truly become total i.e. when it embraces new individuals in a kind of community which has never before existed" (970). This is one of the central hopes of modern utopian thinking from at least Edward Bellamy's Looking Backwards (1888) but it still fails to offer any sign of the way in which such a collectivity of individuals may emerge. The characteristic of dystopias is that the "We" is always assumed, or legislated by the State.

It is, ironically, within post-colonial concepts of utopian imagining that such a 'many-voiced unity of direction of wills' may be seen to emerge, not so much from a social community as a cultural. Interestingly, the word 'nation' is often conspicuously absent from post-colonial literatures as writers conceive a hope that takes various shapes: geographical, historical, cultural, racial—shapes that may constitute an emerging genre of post-colonial utopianism. Historical conditions have often forced them to consider the possibilities of a different kind of 'We'. This collectivity, this 'multiverse of cultures' is the beginning of what Bloch calls Heimat which designates humanity's "feeling at home in existence" (1986, 1196). It signifies an instance of arrival rather than origin. Edward Kamau Brathwaite has a similar notion of home, since, historically, the Caribbean is a place of arrival rather than origin. As he puts it in "Islands": 'Looking though a map / of the Antilles, you see how time / has trapped / its humble servants here'. As a result of the extermination of the Amerindians in the sixteenth century, today's Caribbean island populations consist of ethnic groups that have migrated to the archipelago from elsewhere, either by force of or of their own free will. For Brathwaite, the Caribbean becomes home when people regard themselves as native to the region, as having arrived in the New World rather than originating in the Old. He regards these instances of "arrived-at being" as creole, hybrid, or cross-cultural rather than racially "pure" identities (Brathwaite 1971). In an age of global migration, the Caribbean becomes a model, a utopian space beyond whose horizon lies the promise of "the world as homeness."

What happens when we look beyond the social collective to the cultural? Does this begin to resolve the tension between I and We? The Caribbean is an interesting example here. The first consequence of a society that has no roots, which has been transplanted in a massive diasporic movement, is the drama of subjectivity itself. The point of departure for Caribbean literatures has been to write the subject into existence, with its master theme the quest for individual identity. For Michael Dash, Caribbean literature has focused on the "heroic prodigal, the solemn demiurge, the vengeful enfant terrible, outspoken Caliban" (Dash 1986: xiii). But for Aimé Césaire, the subject is not privileged but simply the site where the collective experience finds articulation. This is reminiscent of the 'collective subject' invoked by Guatemalan writer Rigoberta Menchu in her book I, Rigoberta Menchu (1983). The tension between the individual and collective in post-colonial writing is often resolved in such acts of dynamic identification. In Edouard Glissant, and Césaire, we find that the decentered subject is central to the poetics of the cross-cultural imagination. Such a subject is relentlessly drawn back by the urgency of resistance, the material effects of the colonising process into identification with the cultural collective. As Derek Walcott puts it in The Schooner Flight:

I have Dutch, nigger and English in me,
And either I'm nobody or I'm a nation (1979, 8).

In a situation where the group is ignorant of its past, resentful of its present impotence, yet fearful of future change, the creative imagination has a special role to play. For it is the creative imagination that can focus the collective imagination, provide an identity for a subject that is dis-articulated and dispersed. Importantly, it is
in writing that a collective memory must be invented; it is in writing that the myth of return is projected into the future.

But it is also in writing that the question of language becomes most prominent. It is no accident that it is in the displaced, heterogeneous, turbulent descendants of the plantation economy that language is most easily released from its myth of origin, its fantasy of being. The creolisation of language in the Caribbean stands as both the origin and the metonymy of the post-colonial dynamic of hybridisation. Dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson says in ‘Reggae fo Dada’:

Di lan is like a rack
Slowly shattahrin to san
Sinkin in a sea af calamity
Where fear breeds shadows

Despite the grim picture painted by the words, where people are afraid and where “di present is haunted by di past,” the very act of transforming the language conveys a robust hope confirmed in the final lines

A deh soh mi bawn
Get fi know about staarn
Learn fi cling to do dawn
(Donnell and Welsh 1996, 375).

Even in the darkness of exile the poet can say that he was born to learn about the stars and cling to the dawn. Such language is the paradoxical avenue to identity, the balance between the subjectivity of the individual and the cauldron of the heterogeneous displaced community.

The ambiguities inherent in utopia are explored, and perhaps resolved, within post-colonial literatures by an anticipatory consciousness that lies at the core of its liberatory energy. But the question still arises: How can utopian thinking operate if it has no vision of utopia? One answer is that all utopias are critical. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it: ‘Any utopianism worth the name must engage in a significant polemic with the dominant culture’ (1976, 47). The different manifestations of this genre are nearly always at least an implicit critique of state oppression of one kind or another. Another answer is provided in Ernst Bloch’s philosophy: the utopian impulse in human consciousness does not rely on utopia as a place (unless we understand freedom as a metaphorical place). Rather the dynamic function of the utopian impulse is a dual one: to engage power and to imagine change. In Bloch’s thinking nothing accomplishes this better than literature, which is inherently utopian because its raison d’être is the imaging of a different world. Such literatures tend to resolve the ambiguities of hope. Place becomes central, not as utopia but as the site of transformation, the location of identity, and the generation of a utopian idea—one Bloch calls Heimat. The tension between memory and the future is resolved by their constant and prophetic interaction in the present. And the ambiguous relation between ‘I’ and ‘We’ is resolved in literary approaches to a different form of insurgent, or communal identity, imagined beyond the colonial inheritance of the nation. The utopian function of post-colonial literatures is therefore located in its practice as well as its vision—the practice of confronting and transforming coercive power to produce an imagined future.

References


11.

Endnotes
1 I am thinking particularly of those literary dystopias that flourished in the period between the World Wars, interestingly, a time of financial depression and the rise of some very dystopian ‘utopias’ in Germany and Russia: Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*; Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*; and George Orwell’s 1984.

2 Bloch allows himself a wickedly satirical jibe at Marxist politics when he asks rhetorically “What must we dream of?” and then imagines an editorial committee meeting in which “Comrade Martinov stands up and turns to me menacingly: “May I be permitted to ask if an autonomous editorial staff still has the right to dream without previously consulting the Party committee?” (10)

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THE UTOPIAN IMPULSE IN URSULA LE GUIN’S THE NEW ATLANTIS

Anne Maxwell

This essay aims to show that texts that shed light on the nature of utopias remain vital to attempts to imagine new social alternatives. Fredric Jameson contends that utopian narratives do not supply people with blueprints for radical social change: rather they answer to the human need to imagine alternative and better worlds to existing ones. Ursula Le Guin’s short story The New Atlantis lives up to this formulation: in it we discover a Portland besieged by massive earthquakes, constant power cuts, catastrophic pollution and a desperate, authoritarian government. But we also encounter a group of ordinary humans intent on preserving the dream of a better world rather than the exploitative and unsustainable one of late capitalism. As tectonic plates clash and the physical environment collapses around them, the story’s protagonist is consoled by the thought of a new civilisation arising from the old; one in which humans live in harmony with their fellow creatures and the natural environment. Read in the context of the neoliberal world we are today facing, Le Guin’s story is a timely reminder of the human capacity to keep dreaming of better worlds no matter how grim the actual situation.

From the perspective of a twenty-first century given over to what has been called the ‘utopia of neoliberalism’ (Bourdieu 2009) the literary utopias of the 1970s might seem largely irrelevant. The aim of this essay is to suggest otherwise. The essay proposes that literary works which show understanding of the concept and purposes of utopias remain vital for attempts to imagine new social alternatives.

Utopias are born out of dissatisfaction with the societies of the present. In so far as they hold out an image of a better future, they have traditionally been regarded as a stimulus for change. Conversely, to the extent they present worlds that are sealed off from the present and complete in themselves, they do not constitute a practical guide to revolution, nor do they explain how change from one state to another occurs. Rather they merely register the fundamental human drive to dream of something better. As the Jameson of Archaeologies of the Future explains, ‘[U]topia as a form is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them’ (Jameson 2005, 416).

Ursula Le Guin’s story The New Atlantis (1975) is one of several stories that self-consciously remarks on this feature of utopias. A story with dystopian elements, in so far as it is a damning critique of the direction that humanity along with science and technology have taken under capitalism, Le Guin’s tale is also utopian in its portrayal of the human imperative to imagine an alternative world to the present, in this case a world embodied by the strange, but beautiful creatures of the deep who inhabit the ancient, submerged city of Atlantis, and who are seen by her as humanity’s salvation.

The story’s events take place on America’s West Coast in Le Guin’s home town of Portland. The date is sometime in the near future at a time when capitalism has so exhausted workers and resources that everything has ground to a halt, and daily life is characterised by chronic stoppages and shortages. At the same time, people fear that America is headed for physical catastrophe because the coastline is sinking under the combined effects of global warming, acid rain, continental shift, and the giant bursts of earthquake and volcanic activity occurring in the Atlantic and on the Pacific Ocean floor. To manage people’s fears and frustrations and to veil their own inability to cope, the government has resorted to authoritarian rule. People are arrested, imprisoned and tortured without trial, and their apartments bugged in the effort to seek out and destroy critics and dissenters. A further characteristic of this repressive society is that marriage has been outlawed, because it generates children and hence more consumers of scarce resources such as electricity and food. In such an environment the odd experience of compassion and beauty is what keeps people’s hopes alive.

The story is told through the eyes of a woman aptly named Belle. Belle may not be physically beautiful, but she nevertheless makes golden music on an old viola, and she has visions that are sustaining to her otherwise despairing soul. For every now and again, her mind drifts and she sees a new continent rising up from the sea propelled by the same volcanic activity that is dousing the old American continent. Whenever this happens Le Guin’s narrative assumes a distinctly different register, to the point where the phrasing becomes noticeably poetic and dreamlike, as if reaching toward a verbal...
approximation of the music itself. At first the vision is vague, but as the story progresses, the buildings and inhabitants of this city become increasingly clear to Belle, until towards the end she realises that what she is gazing at is her own city resurrected from its current ruinous state to a condition of great beauty:

We looked up, from the flight of silverfish, up from the streets where the jade-green currents flowed and the blue shadows fell. We moved and looked up, yearning, to the high towers of our city. They stood, the fallen towers. They glowed in the ever-brightening radiance, not blue or blue-green, up there, but gold. Far above them lay a vast, circular trembling brightness, the sun’s light on the surface of the sea (Le Guin 1975, 85).

The narrative begins with Belle returning from a trip to a wilderness park. From the first we are aware that she is exercising a critical consciousness that derives from her intimations of a moral and physical alternative to the present. The bus she is travelling on—the cynically named ‘Supersonic Superscenic Deluxe Long distance coal-burner’ (Le Guin 1975, 61), is streamlined in name only, the implication being that in a society dominated by advertising and consumerism, the ideal of streamlining has deteriorated into a cliché, with the language always outstripping the reality. As Belle muses over her experiences at the so-called wilderness park, we gain a sense of the visual ugliness of the ‘natural’ environment—for the wilderness, as she describes it, contains only the most spindly of trees, every one of which had been planted by a union. Indeed, she informs us that the pollution was such that there were more green tables and cement toilets than actual trees. Moreover, the place was crawling with tourists.

Arriving home to a darkened apartment (the power has failed again), she stumbles upon her estranged husband who is asleep in bed. Simon, a theoretical physicist, has failed again, she stumbles upon her estranged husband (he has dropped a further 20 pounds from an already thin 140, and ‘his knees and wrist bones stuck out like rocks under his skin’ (Le Guin, 2005, 67), it becomes obvious that Belle chose this man as her mate not because of his physical appeal, but because of his personal ethics; for despite being in severe pain he remains true to the goal of inventing a simple device for converting the sun’s energy that would not be damaging to the environment and would also be available to rich and poor alike:

It was strange, and it is strange, to be thinking about “him”, the man I have known for ten years, the same man, while “he” lay there changed out of recognition, a different man. It is enough to make you understand why most languages have a word like “soul” (Le Guin 1975, 68).

The fact that people like Simon and her music are among the few things left in the world that can still fill Belle with a sense of beauty, suggests that for her, beauty does not just pertain to physical appearances, it is also an ethical state or condition of the mind.

A similar idea can be found in Plato’s Republic. Here beauty like justice is described as an abstract thing that is not necessarily visible and can only be grasped using the intellect. The objects of the intellect are called the ‘Forms’. According to Plato, contemplation of the Forms makes a person more ethical. Plato goes on to claim that classical ethics involves taking the principle of the Golden Mean from art and applying it to life. In practice, this means avoiding the extreme one is most naturally inclined towards. Regarding as an aid to character development, the Golden Mean proves fair to all because it avoids dogmatism and fanaticism (Jones 1969, 91).

But the Republic is not the only text of Plato’s that Le Guin is using to suggest a more ethical society. In the Dialogues he presented an apparently true account of an ideal society that existed many millennia before the classical Greek era in which he himself lived. According to him Atlantis was a great island in the Atlantic Ocean whose control extended as far as the North African and Mediterranean regions of Egypt and Tyrrhenia (Italy). Its powerful dynasty of kings was descended from Poseidon, god of the sea and earthquakes. Mixing with mortals, however, apparently caused this divine and heroic lineage to become diluted and weakened, so that
it fell eventually to war with Athens, a former ally. The war led to the civilisation's cataclysmic destruction, an event marked by earthquakes and floods of such extraordinary violence that in a single day and night both the army and the entire island were swallowed up by the sea (Plato 1973, 3).

According to Plato the great civilisation that was once Atlantis was destroyed because the gods mixed with mortals. A similar preoccupation with purity and contamination haunts Le Guin's story, only here the tension is between an original or authentic nature and a less-valuable nature that is man-made. That the story seems nostalgic for the original state of nature and averse to the nature produced by humans is clear from Belle's reaction to the wilderness park's synthetic green environment. The green tables, for example, fail to console her. They do not answer to the ideal of beauty that coincides with the real and the ethical. Only the snow-covered mountains and sublime, empty spaces of Antarctica can do that because free of humans' contaminating presence.

Contrasting also with the man-made forms of nature are those beautiful life forms that in Belle's dream glide serenely through the tranquil, light-filled waters of the lost city of Atlantis. Undoubtedly an image of nature uncontaminated, they are also arguably an image of the early stages of human life itself, together with everything that is potentially beautiful in humans waiting to be born again after the massive eruptions taking place in the Atlantic and the Pacific have finally buried everything on the North American continent. Note the imagery of 'surfacing', even 'birthing', conveyed in these lines, but also the connection to human evolution—the idea that humans evolved from such wondrous amphibious creatures as these and therefore remain connected to them in some mysterious, half-forgotten way. It is as if Le Guin is suggesting that something in the human race that has so far been lost to consciousness may this time around come to the fore.

That the vision of a more beautiful or ethical world continues to haunt people as well as to fill them with hope is clear from the example of the accountant Belle meets on the Wilderness Park bus. He claimed to be reading an essay about a new continent rising from the sea when in fact, as Belle notices, his pamphlet contains no such article. It is clear also from the example of the political dissidents who are being forcefully held in detention and tortured for their beliefs—people whom Simon describes as "men like gold" (Le Guin 1975, 68). Finally, it's clear from the example of the dedicated band of physicists who gather in Belle and Simon's apartment to create the one simple solar cell that would do the work of all of America's coal and nuclear plants combined, but none of whom are able to act on their dream. Hearing Belle translating one of her visions into music, one of these men exclaims that he too 'saw the white towers, and the water streaming down their sides, and running back to the sea. And the sunlight shining in the streets, after ten thousand years of darkness' (Le Guin 1975, 168). All these people are there in the text to suggest that in the dying moments of our present world, there are already people using scientific technology to serve life instead of capital, and there are already signs that a new kind of society, one that is both more just and respectful of life itself, is emerging.

Jameson refers to the reality principle at work in utopias (Jameson 2005, 78), pointing out that although they are collective wish-fulfilments they are 'after all by definition never real fulfillments of desire; and must presumably always be marked by the hollowness of absence or failure at the heart of their most dearly fantasized visions' (Jameson 2005, 83). Speaking of Le Guin's utopias, Jameson contends that in her works the reality principle vies with the fantasy principle: 'In Le Guin then we meet something like a binary alternation between the reality principle of SF and the pleasure principle of fantasy' (Jameson 2005, 74). But then he adds "In Le Guin, the Utopian text reflexively charts the impossibility of that achievement and the ways in which the wish outtrumps itself" (Jameson 2005, 84), which is perhaps another way of saying that the reality principle ultimately wins out over the dream.

In the case of 'The New Atlantis' does this mean that the clean, pure world of nature uncontaminated by humans will eventually become extinct—forced out of existence by an angry, chaotic, hybrid nature whose natural rhythms and harmonies have been upset by an essentially destructive tide of humanity—an idea symbolised by the story's images of a complete environmental collapse? And does it also mean the utopian dream of humans treating each other and nature in an ethical fashion is never likely to happen because the political trend is more toward capitalism than away from it, an idea signified in the story by things getting worse not better?

I have been arguing that the lost city is alluded to in this story to invoke both an ethical practice of science and a more just society. But the fact that Belle can dream about a more genuinely egalitarian society and a more environmentally sensitive application of science does not mean she believes her generation will live to see it, or that it will actually occur. Like Le Guin, she is deeply pessimistic about modern civilisation's fate. How pessimistic only becomes clear at the end of the story when she tells us she's on her way to visit Simon who has once again been arrested and locked up by the authorities. Unsure if she will survive the journey.
to Salem where he’s being held (the earthquakes and floods are now so extensive that Portland is cut off from the rest of the mainland and she must travel by foot), she informs us that she intends stuffing the pages of her journal, and hence the story that we are reading, into a bottle so it might float out to the dark sea from whence the new continent is reputed to be rising.

Elizabeth Cummins (1990, 169) contends that Le Guin distances herself from the Atlantis story by alluding to it only in the story’s title and her concept of a city that has sunk into the sea, and what she is doing in this story is simultaneously discovering the voices of the past and the future. Likewise with respect to the notion of beauty, it has, I believe, been Le Guin’s aim in *The New Atlantis*, to deliberately offer up something new from something old … this despite her claim the story is ‘among the saddest things I’ve written, the nearest to not being hopeful’ (Le Guin cited in Cummins 1990, 17). This brings us to the further question: should we view the story as being primarily about a possible new society that is more ethical than the one of capitalism, or the redemptive power of art and its ability to create something new from old when faced with the increasingly autocratic and toxic world spawned by capitalism?

Obviously, much depends on how we interpret Belle’s dream. At its most basic (ie the realist interpretation) the vision of mammalian forms swimming in and out of the towering, light-filled, structures of the buried city suggests human endeavour and ingenuity melding and merging in a state of harmony and compromise with the changing and evolving forms of nature. Here nature is not seen as so separate from human intelligence that it is something to be feared and exploited, rather it is portrayed as a mysterious but beautiful ‘other’ whose rhythms and patterns humans must learn to live with if they are to survive, a position in keeping with Le Guin’s own environmental politics. Translated into utopian politics, this represents an alternative to the tyranny and enslavement enacted on citizens and scientists by a corporatist-leaning state.

A more abstract interpretation of the dream, however, would emphasise its connection to art and the creative impulse itself. In particular, it would emphasise the power of nature-inspired conceptions of beauty like the Golden Mean, to help humans imagine a more just society. Similarly, when Belle dreams, she too is building on what she knows to be real and taking it to the higher plane of the ethical. A form of wish-fulfilment such dreaming may be, but it is nonetheless a dreaming that has the reality principle firmly in its sights since there is very little that is hopeful about it. Indeed, one could say that in the case of Le Guin’s story it is more in the nature of a heroic gesture in the face of the environmental and political nightmare that is the present.

I have been arguing that the image of the lost city of Atlantis is there in Le Guin’s story not just because it helps convey the idea of a better world than the one of the present, but because it also helps to highlight the impossible dream that is Utopia in the first place. At its most simple, this infers that people will always dream about a better future no matter what. But it also serves to remind us that no matter how omnipotent and all encompassing capitalism becomes, people will continue to dream of a better world. Today, as we watch even the social democratic ideals of successive Labour governments being steadily eroded by the profit driven demands of the world’s largest and most powerful banks, transnational corporations and global funds managers (Beder 2009, 17, 19), and as the world edges closer to the catastrophic environmental and social conditions that Le Guin herself anticipates in her story, this human capacity to keep dreaming is a power that should not be underestimated.

Notes

1. In its emphasis on capitalism and the destructive use of science my reading is compatible with Thomas Wymer’s and Darko Suvin’s readings of the text. Wymer in particular identifies *The New Atlantis* by Francis Bacon, a story that features a utopian island in the western Pacific where life centres around a gigantic scientific research institute, as a major influence on Le Guin’s story (Wymer 2003, 297). He further argues that the invocation of Bacon’s text suggests it is wrong to see the story as an outright attack on science and the idea of progress rather than their cooption by capitalism (Wymer 2003, 297). Suvin’s thesis, by contrast, is that the story embodies a quest for “a new, collectivist system of no longer alienated human relationships, which arise out of the absolute necessity for overcoming an intolerable, ethical, cosmic, political and physical alienation” (Suvin 1975, 265), thereby nullifying the “ultimate class society of the corporate state”(Suvin 1975, 269).

2. This is arguably the transcendent “real” which Jameson speaks of in his *Archaeologies of the Future*, and which he denounces using such phrases as ‘the evocation of those problematic entities outside ourselves whose density refuses to answer our questions’ (Jameson 2005, 398).

3. Le Guin in a recent interview referred to the influence exerted by Taoist philosophy on her writings, saying. ‘Taoism is a way of thinking which is profoundly subversive and permanently anti-establishment’ (Le Guin 2004). The Taoist philosophy is influenced by the observation of nature. It not only proposes the unity of the universe but it posits that everything as a complementary opposite and all things are interdependent. It is also a philosophy of peace, opposed to the manipulation of people and the orchestration of events,
hence it is at once pacifist, passive and non-interventionist. Finally, it posits that nature is complete in itself and that it doesn't need humans. Once we realise this we will begin to treat it on equal terms with ourselves.

References


Author

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Geoffrey Quinlan, Kingston, ACT
Hope is a word that has re-emerged in the light of Obama's stunning win in the United States election. In this time of economic gloom and the reality of bleak recession and unprecedented job losses the United States has embraced the hopeful message of Barack Obama. For many years ‘hope’ has been a word that has been lost, forgotten, and banished to the margins of romantic longing and wishful thinking. Hope is also a word that has been much discussed in relation to the iconic The Great Gatsby but usually in a negative fashion to demonstrate the unattainability of the American dream. Marcella Taylor called Gatsby “the unfinished American Epic” which focused on the “passing of the last utopian frontier” and suggested the significance of this passing on American society as a whole. In the last few months, however, hope has made a return and one gets the feeling that Fitzgerald’s words ‘but that's no matter-to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . And one fine morning’ -- are once again being heard.

The United States has always been a country that has sought symbols of unity and these symbols have usually been ones that emphasise youthfulness rather than maturity because youthfulness encompasses the ideals of continued change, evolution, and the promise of a fresh start. D. H. Lawrence went as far as to say ‘that is the true myth of America. She starts old, old, wrinkled and withering in an old skin. And there is a gradual sloughing off of the old skin, towards a new youth. It is the myth of America’ (Lawrence in Lewis 1955, 1). Lawrence emphasises that this youthfulness is a story, a self-created and self-generated myth. The United States, as a settler nation, was founded on ideas of fresh starts and possibilities. Nowhere are these concepts of fresh starts and possibilities more clearly represented than in F Scott Fitzgerald’s iconic The Great Gatsby. This famous American novel reveals the struggles that take place in the sloughing off of the old skin, towards a new and hopeful youth. Contemporary America has entered a new and exciting phase but it is not enough to offer empty symbols of unity and promise. Throughout The Great Gatsby hope is dismantled and rebuilt. Youthful possibilities pulsate throughout the story and energise and re-energise the story. Barack Obama has become President after a period of the dismantling of hope but he has managed to rebuild and encourage visions of hopeful promises and longings. He has made America believe again in fresh starts and possibilities.

Of course, the United States was not an unsettled nation when the Puritans landed. The Indigenous peoples already had in place a very complex and successful structure of land ownership and societal rules. However, for explorers and for the later Puritans, America offered up a land of indefinite hope: ‘It provoked Utopian social hopes, millenarian visions of history, new scientific inquiries, new dreams of mercantilism, profit and greed, new funds for the artistic imagination’ (Ruland and Bradbury 1992, 4). Its bounty, both imaginatively and idealistically, seemed endless. During the past decade, however, the imaginative and idealistic have seemed very limited in scope. Barack Obama has allowed ‘new dreams’ to come to the surface.

In a recent article in The New York Times Michiko Kakutani (2009) says that Barack Obama’s reading habits emphasise the notion of self-creation and possibility. It cites examples such as The Invisible Man, The Golden Notebook and the poems of Derek Walcott to show how Obama has used words and language to create a fresh, strong and self-assured identity. He has
drawn from Ellison's great work to expound the idea that if you cannot see me you will at least hear and read my words. Ellison's protagonist is invisible to the dominant society until his voice becomes a pulse that beats so loudly it can no longer be ignored. Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* is the story of Anna Wulf's attempt to unite the seemingly different sections of her life through interceptions of memories, dreams, experiences and writings and reveals the strength of story and words. Walcott's poems question epistemological and ontological concerns and expose how histories and stories can be retold to include alternative readings. Obama draws upon all these concerns in an attempt to unite a demoralised nation. George Bush had also been a reader but his choices usually were didactic in structure, almost manuals for construction: Eliot A. Cohen's *Supreme Command* is an example (Kakutani 2009, 3). Fictional works that promoted unlimited possibilities or change appeared to be avoided.

Kakutani in examining the reading of Barack Obama goes on to say that the notion of fresh self-creation is a deeply American one and it is in fact a founding principle of the country, and 'a trope addressed by such classic works as *The Great Gatsby*—and it seems to exert a strong hold on Mr Obama's imagination' (2009, 4). It appears that this desire for possibility and self-creation also holds a strong bind over the American public's imagination. Hope and possibility are also words that have been much discussed in relation to *The Great Gatsby* but usually in a negative fashion to demonstrate the unattainability of the American Dream: Booker says 'The Great Gatsby is first and foremost a chronicle of the death of the American Dream' (2002, 41). *The Great Gatsby* also works on a very ironic level and while it may chronicle the death of the American Dream it also, through its poetic and lyrical writing, rebuilds the dream. The novel was written in 1925 during the Jazz Age and the years leading into the Great Depression. The 1920s was an era that refused to see the coming of some of the worst economic times in America's history. The Depression began in 1929 and lasted until the early 1940s and at one stage a quarter of all Americans were unemployed. The United States is once again facing an era of economic depression but this time it has a leader who recognises the magnitude of the situation and yet is still able to transmit hope to the public.

Marcella Taylor (2004) called Gatsby 'the unfinished American Epic' which focused on the ‘passing of the last utopian frontier’ and suggested the significance of this “passing” on American society as a whole. America, according to Taylor, had lost its search for promise and hope. Taylor's summation seemed to ring particularly true over the last decade. In the last few months, however, hope has made a return and one gets the feeling that Fitzgerald's words 'but that's no matter-to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther ... And one fine morning' -- are once again being taken up with enthusiasm and desire. What is interesting in recent times is the resurgence of the belief that this created self identity can also help produce a national united version of utopia. The self-created individual remains important but added to this idea is the notion that the individual is part of a wider community. It is important to note the 'we' and the 'our' in Fitzgerald's passage because they emphasise the nation as a whole. Gatsby, in many ways, failed because his utopian vision was isolated and individualistic.

I am not suggesting that Obama is the newer improved Gatsby or a version of Nick but what I am suggesting is that Obama represents many of the ideals that Gatsby strived for and never attained. As mentioned above, *The Great Gatsby*, is often discussed in terms of revealing the failure of the American Dream: 'The Great Gatsby carefully depicts America as a land whose once limitless utopian promise has collapsed beneath the weight of the rampant commodification of everything via the growth of modern consumer capitalism' (Booker 2002, 41). There are striking images within the novel that foretell a country starting to bend under the weight of materialistic overindulgence: 'Over the great bridge, with the sunlight through the girders making a constant flicker upon the moving cars, with the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of nonolfactory money' (Fitzgerald 67). There is a strong indication that at any moment the sugar lumps could dissolve out of existence. However, the book can never really be seen in terms of collapse or failure as it offers alternative and utopian ways of reading the story. It is, ultimately, a positive book—a book that reveals the possibilities of America.

Gatsby may not have succeeded but the novel still manages to create a longing for everything Gatsby could be if given an even chance or as Tony Tanner says 'For surely America can produce something better than Buchanans, more splendid than Carraways' (Introduction 2000, xx). There appears to be an inherent desire by the American people to believe that surely the United States can produce someone youthful, filled with promise and someone quite splendid. The novel could never have achieved its lasting status if it was merely a cautionary tale. It is the American Dream—the story of self-creation and fulfillment. Gatsby creating himself but more importantly Nick retelling that story—giving a voice to the dream and thereby recreating the dream to be taken up again and again: 'Gatsby certainly looms—looms and fades, looms and fades—through Nick's history' (Tanner 2000, xix). And it is this desire for retelling that has once again captured the American public. Richard Ruland
and Malcolm Bradbury (1992) find that there has always been a recurring conflict in the United States between the ideal and the real, ‘the Utopian and the actual, the intentional and the accidental, the mythic and the diurnal’ (13). During Bush’s years symbolic figures such as Gatsby faded to the background, overtaken by Tom Buchanan types but under Obama the figure of Gatsby can begin to loom again. Obama has given voice to the dormant desires of the American people that had been pushed aside as unbelievable under Bush.

Jay Gatsby had a very limited education and he identified early that this set him apart from those in power. Barack Obama has had an elite school education and is far less naïve than Gatsby. However, Obama does offer the same youthful energy and unlimited hope that Gatsby offered and Americans still seek. Obama also has taken the individual voice and placed it within a community setting. Gatsby never found a place for his voice—he also remained apart from the mainstream accepted community. He was always seeking acceptance and when this was not forthcoming he retreated into the safety of silence and images. The trouble with this was that his legitimacy continued to fade and it was only Nick’s use of words and story that brought him to the foreground.

Kakutani says that Obama’s understanding of words has allowed him to ‘goad Americans to complete the unfinished work of the founders, and to galvanise a nation reeling from hard times with a new vision of reconciliation and hope’ (2). Gatsby had concentrated on images and on looking the part. The entire novel is filled with references to watching, eyes, images and being seen. One of the most famous and lasting images of the novel is the billboard of the eyes of Dr T. J. Eckleburg: ‘Over the asheaps the giant eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg kept their vigil, but I perceived, after a moment, that other eyes were regarding us with peculiar intensity from less than twenty feet away’ (118). Myrtle, as Gatsby had also done, believed what she saw and also wanted people to see her in a particular way. She failed to realise that images could be bent, distorted and reality shaped. Fitzgerald highlights the dangers of believing only what can be seen. Obama, while recognising the importance of images, does not solely rely on them to bring the country together. He has realised that image alone is not enough to unite a nation and bring hope back to the people. His detailed understanding of authors such as Ellison has enabled him to move beyond the visual. One of Obama’s greatest strengths is the combination of word, image, and voice.

As previously stated Marcella Taylor calls The Great Gatsby ‘an unfinished epic’ and finds that a new order never arrives in Gatsby. The ending leaves the way for the unfulfilled desire of the utopian dream to keep returning: ‘Gatsby dies, Nick goes home—a double epic denouement. However, in the traditional epic, the dying order gives rise to a new order. Because the new order does not arise in Gatsby, the novel as epic is unfinished for neither protagonist frees himself from the outdated myth’ (Taylor 2004, 80). In the best known of all epics The Iliad and the Odyssey a new order is finally restored. Achilles takes his place in Hades to be worshipped for eternity and Odysseus returns to his son and his wife to revenge the wrong-doings of the past and a new order begins. It is important, however, that Nick returns to the West and the West, like the novel itself, offers the possibility of another attempt at crossing a new frontier and starting afresh. Nickelodeon Gatsby returns to the West so as ‘not to be borne back ceaselessly into the past’ (105) but rather to regain a sense of adolescence and possibility: ‘We drew in deep breaths of it as we walked back from dinner through the cold vestibules, unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour, before we melted indistinguishably into it again’ (167). The Great Gatsby may be an unfinished epic but this may in fact be its beauty. The story can continue to be written and retold while still incorporating its past. It still offers the possibility that America can shed its old skin, re-energise and start afresh but all the while retaining remnants of the past.

In The Great Gatsby the possibility for new order is hinted at but never eventuates—but the possibility lingers: ‘With his hands still in his coat pockets he stalked by me into the hall, turned sharply as if he were on a wire, and disappeared into the living-room’ (83). Gatsby is always carrying out a delicate balancing act. This tightrope allusion becomes an ideal way to read the possibility of America itself. America may want the rest of the world to see it as powerful, strong, and stable but the most important element of its strength has always been its delicacy. Bush never understood this element. His government pushed symbols of military strength and unwavering power. Gatsby’s hopeful, yet, tender vision had disappeared under the pressure of Tom Buchanan types. Tender visions were also pushed away from the American public during the Bush years but they have now returned. Obama has become the fresh symbol for this lingering and desired possibility. He is the embodiment of the ‘surely something better than the Buchanans, more splendid than the Carraways.’

America has lived through, and is still suffering from, the consequences of attempting to blend utopian ideals with notions of materialist satisfaction. It still believes in the utopian dream but is seeing this dream through far less innocent eyes. Gatsby was innocent, or more precisely, naïve in his attitude to achieving acceptance. Leo Marx (1964) suggests that Jay Gatsby is a famous example
of a figure doomed to failure because of a displaced pastoral notion. The United States has often been represented as a pastoral landscape, a time before The Fall and Americans seen as a new Adam: 'The world and history all lay before him. And he was the type of creator, the poet par excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene about him. All this and more were contained in the image of American as Adam' (R. W. B. Lewis 1955, 5). Gatsby's desire is to erase the past and start afresh in an unspoilt landscape. However, because of this desire Gatsby is never grounded and there is nothing that connects him to the land: 'Gatsby, pale as death, with his hands plunged like weights in his coat pockets, was standing in a puddle of water glaring tragically into my eyes' (83). Even in his death Gatsby is not connected to the land. He dies in his first ever swim in his pool.

It was not that Gatsby did not have the energetic promise and youthfulness that was needed to be a great success: 'He was balancing himself on the dashboard of his car with that resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American' (62); rather, his failure to find a sense of connection has never fully allowed Gatsby to land—he is, in a sense, still in the water, being 'borne back ceaselessly into the past' (188). Obama has no illusions about trying to erase the past. Raffaella Boccolini says that 'our times need utopia more than ever, but they seem to be able to recover utopia mostly through dystopia' (2006, 3). Obama draws upon the wrongs of the past but more importantly emphasises the promise of the future to reunite the flagging spirit of the people of the United States in what can be seen as a time of crisis. The United States has always used symbols as a way of uniting its ideals. On the one hand President Bush recognised this fact but his use of symbols was one that alienated and isolated rather than drawing a nation together. Bush attempted to erase, or at least avoid, the past. His was a vision of power and muscle. President Obama, on the other hand, does not hide or evade the problems of the past or future. His utopian ideals are not seen as unreachable or as mere romantic longings but as reachable possibilities for America in the future. Jay Gatsby was a fictional representation of all that America had hoped for but his ideals were never actualised. At the end of the novel Gatsby dies and justice does not appear to be served in any way. Fitzgerald also reveals that although the physical manifestation of Gatsby may have perished his energetic promise and youthful longings have been retained. However, before these longings can reach fulfilment they must be connected and united and Barack Obama is perhaps the person who can achieve this goal.

References


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The utopian impulse can lead to disillusionment. It can be contrasted with the less ambitious but more realisable politics of survivalism. By survivalism I have in mind not the epic quest for inevitable ideological certainty, but rather the modest desire to plan a political rearguard action to preserve our present benefits, material, democratic, and cultural, against those who argue for their diminution or destruction. This can itself be a radical agenda when these benefits are under threat by the intrusions of increasingly authoritarian states. In this regard, I will consider the anti-utopian and survivalist politics of John Berger. This will include some brief contextualisation of Berger’s long-lasting writing concerns, before I make more specific reference to one of his most original works on the politics of peasant survivalism included in his imaginative trilogy of peasant culture in modern times, Into their Labours (1992). I refer to volume one, Pig Earth. This work operates as a novel but is structured almost as a series of short stories and includes a final historical afterword.

Berger is perhaps best known for his pioneering work, more than four decades ago, on the social function and historical context of painting. Although Berger has continued to write on painting and culture, his search for realism in art moved also into the arena of writing imaginative literature, as well as into joint-projects in film and photographic documentary, particularly in projects dealing with themes of exile migration, and exploitation. For example, Berger’s recent work, the essays, Hold Everything Dear (2007) is a protest from a longstanding, eminent critic of American abuses of power. And it is a literary and political appeal to the idea of survivalism. In these musings of poetry, art, and documentation of human endurance, especially in the Middle East, Berger discusses what he calls the guerrilla tactics of political resistance (2007: 1), particularly the ways that the poor, while not overcoming their oppressors, can maintain some vestiges of freedom. Berger’s long interest in the victims of progress, those dispossessed by economic and political change, looks particularly at migrants and refugees whom he depicts as the casualties of neoliberal, global, and nationalist utopianism.

Aesthetics and political ideology have long been Berger’s central intellectual concerns. He has developed these into a political theory based particularly on the rural environment as a place for human resistance and survivalism, based on what he believes to be peasant values. Berger’s aesthetics link the world of nature as he perceives it with his positional politics. Nature is one that includes human beings. The place of humans, however, is integral and spiritual. Work is sacred. It is far from being the damaged and exploited instrument of human commodification that he associates with industrialisation and capitalism. The environment is natural, for Berger, when it is in harmony with humans realising their unalienated potential, not in terms of a Marxist epic resolution, but in terms of living as part of a landscape. This has interior and exterior aesthetic arrangements in which households and other interiors are in balance with the exterior environment of arable land, pastures, and the mountainsides which frame the alpine peasant ways of life. This is an aesthetic of peasant work, of environment and community, all of which he believes to be endangered in modern times. In several essays in his 1985 book, The White Bird, Berger makes it very clear that for him art is not simply ideology. He accepts that art is created in history and that it may become commodified by the culture of capitalism. In this writing Berger develops both his views on aesthetics and the basic arguments about the environment and survivalism that we see in his trilogy of peasant life, Into their Labours (1992).

Berger’s trilogy of peasant life, Into their Labours, glimpses a different world. This world is one where peasants are shown to inhabit a threatened space which, while it lasts, is in harmony with the wider environment at a number of levels. It captures the rhythms of birth, death and regeneration, and it provides an aesthetic and spiritual reverence for the indivisible physical and human
environments of village life in alpine France. More than this, it is an imaginative construction of work and loss, a realism of particularities within a wide historical context. *Pig Earth*, the first volume, appeared in 1979, five years after the author started to live and work in a French alpine village. It examines peasant experience on the margins of capitalist society, where peasant values are questioned and threatened yet still survive. Berger presents two modes of discussing peasant life. First we read the novel with its collection of stories, poems, and illustrations about peasant consciousness in alpine France, and then Berger offers us his historical afterword in which the plight of the peasantry is portrayed in the language of political theory. The second volume, *Once in Europa*, published in 1989, examines the modernisation of village life, where capitalist values intrude on peasant culture and almost destroy it. Volume three, *Lilac and Flag*, published in 1991, portrays the loss of the third generation, those peasants who settle in the metropolis.

In *Pig Earth* Berger’s representation of the world of peasants implies a savage criticism of much capitalist practice. We are confronted with two competing views of money, work, space, time and community. Peasant values, Berger suggests, have a greater authenticity than those of city life because they are grounded in the soil, the seasons, in birth, sex and death. The first part of the book consists of a series of stories linked by place rather than by character or chronology, together with some drawings and poems. The change to the abstract discussion of the historical afterword of *Pig Earth* is abrupt. Berger believes that peasant life is almost extinct in Europe, a failure to survive of an ancient culture ‘committed completely to survival’ (1988, 196). Peasants, he argues, managed for most of their long history to insulate themselves from their wider society. Their economy within the greater economy was integrated into the larger unit by its surplus, but remained on its margin through peasant self-sufficiency. But peasants do not think in terms of a surplus, this is town talk. They think of it in terms of production to overcome a preliminary obstacle, they survive on their residual product (1988, 198). While modernist ideologies have been fighting a battle about the future, peasant ideology, based on survival, has been mute. The debate on capitalist or socialist notions of progress, for example, cannot be understood from the perspective of peasant ideology. Peasants are interested in what has been, not in what might be. This conception of time is the framework assumed in the description of an allegedly peasant utopia in the last story which I discuss below.

Berger argues that those who depict peasants as conservative do so with the eyes of the city, the eyes of modernism. This point also raises questions for Marxist scholarship, particularly concerning Marx’s depiction of peasants as a reactionary force. Peasant conservatism, according to Berger, has nothing to do with the conservatism of a privileged ruling elite: ‘It is the conservatism not of power but of meaning’ (1988, 208). If capitalist society, and modernism generally, is so future orientated that the present is undervalued and the past forgotten, then peasant values provide some corrective insights into ways of reconstructing or reworking our ideological inheritance. To this explicit argument from Berger we may add his implicit advocacy of the corrective peasant visions of work, community and avoidance of waste. Berger is not arguing here for a return to the old peasant way of life. Rather, he reminds us of the dangers of forgetting the positive aspects of that way of life, aspects which might possibly be reconstructed as an ideological antidote to some problems of modernism.

Meanwhile, if one looks at the likely future course of world history, envisaging either the further extension and consolidation of corporate capitalism in all its brutalism, or a prolonged, uneven struggle waged against it, a struggle whose victory is not certain, the peasant experience of survival may well be better adapted to this long and harsh perspective than the continually reformed, disappointed, impatient progressive hope of an ultimate victory (1988, 212-213).

Berger celebrates peasant survivalism in a way that would perhaps appear idealistic, romantic and traditionalist to some critics. For example, in a review of *Pig Earth* Terry Eagleton (1979) argues that Berger’s realist form imposes a limitation on his political awareness; the complexity of the afterword does not fit with the partial consciousness of the fiction. However, Berger’s version of socialism, like that of William Morris, is based on his aestheticism and on his attachment to rural environmental ideals which stand outside the modernist project. Although Berger’s aesthetics are informed by ideology and they capture a vision of peasant ideology, the ideology does not dominate the aesthetics. If Berger conflates a socialist ideology with his aesthetics, it is because, in contrast to Eagleton (1978), the aesthetics are of primary importance.

Dyer (1986, 134) implies the centrality of Berger’s aesthetics when he calls him a spiritual materialist. He is a materialist who accepts the reality of political and historical grounding, but a sense of spirituality through poetic and novelistic insight is the currency of his work. For Berger, the political labour of producing the world mirrors the individual labour of producing art; the historical and the transcendental join hands in a pessimistic (he would say realistic) aesthetic of work. This involves an attack
on notions of progress in the name of human worth, work and art. In The White Bird Berger writes:

political disillusion is born of political impatience and we have all been conditioned to live this impatience because of the overall promises repeatedly made in the name of Progress (1985, 273).

The removal of utopian hopes for a socialist heaven-on-earth, and an understanding that the world more closely resembles a hell would not, Berger argues, change our fundamental political choices:

we would be obliged to accept the same obligations and participate in the same struggles as we are already engaged in; perhaps even our sense of solidarity with the exploited and suffering would be more singleminded. All that would have changed would be the enormity of our hopes and finally the bitterness of our disappointments (1985, 273).

It is this vision of survival that Berger values in peasant culture. When combined with other peasant values such as worth in work, the importance of remembering, and attachment to place, it offers a vision of capitalism transcended. It does this even as peasant culture succumbs to the market forces and dehumanisation of that dominant culture. And the reality of this vision can be recovered only through art.

The intricacy of village gossip, storytelling that creates community, the immediacy of space, and the culture of survival are constant themes. Berger’s aesthetic imagination captures these as one truth of village life. The political theory of the historical afterword allows us to see another truth, one informed by Berger’s socialism and his distrust of narrow historical determinism. The historical context of peasant culture, and the moment of its historical demise, are presented at an abstract level. Berger sees this truth in a way that goes far beyond the immediacy of peasant life, it is a radical assault on the hubris of progress from the perspective of a disillusioned exile from the city who longs for a lost rural simplicity. Berger’s alpine village contains different senses of time and history from those of the town. It is, to some extent, a pre-modern fossil in the modern world. Events of 1833 are spoken of as if they happened yesterday, and gossip fulfills a social function, creating the collective fiction of continuous everyday life. Gossip is oracular, it invites both questions and responses, it defines both individuals and the community. In the city the media attempt to play this role, but do so facelessly. According to Berger, urban characters play many roles, but village characters have less space for anonymity, ‘A village’s continual portrait of itself is mordant, frank, sometimes exaggerated, seldom idealised or hypocritical’ (1988, 10-11).

In ‘The Value of Money,’ Berger uses pictures in the text to demonstrate patterns of life. We see images of new farm machinery and an advertising slogan. The outside world is starting to intrude. This story is concerned with the generational gap between a son’s entrepreneurial modernism and a father’s traditional values about money and work. Marcel, the father, works with his horse, he resembles it, but his sons have gone into a factory and into the flimsy world of ‘commerce’. They want free weekends, holidays, money in their pockets. Marcel is not merely observed working; he speaks his justification of work for himself:

Working is a way of preserving the knowledge my sons are losing. I dig the holes, wait for the tender moon and plant out these saplings to give an example to my sons if they are interested, and, if not, to show my father and his father that the knowledge they handed down has not yet been abandoned. Without that knowledge, I am nothing (1988, 74-75).

The role of technology is addressed when the son buys his father a tractor. This will save work, but work is essential for the way of life, ‘Their job is to wipe us out’ (1988, 78). Machines have replaced human labour on the plains, but the wealth they create goes to the owners of the machines. The machine, thinks Marcel, destroys traditional values, and pushes the farmer into a life based on credit until he is forced to sell up. And a farmer who resists this looks old-fashioned to his son, mean to his wife, poor to his neighbour, and unworthy of his nation’s agriculture (1988, 81-82). The son works the markets. To Marcel, he is robbing people, it is fraud. To the son, it is selling. The son’s view of the cider press’s value shows how objects are valued in the city as antiques for show, for decor, not as elements of useful work. One product of this useful work with the cider press is gnôle, which can be used as an antiseptic, as a preservative, or, heaven forbid, as cheap, powerful grog. Marcel is incensed that the state wishes to tax his gnôle, he kidnaps the government inspectors, and they ask him how much ransom he wants. Humans are reduced, in their eyes, to a cash value. Marcel gives up because the world of the peasant and the world of modernism have no common understandings. For Marcel, walking on his farm and its environs is thinking. In prison his thoughts are clouded, but he does realise that his punishment is to lose the habit of work. He knows that, for peasants, work is a benefit, not a cost. As shall be expanded on below, this is not a utopian assertion of the value of work; it is a
celebration of survivalism.

The longest ‘story’ in *Pig Earth*, ‘The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol’, looks at the life of a recluse, Lucie. The narrative is told from the perspective of the much travelled Jean, one who leaves but returns to the village. At various points Jean takes on different narrative positions: sometimes a character involved in the story of the village; at others repeating hearsay about the village during his long exile; and at other points approaching the perspective of the eye of the village, referring to himself in the third person. By the eye of the village I mean, the village’s all-seeing sense of its own story. The gossip is the mundane activity, but abstracted it becomes the story of the village told to itself in perpetual present, the eye. Lucie’s life, unlike Jean’s is to be seen purely through the village: Lucie endures while Jean is the returned exile. Lucie has three lives within the story. Firstly, Lucie is seen as a young and rejected threat to the harmony of the village. She is the outsider insider, persecuted for her unusual appearance. Her brother arranges for her effective disinheritance and exile high on the mountain. As a young man Jean thinks himself lucky to escape her plans to marry him. Lucie’s second life is that of the recluse high in the mountains. She becomes a pre-peasant gatherer, wandering on the high alp, her sense of space hugely expanded by her movement away from peasant agriculture. Gradually she learns the ways of the market, selling flowers and herbs in the city, and smuggling cigarettes back to the village. She makes money, but remains bemused by the values of the town:

> You have to understand that everything you watch in the city is as unimportant as a game. Everything which impresses you about the city is an illusion (1988, 151).

This writing evokes the city as a place where images are mirrors within mirrors, maximum activity with minimum meaning. When Lucie crosses the state frontier to reach the market town she also crosses a more significant cultural frontier into a different way of life. Before Lucie is mysteriously murdered, the now old Jean comes to value her. He realises that his long absence from the village has been unreal, a pause, a waste of time. Lucie’s third life is that of a ghost. The form shifts to magical realism, away from the more prosaic realism of the earlier stories, (but not so removed from the spirituality of the poetry). Jean hears Lucie’s voice, her spirit pervades the village. In her ghost-like state, she too adopts the vantage point of eye of the village.

The peasant perception of progress, or lack of it, is glimpsed when Jean visits what the author calls the utopia of the violently dead. The ideal here is a community of shared work in harmony with its own perception of nature. This provisional utopia is a sacred sense of place in which aesthetics and communitarian political ideals unite. In truth this is not a utopia in the sense of a future to be strived for. Rather it is an idealised version of community harmony without any inevitable sense of progress. It is a celebration of survivalism, of the unending struggle to preserve and adapt peasant values in a world that is outside modernist time.

Berger’s politics of survivalism is a radical anti-modernist political theory. It tries to imagine how the world might be and how we can save it, at least in the short-term, from the greatest cruelties, the greatest human, spiritual, and physical destructions, but without resorting to any belief in an ultimate progress. Berger’s aesthetics are environmental, political and spiritual. His environmentalism is aesthetic, anti-modernist, and anthropocentric without being narrowly instrumental. His political theory includes an attempt to retrieve the art, the experiences and values of the marginalised, especially those of refugees and peasants. It is an anti-utopian politics of survivalism.

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Salvation Army Hostel

Each morning
on the steps
of the Salvation Army hostel

a chemically troubled
woman sits

her street tan
is the colour of terracotta
and hair the texture of hessian

in the nerve-end
of her
stare

the dull pulse
of the peak hour traffic
unravels
itself

with a cigarette
behind each ear
and one in her hand

she waits as calmly
as a get away car.

Jules Leigh Koch
South Plympton, SA

The Victim

he thrust

and twisted
until his hand
pushed hard
against the belly fat

the steel turned
with the ease
of a door handle

the feet lifted
to tips of toe

blood bubbled
and crept
the corners of mouth

this knife

had cut all ties
with calm and reason

had abandoned courts
and trial procedures

had set him apart

had finished
what his words
could never say.

Adrian Flavel
Stirling, SA
THE DYSTOPIAN MIRROR AND THE FEMALE BODY

VIVIENNE MULLER

Women's experience of the change room mirror is not a particularly affirmative one. The pleasure in looking at the self is dissipated by the ideal feminine 'I' that hovers in the shadows of their image of self and others constructing dystopian surveillance and entrapment. This article considers the responses of a number of women bloggers who describe their negative experiences in front of change room mirrors. It also argues that the mirror has been used in more positive and creative ways by women artists to assert a self that is not subject to a critical gaze.

Consumerism has a long and complex association with women and the female body. The change room mirror is an interesting instance of this relationship as it invites women to conjure an idealised form of the body as it simultaneously abjures the 'real' one, jeopardising a primary goal of consumerism – pleasure. This article considers a number of women's experiences of and responses to the change room mirror arguing that these are largely dystopian acts of self-imaging fed by the broader consumer culture in which they occur. The article also considers other types of mirrors that have been proffered by feminist and artistic practice in less dystopian ways countering the mirrors of phallocentric representation and accenting women's capacity to express more positive and liberatory images of the self. Feminist interest in women's identity locates the body as central to the cognitive scaffolding of self-image. Kathy Davis observes:

For feminist scholars, the body has always been – and continues to be – of central importance for understanding women's embodied experiences and practices and cultural and historical constructions of the female body in the various contexts of social life (Davis 1997, 7).

As one of the contexts in which identity formation is conspicuously engaged, Western consumer culture contracts specific form of the female body for its primary goal – the pressure and desire to consume (Jagger 2000; Featherstone 1991). In thousands of women's clothes boutiques and women's clothes sections of department stores throughout the Western world, the changing room mirror acts as a tangible instance of women's dissociative and ambivalent relationship with their bodies and of consumer culture's complicity in this process. Despite the ways in which postmodern consumer practices make available a multiplicity of ways for women to 'be', the change room mirror remains a site that reflects back to women a visual consumerist discourse in which their bodies are 'regulated, normalized, fetishized and commodified' (Jagger 2000, 55). The change room mirror in this respect is not unlike French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's mirror which signifies the powerful and often deleterious effects of the social and symbolic systems in Western culture on the individual's (specifically the female's) sense of self.

In his references to the mirror stage as a transitional period in the individual's entry into the symbolic order, that is the order of society with its cultural, ideological, legal and linguistic rules and norms, Lacan highlights the importance of language and the specular in helping shape identity (Lacan 1977). Rose writes that for Lacan 'the mirror image represents the moment when the subject is located in an order outside of itself to which it will henceforth refer' (Rose 2005, 53). Althusser (1971,69), working with Lacan's conceptual mirror in Marxist terms, remarks on the ways in which the broader society, carrying its ideological imperatives, interpolates the subject into culture compelling it to recognise and relate to the various images of that culture's identity on offer. Foucault also alludes to the ways we are made 'subject' to ideologically and power laden discourses in the symbolic order which position us in controlling ways (1982, 212). To adopt these ways of understanding self-formulation, is to recognize that we can never see ourselves other than in the images reflected back to us by society, which becomes, in effect, the mirror itself. For women in white Western culture, the symbolic order is driven by capitalist patriarchal consumer systems which prescribe very specific and socially approved of ways of being female/feminine. Such prescription can be seen as not dissimilar to the negative social control evident in dystopian fiction.

The experiences many women shoppers have of change room mirrors expose a gap between privileged images of the feminine and female bodies and women's self-
perception. Susie Orbach, amongst other therapists working with female clients battling poor body image, notes the anxiety that many women feel living in a society that promotes idealised representations of the female body (Orbach 2009, 142). She writes: ‘Throughout the world, girls and women grapple with the asymmetry of the images that are projected and their own attempts to find a place and a body that they can live from’ (2009, 137). Judith Woods, in the online version of The Telegraph (UK) in February 2007, taps into this anxiety in her identification of the ‘malevolent’ changing room mirror in an article entitled ‘Whose mirror is fairest of them all?’:

The terrible images are seared into our retinas. Call it instinct, call it bitter experience, but we know which malevolent mirrors will instantly transform a bare thigh into a side of ham, which looking-glasses will draw us, like Alice, into a parallel universe where we all look like Jabberwockies (Woods 2007).

Woods suggests in this report that humiliation and horror rather than pleasure and satisfaction underpin women’s confrontation with their mirrored selves. This is compounded in the change room that contains a number of differently angled mirrors. One anonymous shopper writes about her experience of the multiple mirror changing room on a blog entitled midwifemuse:

... (I) looked up and was face to face with Michelin woman. There she stooped, massive bum, rolls of fat, orange peel thighs, I’d seen all that before but never a panoramic view, I didn’t know I had a roll of fat on my back. It’s not huge, but it’s there, and I hate it. I was surrounded by mirrors, whichever way I looked I could see from angles that I had never been unlucky to view myself from before. My body image plummeted to an all time low... (2009).

Respondents to the blog were united in their condemnation of the multiple mirrored change room, but were also relieved that there were sisters in cellulite arms and legs out there; one signing off her response with an invitation to have a ‘girlie shopping trip together’. The cavalier attitude and the self-deprecating humour expressed by these women shoppers may momentarily unite them against the powerful feminine ideal, but they cannot dispel it. Moreover the multiple mirrors’ fragmenting effects capture consumer culture’s capacity to creatively exploit the female body. In her book Material Girls, Suzanna Walters notes: ‘The fragmentation of the female body into parts that should be improved or worked on often results in women having a self-hating relationships with their bodies’ (Walters 1995, 56). The multiple mirrored changing rooms arguably contribute to bringing into being and to sustaining in consumer culture, these body parts which then need to be manipulated and managed by consumer products.

Looking into the mirror for women is, in effect, to look at a double image—the ideal juxtaposed against the real; but it is the imaginary feminine (the ideal), that has the most powerful self-castigatory effect on the female subject. The ideal is contradictory, just as ideals often paradoxically prefigure control of the human subject in dystopian explorations. Barbara Brook writes that the imaginary female ideal is prescriptive, narrow, exclusive, but above all, seductive:

This representation is not simply a stylized version of a particular idealized femininity but actively produces a heterosexual object of desire which we are encouraged as women, to internalize as the actual embodiment of femininity (Brook 1994, 55).

The pervasiveness of the image in Western and increasingly non-Western cultures is not to be underestimated; nor is its persuasiveness. Famously Laura Mulvey (1975) and John Berger (1972) have identified the dominant image of the female body as that projected by the ‘male gaze’; that is masculine systems of representation in Western culture. Berger’s assertions were secured from his analysis of famous European paintings of women subjects and popular advertisements. He contends that ‘according to usage and conventions which are at last being questioned but have by no means been overcome—men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at’ (Berger 1972, 45-47). For Berger as for Lacan, this is paradigmatic of women’s ‘place’ in the symbolic order; they are brought into being and ‘positioned’ by the regulatory and prevailing gendered discourses of society, suggesting that women have little or no agency in the construction and control of their identities. There is much in the following female blogger’s comments that recalls Berger’s claim that women watch themselves ‘being looked at’, and in the process scrutinise their perceived shortcomings. She writes in response to another shopper’s frustrated and negative experience with changing room mirrors: ‘Where the hell were you shopping? I always find the mirrors at the store make me look drop dead gorgeous in stuff, but the hell were you shopping? I always find the mirrors are huge... (cellulitedelight April 2008).

This comment not only captures the dominance of the image (‘the mirrors at the store’) over the real (‘my own mirror’),
but also arrests the sense of self as always an effect of symbolic positioning.

The change room mirror can thus be seen as both metaphoric and metonymic of the symbolic order, and it is both forms that have been taken to an extreme with the invention of a changing room mirror that provides female customers with fashion tips. The ‘fashion tips’ mirror is a potent enunciation of the male gaze. In her article, ‘Foucault, Femininity, and Patriarchal Power’, Sandra Bartky analyses the ways in which women subject their bodies to self-surveillance, guided by dominant social images of femininity. In this process of self-monitoring women become ‘self-policing’ subjects, as ‘surely as inmate(s) of (the) Panopticon’ (1997, 149).

The following item on the fashion tips mirror appeared in an online fashion tips magazine, Fashion Style You, the Fashion Blog:

... the Magic Mirror knows what suits you and never gets bored. Once the mirror sees what you have tried on, it will then suggest matching items, and if something does not fit, it will ask a sales assistant to fetch a different size. Big Space, the manufacturers, claims that the Magic Mirror acts as a futuristic personal shopper and friend (Fashion Tips 2007).

Ostensibly the term ‘futuristic’ here connotes positivity, but it is an alarmingly dystopian signifier. The article records the experiences of one of its first clients who rapturously reported that ‘Shopping with my boyfriend is a bit of a nightmare ....but this mirror knows my size and even suggests stuff. I can take as long as I like with this mirror whereas my boyfriend gets in a huff after an hour’ (Fashion Tips 2007). The mirror in this instance sustains an image of potential perfection and pleasure, so that the boyfriend, metonymic of the power of the male gaze, no longer has to be present; his role has been taken over by his proxy, the magic mirror.

Writing on the importance of clothes for fashioning self-identity, John Jervis acknowledges the centrality of the mirror effect in consumer culture. However, he puts a positive spin on the concept arguing that women need not be subjugated to the gaze. Rather ‘the mirror can play a creative role’ in that it can ‘encourage the creation of new elements of self-identity’ (Jervis 1988, 133). In a similar vein, many feminist cultural critics eschew the...
pessimism of earlier counterparts with their ‘narrow focus on the domination and objectification of women in contemporary consumer culture’ (Jagger 2000, 55), instead laying claim to the pleasurable creativity that women can enact in consumer choices through their fashioning of identities not anchored to a fixed feminine normativity. According to this view, consuming can be empowering for women who can manipulate the self through their exercise of choice in positive or parodic ways (Jagger 2000, 55-56). As playful, resistant and utopian as this seems, it must be said that women shoppers considered in this article, faced/fazed by the change room mirror, rarely affirmed any pleasure in gazing at the reflected self; for many it was a dystopian experience calling forth self-loathing and self-denial rather than self-creation.

Through the Looking Glass
While the reality of many women’s experiences of change room mirrors exposes consumer culture’s reverence for a particular way of being female, mirrors have been used in women’s artistic and cultural practices in more utopian ways to re-frame female identity. Writers, artists and performers as diverse as Annie Sprinkle, Luce Irigaray, Alice Walker and Yayoi Kusama, amongst others, command the distorting, reflecting, multiplying and deflecting properties of mirrors to challenge dominant representations of the female body and the female self. In Speculum of the Other Woman, Irigaray writes of the speculum (the curved mirror used for internal examination) as a metaphor for women’s self-representation, with the potential to deflect the ‘narcissistic reflections of phallocentric discourse’ (Morris 1993, 128). The speculum produces instead a ‘dazzle of multifaceted speleology. A scintillating and incandescent concavity, of language also, that threatens to set fire to fetish-objects and gilded eyes’ (Irigaray 1974, 43). Irigaray’s language here challenges the male gaze (‘gilded eyes’) of consumer culture’s mirrors, and confines that her project is to find an erotic, but non-phallocentric language or medium to express women’s self-representation, with the potential to deflect ‘narcissistic reflections of phallocentric discourse’ in many contemporary texts however, the speculum finds its way into women’s textual practices providing a motif for the freedom of embodied and imaginative self-articulation. There have been many instances of this. Amongst the more controversial is the work of Annie Sprinkle, one-time stripper and porn star, now self-styled performance artist and ‘sex educator’. In Public Cervix Announcement, Sprinkle invites the audience to celebrate the female body by viewing her cervix with a speculum and flashlight. On her website Sprinkle writes: ‘Lots of folks, both women and men, know very little about female anatomy and so are ashamed and/or afraid of the cervix. That’s sad, so I do my best to lift that veil of ignorance. I adore my cervix. I am proud of her in every way, and am happy to put her on display’ (Sprinkle 2009). In the mutual space of investigation of the inner female body, Sprinkle instigates a confronting and not always comfortable journey behind the screen of male representation deep into the recesses of female sexuality. Sprinkle’s very public performances hold in contradictory suspension the tension between women’s bodies as the object of the male gaze and women as active, artistic agents of their own corporeal subjectivity. This tension is not always resolved but is allows for a questioning of both subject positions and the power dynamic that is played out in them. In her analysis of Annie Sprinkle’s performance work, Linda Williams claims that Sprinkle destabilises and denaturalises the ‘normal’ meaning of pornography as a male genre expressing male desire, power and pleasure and appropriates it in parodic and positive ways to articulate women’s sexual pleasure, desire and agency (Williams 1997). Sprinkle’s performances engage with Irigaray’s emphasis on touch as well as sight to identify the ‘multiplicity of genital erogenous zones in female sexuality’ (in Morris 1993, 129), which have been either debased, exploited or rendered invisible in Western patriarchal cultural systems of representation.

In literary representation, the mirror has a complex history of self-enunciation and self-denunciation, particularly in fictional expressions of female identity. In their seminal work The Madwoman in the Attic, Gilbert and Gubar point out that in texts such as Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea, the mirror acts as an agent of control that reflects back to the female, patriarchy’s imprisoning image of her so that she is blinded to her real self (1979, 340-350). In many contemporary texts however, the mirror enacts moments of self-actualisation for female characters, especially in its speculum form. In a crucial scene in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, the speculum facilitates the emergence of female sexual pleasure independent of male initiation and determination. Shug Avery, a singer and free-spirited character, urges Celie, the oppressed female narrator of the novel, to ‘take this mirror and go look at yourself down there’ (1983, 69). Despite the fact that Celie has experienced sex with her
husband, an activity that Shug likens to him ‘going to the toilet’ on her, Shug insists that Celie is ‘still a virgin’. The mirror, bearing a striking resemblance to the speculum, enables Celie to consider herself as sexually embodied in her own time and space, through the gaze of the speculum. The mirror, bearing a striking resemblance to the speculum, enables Celie to consider herself as sexually embodied for the first time and to take pleasure in looking at and touching her-self:

I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass between my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose.

It a lot prettier than you thought, ain’t it? she say from the door.

… I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me (1983, 69-70).

It is shortly after this moment of self-exploration in which she also experiences the orgasmic potential of her own body, that Celie finds the courage to leave her husband and strike out on her own.

The installation work of Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama often utilises mirrors. A 1965 installation piece features a large mirrored room filled with stuffed phallic fabric shapes, covered in red polka dots and entitled Infinity Mirror Room – Phallic’s Field (Floor Show). Visitors can stand or lie or sit in the installation where the mirrors are set in such a way so as to endlessly reflect a self reflected infinitely in the phallic field – a strong visual representation of the self’s deferral to phallocentrism. However this installation, and others of Kusama’s that draw on the dots and mirrors motifs, afford a different interpretation which links the artwork expressively with the possibility of transcending the constricting nets of the finite world. In Kusama’s aesthetic, the dots on the phalluses are the first step towards an obliteration of the self (the social self?), while the mirrors offer the ‘joy of inheriting the vitality of an infinity’ (Turner 1999).

It is from this sense of the infinite that a more liberatory interpretation which links the artwork expressively with the possibility of transcending the constricting nets of the finite world. In Kusama’s aesthetic, the dots on the phalluses are the first step towards an obliteration of the self (the social self?), while the mirrors offer the ‘joy of inheriting the vitality of an infinity’ (Turner 1999).

It is shortly after this moment of self-exploration in which she also experiences the orgasmic potential of her own body, that Celie finds the courage to leave her husband and strike out on her own.

The changing room mirror as a site of consumer culture’s male gaze, often invites women to respond to false and fantasised images of themselves. Their experiences are uniformly underwritten by feelings of inadequacy and anxiety as they measure themselves against idealised feminine images wrt large by the social and symbolic orders to which they continually defer. The mirror as a motif in textual representation has often been used to creatively exploit this gap. The work of female writers, artists and performers such as Luce Irigaray, Annie Sprinkle, Alice Walker and Yayoi Kusama plays challengingly with different types of mirrors to furnish the female subject’s sense of who she might be beyond the flattering or fattening effects of ‘real’ or imaginary mirrors.

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LONGING FOR A LIFE LESS ORDINARY: READING THE BANAL AS DYSTOPIAN IN SONYA HARTNETT’S BUTTERFLY.

LARA CAIN-GRAY

Sonya Hartnett’s work aligns with realist literature, however Hartnett’s writing for young adults has been referred to as dystopian, with critics highlighting the gritty social settings and bleak outcomes of her novels. Dystopia is sometimes used as synonymous with a generally destructive or depressing environment, but is more often associated with the nightmarish projected future worlds of science fiction. This article will offer a reading of Butterfly’s treatment of the future and dystopian motifs to demonstrate how such a ‘realist’ text can re-articulate some science fiction conventions. The social bleakness in Butterfly is located in the banality of life in the suburbs. In this way, it could be argued that Hartnett’s readers are asked to view a banal future, rather than any far-fetched or fantastic future, as dystopian.

Butterfly (2009) sees teen protagonist, Plum, endure the small horrors of embarrassment and disillusionment, rather than issues like suicide or incest, which drew attention to some of Hartnett’s previous works. Plum believes that she has a ‘grand destiny’ (Hartnett 2009, 152), which may be typical of the teenage psyche, but might also be read in the context of a contemporary desire for fame (or notoriety) as preferable to a life that is merely ‘average’. Butterfly features several characters desirous of change, which, as a literary device, invites the reader to imagine the future of this particular social world. Unfortunately, there are many indications that these players are unlikely to effect major change in their life patterns, thus suggesting they will live out the very run-of-the-mill future lives that they most fear. This article links several understandings of dystopia with a close reading of Butterfly to explore the ways in which the novel cuts across genres to illuminate a vision of ordinariness as dystopian.

A dystopian narrative, put briefly, is ‘the story of the “bad place”’ (Kennon 2005, 40). For Sargent (1994, 9), a dystopia is a ‘non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in a time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived.’ This style of writing is most often associated with science fiction due to the nature of a wholly new, imagined world necessarily being in the future or outside the common earthly experience. A desire for amelioration of the human race is a significant driving force in many dystopian narratives, with populations questionably ‘improved’ and often left homogenous, impasive or robotic. In this way, it is often the quest for a utopia that brings about a dystopia, and we see this clearly demonstrated in the desire for improvement expressed by Hartnett’s protagonists in Butterfly, each of whom strives towards a future that is markedly better than their present.

To call Sonya Hartnett’s work dystopian seems like a stretch in the light of the aforementioned definitions, given that her work has simultaneously been linked with social realism, a genre of writing very much grounded in the ‘now’. In truth, Hartnett’s writing probably transcends many of the labels of literary marketing, but rising to mainstream popularity as she did in the early 1990s, her writing was caught up in the nexus of two important literary trends: the development of ‘grunge’ and a renewed fascination with Young Adult (‘YA’) fiction. Several of Hartnett’s books, including Butterfly, are now marketed as crossover novels, in that they appeal to a variety of reading ages. Her strong reputation as a YA author, though, means that critical responses continue to examine her contentious themes in terms of their appeal and/or potential effect on young readers.

The YA fiction genre was put under the microscope in Australia in the 1990s as several authors released hugely popular, nihilistic books for young readers. This resulted in much critical debate on issues of thematic appropriateness for readers in this cohort, which might loosely be viewed as fourteen to eighteen years old. Along with controversial writers like John Marsden, Hartnett was at the vanguard of YA authors discussing topics like sexuality, incest, abuse and death. Reviewers and critics regularly questioned whether reading about the nasty side of life would leave teenagers educated, prepared and validated, or depressed and encouraged into negative behaviours.
Bradford (1996, x) noted that much of this debate fails to recognise that children’s books are ‘inescapably implicated in the processes of socialization and identity formation’. And, in the ‘talkback age of frank disclosure’ (Legge 1997, 11) there is little point denying that young people are already exposed to a range of topics that parents may wish could be avoided. At the same time, publisher Walter McVitty said that ‘too many of today’s writers for children finish where there’s no bloody hope, where you’d rather end up dead’ – hence the links made between these texts and a dystopian social vision (in Legge 1997, 17).

Michaels (2005) noted a paradigm shift in Australian YA realist fiction beyond 2000 which incorporates a new focus on hope; whereas the popular novels of the 1990s were said to ‘leave their characters splattered on the concrete or, worse, a twisted wreck in some spinal unit’ (Legge 1997, 16). Butterfly’s conclusion is open-ended, and an optimistic reader may see hope for Plum; she is, at least, alive. However, Hartnett herself has said that Plum ‘probably won’t do anything much with her life’ (Warhaft 2009) thus the novel offers a reading which sees Plum, her family and friends settling into a relatively mundane (hopeless?) future, if not the obviously miserable circumstances portrayed in Hartnett’s 1990s novels.

For young readers, novels like Butterfly will intersect with the many other popular cultural texts (reality television, social networking) that highlight a longing to be extraordinary. There have been many studies about teenage ambition suggesting that young people look to the world of celebrity for role models (e.g. Bromnick and Swallow 1999). The desire for fame is about idolisation of individual famous people, but also the perceived lifestyle benefits associated with being famous, such as wealth and popularity (Gountas and Gountas 2008). This perception of ‘success’ frequently leads to a ‘subsequent sense of failure, alienation and low self-esteem when celebrity status is not achieved’ (Times 14 March 2008). It is likely that Butterfly’s characters will never be ‘special’ by this definition, thus suggesting an essentially disappointing future for them. It is in this way that their imagined future will be understood by young readers as dystopian. A close reading of Butterfly demonstrates the many ways in which the projected future of its protagonists is painted as unsatisfying to the point of dystopian.

Ariella Coyle, or ‘Plum’ as she is known, is soon to turn fourteen. Her bedroom, in early 1980s Melbourne, is plastered with posters of David Bowie and kittens, representing her position on one of life’s precipices: about to make the jump away from childhood to the messy purgatory of the teens. She is questioning her world at every turn: her appearance, her family, her belief in God, her self-worth. ‘...even if there was a God,’ she tells her reflection, ‘He wouldn’t love you’ (2). Plum’s internal monologue blends self-loathing with a strongly held belief that she is destined for greatness. ‘Of late she’s been attracted to all things ruthless and peculiar’ (2). She is beginning to separate herself from the unquestioned beliefs and routines of her life as the youngest child in a family and taking notice of the myriad possible futures that lay open to her.

This position of potential seemingly is a hopeful one, however Plum is surrounded by adults who are not living the lives they dreamed about at her age. The novel thus suggests that very few of us ever accomplish our teenage hopes and ambitions. Furthermore, many people eventually settle for an adequate life and lack the energy to bring about major change.

Butterfly is heavy with symbols of longing for the unattainable. At page 14, Plum sits in the window of her bedroom ‘baying for the hills’ in the distance. Plum dislikes her ‘meaty’ body (1), yet she stuffs her face with chocolate knowing that ‘every bite is making her life more intolerable’ (15). As tears roll down her face her ‘view of the ranges is blurred by her woe’ (15) and we understand a pattern of self-sabotage in Plum that is likely one day to impede her ambitions. Plum suspects she has a ‘grand destiny’ (15), and that it is her fate to be persecuted and misunderstood until ‘something – something foretold on parchments lying undiscovered in a cave, something that will occur when three dark stars align – makes her rise and spread her awesome wings’ (15). She longs for the extraordinary, but is doing little to work towards it, hoping instead that the universe will somehow make it happen.

Plum’s family environment is ‘functional enough’ (Warhaft 2009) in that there is no deep lying tragedy or abuse at work. The Coyles are ostensibly loving and supportive, if inarticulate and oblivious to each other’s distresses at times. This distances Butterfly from others of Hartnett’s realist works that feature determinedly dysfunctional families. This novel’s most fractured family is the Wilkses, Plum’s neighbours, with Maureen Wilks being the most important representative of the dystopian vision besides Plum.

Maureen is a thirty-something mother to four year old David. Her husband, Bernie, is ‘the kind of man who says “Another week gone,” when you meet him putting out the rubbish bins’ (49). He drives a Datsun Skyline, which Plum’s brother Justin states is a good car if you want to be ‘ordinary and reliable and unadventurous’ (33). Maureen dresses glamorous, for this neighbourhood, in low-cut blouses and tight fitting jumpsuits. She is a closet smoker who ‘smokes in secret for the sheer
pleasure of secrecy. She smokes because, smoking, she is nineteen again, on the shore of possibilities’ (65). She is also having an affair with Justin.

For Maureen, Justin is a ticket out of the life into which she seems to have accidentally fallen. ‘To her, he has more promise than he’d ever have use for’ (102). Unfortunately Justin is coming to see Maureen as clingy and desperate. He is her last hope for a life less ordinary; she is just the latest of many life experiences he anticipates. Maureen’s interactions with Justin exhibit a desire for the exotic no more sophisticated than those of the adolescent Plum. In bed with her lover she says ‘Let’s catch a plane to Berlin. We’ll rent an empty warehouse near the zoo. […] We’ll have no furniture except a bed, and we’ll wear nothing but black…’ (101). Justin chuckles and laps up Maureen’s belief that he is capable of ‘doing and being anything’ (102), at the same time feeling happy to ‘unfold a daring map of life because it is only words, nothing will happen, he is quite safe’ (102).

This scene typifies the tension present throughout this novel between a desire for an extraordinary future and the underlying message that it will most likely never eventuate. Maureen recalls a conversation with her own mother: ‘You have to be somewhere and live somehow and do something and be someone [...] What’s wrong with who you are?’ (130) Maureen can’t think of any fate worse than ‘to live like something taken from the shelf of a cut-price variety store’ (130).

It is Maureen who initially offers Plum a doorway into the exotic. As an image of womanhood for Plum, Maureen is ‘sultry’ (23) while her own mother is ‘dowdy’ (34). Plum feels patronised or misunderstood by other adults, whereas Maureen supports her desire to be different, encouraging her into such ‘improvements’ as changing her name and dropping her school lunch in the bin each day to lose weight. For Plum the changes Maureen suggests become important markers of identity: ‘I’m not Plum anymore […] I’ve changed my name to Aria. Plum was a Skyline’ (33).

Plum spends her school days amongst a gaggle of girlfriends whose admiration she longs for, though she is more often a target for taunts. Along with Plum’s many insecurities about her appearance and her family, she feels inadequate next to these girls. She creates a means to empowerment by assembling a collection of talismans in a suitcase beneath her bed. She takes these treasures out of their chest periodically, presenting them to the universe as if to summon the changes she desires. ‘The glass lamb. I belong. The Fanta yoyo. Admire me. […] The dainty wrist-watch. I am more than you see’ (sic) (13). The treasure chest is her greatest secret and, perhaps like Maureen’s smoking, partially exists for the sake of secrecy – a small, safe act of rebellion.

The action of the novel takes place over just two and a half weeks, adding intensity to the desolation Plum feels as two crucial parts of her life suddenly crumble. Firstly, as Plum’s gang pick over her bedroom during her birthday party, it is revealed that her collection of potent charms is made up of items stolen from her friends. The girls storm away from the house and proceed to make Plum a pariah in the school ground for the days that follow.

Secondly, there is an inevitable collision of worlds when Maureen begins asking Plum to babysit David. While Plum and David are at the park, Justin is with Maureen. Whilst it takes some time for the denouement, the very fact of Maureen’s friendship with Plum is enough for Justin to end the affair. He has no interest in complications. Eventually, it is Maureen who tells Plum that she and Justin are in love and intend moving to Berlin. A devastated Plum confronts Justin who denies all, declaring that he is ‘…a delivery guy. Not someone who runs off to Berlin’ (197). However, Justin provides Plum with the ammunition she needs to launch a series of stinging barbs at Maureen, telling her that Justin never loved her, that he finds her old and sad, and that she is a ‘housewife with a baby, and what would he want with that?’ (202).

At the end of this revelatory day, Plum sits down to watch a film with the family; she eats her dinner with gusto. This is not an obviously negative ending for Plum, and she shows signs of being more comfortable within herself. However, to be ‘safe’, perhaps still over-eating and returning to the regular family routine of watching television could be read as indicators of a lack of any major personal transformation.

At the same time next door, Maureen is putting David to bed and considering her life. ‘She had not realised it happened this way – that one only gets to make a handful of decisions before everything is decided […] Routes close, options shrivel, and it all happens without fanfare, simply day following day…’ (212). In the ambiguous final sentences, which one reviewer called ‘Hartnett’s signature “left-hook” ending’ (Greville St Blogspot 2009), we are asked to question whether Maureen has absentmindedly suffocated her son. If so, will this bring tremendous pain or the ‘unheard-of opportunity of beginning again’ (215)? The mere suggestion that an horrific accident such as this may be preferable to carrying on with an average life in the suburbs establishes how nightmarish Maureen’s ‘ordinary’ life is considered to be.

Hartnett views Butterfly’s setting as ‘recognisable’, rather than mundane and sees the identification of
the extraordinary within the ordinary as an interesting challenge for a writer (Warhaft 2009). Nevertheless, there is no escaping the connotations of the terminology; to suggest one is challenged by looking for something interesting to write about within this familiar, recognisable environment is to imply dullness around the notion of ‘ordinary’. This is not to suggest that everyone should be unhappy about living an uneventful life: indeed many would be grateful for it. An alternative reading might even posit that Plum could create a utopian future by conforming to the social mores around her; Bradford et al (2008, 351) suggest that belonging and acceptance might be utopian desires.

There are other facets of the novel that suggest a dystopian reading. For example, Plum and her brothers are voracious film and TV buffs with a particular interest in SF and horror. Several famously dystopian texts are mentioned, including Soylent Green, Planet of the Apes and Logan’s Run. Plum’s avid discussion of popular culture helps anchor the book in its 1980s setting. At the same time, this nod to cinematic history hints at a sense of plus ça change in terms of our suspicion about what the future holds.

This article links several ideas about dystopia with a close reading of Butterfly to explore the ways in which dystopia might be represented in texts outside of science fiction. With particular reference to dystopian YA fiction, Kennon (2005, 40) posited that ‘optimistic possibilities for emancipatory agency seem intertwined with pessimistic acknowledgement of the limitations for the transformation of society and relationships between generations.’ Kennon applied this to futuristic novels, but this understanding of dystopia, like others mentioned here, fits neatly with Butterfly, where Plum is presented as desiring an extraordinary future but is likely to succumb to the limitations articulated by the adults in her life. Thus, despite being far removed from science fiction writing traditions, Butterfly can be read as a dystopian novel because it projects a future for its protagonists that is, in Sargent’s words (1994), ‘considerably worse’ than the future in which they expect to participate. If this is then also considered a YA novel, we can deduce that young readers may add Butterfly to the many other contemporary texts that articulate the importance of an extraordinary life, and interpret the banal future as a dystopian future.

References


Endnotes

1 See, for example, the incest and patriarchal abuse seen in Hartnett’s 1995 novel Sleeping Dogs.

2 All further quotations from Butterfly will use the page number only as a reference.

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Written in the post modern times of the late twentieth century, *Dead Europe* (2005), by Greek Australian author Christos Tsiolkas, is a deeply dystopian novel which looks back at the Old World from the viewpoint of the New World. In this respect, the author keeps faith with the quest trope that Anthony Hassall identifies in Australian writing, where three interrelated quests continue to find imaginative expression: ‘the voyage in search of Australia; the quest for ‘home’ in Europe; and the journey into the centre of the country’ (1988, 390). In *Dead Europe*, Tsiolkas’ original contribution to Australian dystopian literature is his use of the quest theme to create his dystopian vision in the present. In the twentieth century, dystopias have more usually been imagined in far off futures, as the alienated societies formed by technology obsessed, urban-industrial states, which ultimately evolve to spawn their own nemesis. However, in *Dead Europe*, filtered both literally and figuratively through Isaac’s vision, dystopia is realised in the present. This article explores the three techniques that Tsiolkas uses to create this present day dystopia in the novel. The first is in through the use of photography to create word pictures of the ‘future-present’; the second is in the depiction of the calamity of anti Semitism and the third is through the collapse of time which is embedded within the novel’s structure.

Briefly, *Dead Europe* tells the story of Isaac Raftis, a photographer, who is also Tsiolkas, first person narrator in the novel. When the colonel’s right wing regime ascends to power in Greece, as a communist, Isaac’s father has to flee. Doubly marginalised as a homosexual and a child of immigrant parents, Isaac grows up in Australia. After his father dies the remaining family lives on in Sydney, however, Isaac decides to travel back to Europe, a homecoming which begins in Greece. In recognition of his heritage, the Greek Ministry of Culture sponsors a photographic exhibition of his work in Athens.

The first technique the text uses to construct dystopia is the narrative depiction of photography—Peter Davis draws a distinction between the actual physical immersion of a photograph into an imaginative text and the ‘narrated photograph’ which employs narrative to insert a photograph (or the act of taking a photograph) into a text (2007, 1). A key device for representing modern day dystopia back to the reader, the ‘narrated photograph’ in *Dead Europe* acts as a photographic filter superimposed upon reality. In her key work—*On Photography*—Sontag theorises about what it means to continually mediate reality and experience via the insertion of a photographic image:

A photograph is not just the result of an encounter between an event and a photographer; picture-taking is an event in itself, and one with ever more peremptory rights – to interfere with, to invade, or to ignore whatever is going on. Our very sense of situation is now articulated by the camera’s interventions. ... This, in turn, makes it easy to feel that any event, once underway, whatever its moral character, should be allowed to complete itself – so that something else can be bought into the world, the photograph. After the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring onto the event a kind of immortality... (1997, 11).

Capturing photographs which he recreates in words, Tsiolkas uses his authorial gaze to ‘invade’ and ‘intervene’ in Isaac’s pilgrimage – thus creating the inevitability of the European unconscious in the new time tense of the ‘future-present’. Here, as in Sontag’s quote, photography allows an event, once underway, ‘whatever its moral character’ to complete itself, so that ‘something else can
be bought into the world’. In Dead Europe this becomes the dystopic present which is the culmination of the hellishness of European history.

Numbing themselves into neo-liberal materiality, this is a history and a present which Europeans choose not to make conscious. But, as Isaac’s camera records it, this is a moral event that is already and inevitably underway. Although recorded photographically, Isaac’s journey more properly owes its antecedents to Hieronymus Bosch—that painter of grotesque images depicting sin and moral failure. Isaac is crossing through, ‘Ghosts. Blood and land and ghosts’ (90) (Padmore 2007, 54). Isaac explains: ‘Every photograph is an apology, every photograph I take is an act of contrition before a mocking and malignant God. With every shot his laughter rings out’ (304). For Isaac this is a passage from this world to that which is to come—a modern day photo shoot of pilgrimage. Here, Europe becomes a haunted landscape where the real and unreal, the past and present, flesh and spirit, the dead and the undead mingle and merge.

As he travels through hell photographing the delirium of his progress, Isaac sublimates the death drives within his art. At one of the oldest remaining ghettos in Europe—the Venice ghetto—Isaac encounters the ugly remnants of the European chthonic spirit, unleashed and turned political. As bidden by a mute and aged Jew, he photographs the legacy:

A black swastika was scrawled in thick brushstrokes on a peeling whitewashed wall. He pointed to my camera. He wanted me to take the photograph. I shot the photograph. He took me through the ghetto, all the while pointing at graffiti and wordlessly commanding me to take photographs of it. It was mostly swastikas … (150-151)

Later, encountering bodies, Isaac pursues them so as to capture their images but they vanish before him and ghosts appear in his photographs. He takes pictures of real people who transform into corpses (52, 134, 303).

Similarly in Paris, Isaac takes photographs of the immigrant men who work in Gerry’s warehouse—African men, and Arabs, men with names like Mohammed, Ibrahim or Hussein. When he develops the photographs he finds that:

Their faces are contorted into death masks of sullen despair, of unbearable anguish and never-ending grief. Those morose faces turned towards the lens are countenances pleading for a great silence: they are doomed. [Gerry’s] face is not proud, it is not welcoming my mother’s gaze into his European world. There is no expression on his face, it can’t be read. He is Charos (303).

Tsiolkas demands that the reader comprehend the inevitable reoccurrence of the chthonic drives of the human psyche. Reviewing his photographs, Isaac’s mother, Reveka, understands that the camera cannot hide these death drives in the dark underbelly of the new Europe: ‘Could Colin not see the truth of the photographs? Isaac had not photographed the past, he had captured the future’ (405). The ghosts that Isaac captures are not only from the past. They are also the ‘present-future’ hauntings of the stateless refugee and the colonial refugee, displaced because of the communist collapse and/or imperial exploitation. In his reading of Dead Europe, Mansfield turns to Derrida to explain that the ghost ‘is a remnant from the past, unresolved and unassimilable coming to us from the future’ (2008, 1). At the gateway of the European metropole, the new colonial armies are now waiting, underpaid and undocumented and always held at arms length from inclusion into citizenship and national belonging.

Exploring its uncanny ghost story effects, Catherine Padmore finds Dead Europe is ‘a disturbing and difficult book’ but a one which nonetheless, remains ‘firmly lodged’ in her consciousness (2008, 434). Padmore goes on to discuss the novel’s possible anti-Semitism. In fact, Tsiolkas uses the calamity of anti-Semitism as his second narrative device for creating a ‘present-future’ dystopia in Dead Europe. Here, the issue, lies in Tsiolkas’ use of anti-Semitism to explore the crisis of the Other – predominantly in Europe but also in Australia. Padmore is not alone in her strong response to the novel, Gelder also identifies Dead Europe as a source of ‘heated debate’ (2009, 18). A great many articles and reviews have been written about Dead Europe and some have elicited ambivalent responses to the novel’s perceived anti-Semitic themes (Rosenblatt, 2005, Padmore 2007). Robert Manne (not unjustifiably) has already criticized its use of ‘some of the oldest and most consequential anti-Semitic libels’ (2005, 53).

Establishing the indecency of anti-Semitism early on, the novel begins with Isaac’s first person narration of the tale that his mother used to tell him: ‘The first thing I was ever told about the Jews was that every Christmas they would take a Christian toddler, put it screaming in a barrel, run knives between the slats, and drain the child of its blood’ (1). Later on, Isaac’s photographer friend, Sal, now working in Prague, introduces Isaac to his boss—Syd. Once a talented artist, Sal now prostitutes his talent photographing pornography. Sal describes
Isaac takes note when Syd launches into a diatribe as the vengeful Jew, 'I am the real Jew, mate. …You don’t know Jews do you? You think we should be the nice old fella in the back of the store, wouldn’t hurt a f…ing fly. Salt of the earth and God’s chosen people. I’m not that kind of Jew, c…. That kind of mumza Jew is finished. I hope that mumza has gone forever’ [expletives deleted] (220). As Rosenblatt observes, Tsiolkas’s Jews ‘are not people one can feel any pity or sympathy for’ thus it becomes easy to see them as ‘disposable human beings of little worth’ (2005, 79). Given recent European history, Tsiolkas engages with dangerous ground.

In fact, Tsiolkas’ stance is more complex and when he attends the launch of Dead Europe, he is at pains to explain that it is anti-Semitic fears and hatreds of the past which animate the European racist hatreds of today (Rosenblatt 2005, 79). For Tsiolkas, the anti-Semite seems ‘to always be the other, it was never who we are’, and he does not believe that this is the way that racism works in any of its expressions (Padmore 2008, 448). If Dead Europe is simplistic as an anti-Semitic, then there would not be a constant parallel motif running through the novel about who is Jewish and who is not. Jewish and Christian bloodlines and names intertwine throughout the novel to create complex lineages. Frequently, these threads make readers question Isaac’s own origins (Padmore 2007, 59). Even the poisonous Syd recognises Isaac as a Jew and has difficulty accepting Isaac’s denial (218).

For Kristeva it is this need to create a ‘cult of origins’ which generates a hate reaction amongst human beings. Hating ‘those others who do not share my origins’ allows individuals to justify being insulted by cultural, personal and economic difference, and to move back amongst their ‘own’, sticking to an archaic, primitive “common denominator” – which will prove to be a more trustworthy than the ‘foreigner’ (1993, 3). Those who subscribe to the ‘cult of origins’ seek refuge amongst their own and submerge the conflicts they experience amongst each other ‘by projecting them on others – the strangers’. Then, confronted by their violence toward the Other, human beings begin to question the tenuousness of their own survival and the validity of their own achievements. Thus, the ‘cult of origins’ ultimately leads to the ‘hatred of oneself’. Yet, meeting with difference, human beings still withdraw into the ‘weird primal paradise – family, ethnicity, nation, race’ (1993, 3). Historically, Europeans deny their own differences and the abhorrent aspects of themselves, project these aspects onto the Jewish people, and thus unify themselves in hating a common Other. In Dead Europe, the modern day European Union is still abounding with ethnic and tribal hatreds.

In Kristeva’s view, Christian religion which dominated the West and the secular thought that replaced it both act as the ‘efficient laboratories’ where ‘identification hatred [can] be metabolised, without for that matter, voiding the commission of crimes’. The end result continues to remain the same and it ‘affects the core of the speaking being’. A being which is split between on one hand man’s symbolic identity which ties him to ‘strong brotherly demands’ and ‘our imaginary identity rooted in the original cell (family, race, biology)’ (1993, 4). Isaac’s recovery to health is premised on the healing that his mother effects for his ‘speaking being’. Life returns to him when his mother heals his ‘symbolic identity’ by acknowledging brotherhood with the tormented ghost of the Jew whom her family betrayed and killed: a Jew with whom Isaac shares his ancestry. In acknowledging the truth of her family’s origins in violence and murder, Reveka also heals the self-hatred, ‘the hatred of origins’ that is propagated by denying history.

Perhaps this is also the source of Colin’s self-hatred. Colin is Isaac’s Australian lover. He was only fifteen when his mother’s boyfriend—Steve Ringo ‘took him to a tattooist who carved a swastika on the boy’s right arm’ – a tattoo which is still visible. Steve Ringo taught Colin to read from the Bible and the doctrines of the Aryan nation. Hating his history and its power, Isaac threatens to leave his lover if he does not have his tattoo erased—Colin pleads with him, crying: ‘I can’t… This is my history and this is my shame’ (10). Seeing his lover’s torment Isaac stays. Later, Isaac asks Colin if he still hates the Jews and Colin replies: ‘No, no, I don’t. I still envy the rich. I envy you wogs because you can be passionate and touch each other without cringing. But I don’t envy the Jews. I’ve exiled myself from the Jews’ (254). Tapping on his arm, Colin indicates the damage he has inflicted on his symbolic identity: ‘This tattoo, it’s never going to go away’ (254). Colin’s spiritual wholeness requires that he acknowledge brotherhood with those whom he wronged as Other. But his swastika tattoo, that symbol of terrible crimes that were commissioned against the Other, is leached on Colin’s skin, denying him absolution.

Responding to the wounding of his lover’s symbolic identity which has been denied its ‘brotherly demands’, Isaac grants him brotherhood and benediction:

If with me Colin had found someone to prepared to accept his shame, I now shared
Isaac's act of reconciliation is not one of sanction but of compassion – he recognises and acknowledges the moral damage inflicted on his lover – a damage which he too owns. Terrible as it is to read at times, the depiction of anti-Semitism in Dead Europe, once owned and acknowledged, also offers the only possibility of salvation for the tormented beings that inhabit the novel. Yet, as a truly dystopian work, Dead Europe still profoundly questions the possibility of realising the utopian dream of making men good and happy, of overcoming poverty, disorder, ignorance and crime, of the possibility of faith in any religious or political meaning. As an allegorical History of the West, Dead Europe engages deeply with a dystopian European legacy, testifying to what 'two thousand years of Judeo-Christian soul shaping and three centuries of crusading scientific intellect' have brought to the world (Roszak 1972, xxxi).

The third technique for creating the 'present-future' dystopia in the novel is the collapse of time. Both of the two earlier points discussed – the use of photography and the depiction of anti-Semitism – relate events which have no temporal connection. Back grounding this is the overall narrative structure of Dead Europe which collapses time in the broader sense. The novel is organised between two strands which move the reader backwards and forwards. One strand begins in the brutal and archaic Greek peasant past. The other strand relates Isaac's experiences in the present, both in Europe and Australia. The Greek peasant past is ruled by a medieval Christian cosmology which begins in sacral time, where Christian mythology renders meaning to a brutalised existence, of curses, blood vengeance, ghosts, witches, murder and rape. This is what Benjamin calls Messianic time as signalled by Auerbach (Anderson, 29). Here the sacrifice of Isaac prefigures the sacrifice of Christ and all is linked to Divine Providence where everything that has been, is and will be. This narrative thread is the Old Testament strand of Dead Europe. Tsiolkas skilfully moves this strand into the historical realities of modern Europe to collide with the second narrative which detailed Isaac's pilgrimage across Western Europe. This is the New Testament narrative of the novel. As clarified above, in Messianic time the death of Isaac prefigures the coming of Christ who takes on the sins of mankind so as to atone for them. Thus, Isaac becomes the grunge Christ for a new millennium, drug fucked and predatory as he bears witness to his brother's suffering.

Speaking in a first person narrative, Isaac is the onlooker to the terrible crimes that human beings inflict upon each other. Hence, his voice implicates the reader in the horrifying responsibility of being his brother's keeper and the brotherly demands of a symbolic identity. Robert Manne is right – Isaac implicates the reader in 'some of the oldest and most consequential anti-Semitic libels' (2005, 53). But these are slanders which have implicated the Christian community of the last millennium. These are collective sins, not merely Isaac's. Without the poisoned myth of the Jews betraying Christ, the murderous European excesses of anti-Semitism would not have been possible. Christianity, with its history of endless Jewish pogroms, created the Jews as Europe's first stateless people. In the Europe of today, under the thrall of secularism, capitalism and consumerism, the dispossessed and stateless are treated with similar racism and abhorrence. Although this is racism that stops short of genocide, it still denies human beings the right to a meaningful existence.

In his interview with Cornelius, Tsiolkas identifies the marginalisation of the homosexual characters in Dead Europe:

Dead Europe is a book that argues that because of the choices my characters make about the nature of their lives, their always going to be exiled from the monotheistic God, and that's an aspect of Judaic, Islamic and Christian faith that I think is almost impossible to overcome (2005, 23).

Rejecting the possibility of religion to achieve the Utopian ideal, of making men good and happy, Tsiolkas takes the vampire as his literary emblem. Huggan writes that vampires can be seen 'as figures of dangerous alterity, as direct threats to established systems of social order' (2006, 192). Gelder asserts that the vampire has long been associated with anti-Semitic representations of displaced Eastern European Jews (2009, 226). Similarly, the Encyclopaedia Britannica states that when the church curses people they become vampires. It is in the interests of these 'undead' that Tsiolkas invents a new Eucharist—a new sacramental or memorial reenactment which says 'This is my body,' and 'This is my blood'. There are surreal moments in the novel when Isaac is overcome by bloodlust and feeds vampire-like on the blood of others (257-259). After feasting on Anika's blood he tells us: 'There is poetry after Auschwitz: I can taste a juicy drop of Anika's blood on the bottom of upper lip' (299). Here is the allusion to Adorno who said that it was barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz. Born a Jew in 1903, Adorno saw the enlightenment project as powerless against the rise of fascism. By 1929, when Nosferatu (1929) the classic vampire film was made, the Weimar republic had become 'an explosive melting pot of political extremism, rampant inflation, rigid authoritarianism and moral and
social decay’ (Koller 2001). Participating in Isaac’s pilgrimage through Dead Europe, the reader realises that the past may not be past and that it creates both present and future.

In conclusion, Dead Europe warns that the West’s ‘last men standing’ may well reinvent the Hegelian master/slave relationship in new and more barbarous ways. To make this plain, Tsiolkas uses the three narrative techniques outlined in this article. Firstly, the narration of Isaac’s photographs impels the understanding that this is an event already underway. Secondly, Tsiolkas’ invocation of the horrors of anti-Semitism warns of the inevitable, murderous, intentions of human beings towards those whom they perceive as Other. Thirdly, Tsiolkka’s technique of collapsing time, by positioning events which have no temporal connection alongside one another lays bare the past—which inevitably assembles Dead Europe’s dystopic ‘future-present’. Implicit in this dystopia, is the urgent need to reassess Western utopian thought, so that the twenty first century does not become ‘the reactionary domain of fundamentalisms, religious illusions and ethnic wars’ (Kristeva 1993, 69). But, as Tsiolkas warns, if answers are sought in the political and religious cosmologies of the past – they will inevitably fail.

References


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Moving through Labor’s first term of government in Australia, and in a climate where all conversations take a backseat to the global financial crisis, it is interesting to reflect on Australia’s sense of national identity and on what it means, in terms of the politics of identity, to be Australian. The global financial crisis leaves little room for illusions of insularity, or for any clinging to a belief that Australia is in some sense a fortress, or an island in an economic or political sense. Economically, Australia is enmeshed within the world and within a global community, having slipped the moorings of its protected past to drift into a global present. But if the economic realities are uncontested, the same cannot be said of Australia’s sense of its social position. This paper brings the issue of the social—the issue of Australia’s national identity—to the fore. The paper starts with a reminder of what has broadly been called the culture wars, and of the retreat into conservatism of Australia’s sense of itself in the years following the defeat of the Keating Labor government. It then asks a series of questions about the current Labor government’s position on, or imagination of, national identity, and about how that is articulated in policy terms. In other words, as economic policy gets played out nakedly and flamboyantly and with no questions about the fact that being Australian implies a sense of cosmopolitan and global citizenship, this paper asks questions about the policy landscape and political vision which the Labor party is sketching around social issues.

In a broad ranging response to the questions posed in this article’s opening provocation, The Hon Mark Butler MP, federal Labor Member for Port Adelaide and Parliamentary Secretary for Health, paints a picture of where Australia is tracking with its sense of identity and its sense of a place in the world, and he paints—in his own words—an impression of the government’s and the Labor party’s role in that unfurling. Butler comes to the task as a new MP, elected in 2007, and as part of an emerging new face of Labor. He begins his response by putting the question of Australian national identity in historical context and looking at Labor’s role in that history. He then moves his focus to questions of social, foreign and economic policy in order to tease out recent developments in the evolution of an Australian sense of self prior to the election of the Rudd Labor government, and since that government’s inception. Butler reflects on the Rudd government’s role in reshaping Australia’s image of itself and the image it projects overseas. He looks at the evolution of Australia’s nation building and identity-shaping policy environment over the first half of Labor’s first term in government. Critically, he seeks to answer a question as to whether the Rudd government is playing out a series of ad hoc or hodgepodge policy positions, or whether a sum of social policy initiatives so far flagged under Labor constitutes a coherent vision or message about how Labor sees questions of identity, and about how it sees Australia, its place in the world and what is meant by the idea of Australian citizenship.

Provocation: first term Labor and the question of identity

Since the Hawke/Keating economic reforms, and on either side of the global financial crisis, the central point of difference in the national ideas debate has not been a clash of economic ideas, or—as Giddens (1994) notes...
in another context—of Left and Right in a traditional sense. The point of difference—the clash—has reoriented itself along an alternative axis defined by the social more than the economic, and by conservative versus progressive imaginings of appropriate national identity. It was that debate, the culture wars, the derision of black armbands and the insistence that reconciliation must be ‘practical’ that moved up-front and centre in the Howard years, contesting Keating’s vision of an alternative practicality, of reconciliation making ‘good economic sense’, of engaging with our neighbours and of putting the republic on the agenda.

Howard came to own those concerns. Right up until WorkChoices, those issues of identity occupied as much of a role under Howard as they did under Keating, playing out as a ubiquitous three Rs of Australian politics for a decade or more—reconciliation, the republic and refugees. These were the key wedge issues. These—especially the first and the last—defined the point of difference between the two potential parties of government, and these defined the political agenda. Or rather, they failed to define a point of difference, and whilst a cacophony of nationalistic fervour whipped up a storm of political engagement on the far right in general and amongst One Nation and sections of the Liberal and National parties in particular, the silence from Labor was deafening. Beazley missed the boat on Tampa, was cornered on detention, and would not be wedged on citizenship tests or indigenous issues. Labor found it hard to articulate a national vision under which it could meaningfully position policy alternatives. In opposition, Labor struggled to contribute to what was, for a decade, the central ideas debate. It struggled to foreground the social and to deal with unrelenting questions of identity and the spectre and growth of an increasingly exclusive imagined community (see Anderson 1991 for an account of the nation as imagined community). And so a backwash of conservatism clogged the national imagination. Rights for same sex couples were off the agenda. An apology to the stolen generations was a distant hope. It was that climate of an accretion of social injustice—amidst the possibility of that accretion—which ultimately must have made WorkChoices seem possible, which must have provided an apparent intersection of possibilities for the conservative and liberal impulses of the Howard government.

But it wasn’t sustainable, and it wasn’t possible. In 2007 a Rudd Labor government was elected in a convincing victory, and a social democratically inflected agenda of social justice was back on the table. Rudd had already shown his hand in that regard—WorkChoices was to go, and the concerns around climate change fell under the auspices of Rudd’s agenda too. Further, modelling himself on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudd had articulated a clear, progressive agenda with regards to inclusivity and social equity, wrenching the gospel from the clutches of the right and redploying it as a tool to effect a new, progressive national vision (Rudd 2006).

Rudd had a new vision for Australia. It was, and remains, a vision in which social justice is taken seriously, and in which a progressive impulse is paramount. But what, under Rudd, are the politics of identity? We have seen a bold start. We have witnessed an apology and a cabinet roving Indigenous communities. The detention of asylum seekers has received attention and is—though still a difficult issue to defuse—on the agenda, and a republic is not explicitly off. We have, in Mandarin, heard a reengagement with our neighbours and our future rather than an exclusive and parochial obsession with our past. Under Rudd, Labor’s social democratic impulses appear inclusive, and free from many of the fears of otherness which separated ‘us’ from ‘them’ and ‘me’ from ‘you’ under the previous regime.

But are these moves towards an inclusive horizon a hodgepodge of ad hoc policies, or is there a vision being played out here? We seem to have moved some way from Howard’s white Australia where brown people were routinely locked up for trying to come here and where white people were paid to breed. We seem to be over our obsession with ignoring the fact that black people exist here, and that they raise a whole lot of issues. But does this constitute the makings of a vision, and how will the Rudd government articulate and coherently engage with the question of national identity as it progresses through its first term? Ultimately, how will Rudd approach his citizenship test?

Response: Mark Butler MP

Responding Historically

In my response, I want to deal with the question of national identity in the context of Australian history, along with Labor’s role in that history and identity, and the role of competing economic policies in the debate over national identity. Particularly, I want to look at how the national identity debate crescendoed in the last part of Howard’s government, and at what has happened since then, firstly from an international perspective in terms of how others see us now compared to how they saw our international activity under Howard, and secondly, in terms of how the various agendas of the Rudd Government come together to form a vision for our identity.

I want to begin with the issue of how we think of ourselves and how we have historically thought of ourselves as Australians. The first observation is that, outside of any academic discourse on identity, we don’t actually like
talking about ourselves that much. One time when we did seem to talk about ourselves to some degree was in 2001 during the centenary. In the Deakin lectures of that year, John Carroll said:

This country is obscure. It was hard on its explorers, as if signalling its hostility to being mapped. Tracing its social contours has proved correspondingly tough, producing no more than a largely defunct legend of identity—that of the bushman and his ethos of egalitarian mateship—and a couple of summary phrases like the ‘lucky country’ (Carroll 2001).

This sums up the point that our national identity is hard to pin down. Compared to the example of America’s sense of their own exceptionalism, this is pretty uninspiring. Our sense of national identity shares no such sense of an ideal or of a shining city on the hill. It is less of an ideal and more of an image, and that image has traditionally been white, male, outdoors and usually rural.

Of course, none of this imagery really reflects the reality of Australia and its history. These images have progressed over time, passing from settler to digger to the square jawed, bronzed surf lifesaver. The imagery has been manifested and personified in sporting heroes—usually male sporting heroes—and constitutes something partly aspirational and partly an ideal. It is within that aspirational imagery that we find the quiet discourses of Australian idealism and all the values and exclusions which that idealism entails. There is value to be found here—what that idealism and those images orbit around is a core cultural value of anti-authoritarianism and a sense of a fair go.

A good example of that, which I enjoyed telling during the period when Howard was cloaking himself in the ANZAC tradition, can be found in Phillip Knightley’s account of survival rates of POWs in Japanese POW camps in World War Two. The account documents three quite distinct cultures within the Japanese camps. In the British sections, the officers got first pick of the food and the water and the shelter and the soldiers were left to scraibler over whatever remained. That could be argued to be a traditional British hierarchal approach. True to form, the Americans set up a trading system. But the study found something quite distinct in the Australian section, and that was that the Australian prisoners who were most in need got priority. The sick and the injured got first pick of the water, the food and the shelter and the rest—be they officers or soldiers—came second (Knightley 2000). What this account offers is something deeper than a mere reflection on romantic values. It suggests a case for connecting these cultural differences to the fact that Australian POWs had the best survival rates in the Japanese camps. This story of survival through coming together and a fair go all round is a compelling description of an ideal which does run through Australian culture and through Australian identity.

But as heart warming as that reflection on being Australian is, it is also a reflection on a very closed imagery and a very closed sense of identity, with no room for Indigenous stories or non-white stories. It is a reflection on a national sense of self which had no place for the three Rs: reconciliation, refugees or a republic devoid of its racial ties to the past. It is a comment on an historical identity that was on one hand very Australian, very progressive and very egalitarian, and on the other, resolutely white and proudly British.

My lifetime has seen a sea change in elements of that national identity. Despite the conservatism of the last decade, there has been an evolution of the Australian national identity spurred by the entrenchment of an ideal of multiculturalism, the relentless if slow growth of a republican debate, the reconciliation agenda, and the birth of an endemic arts and cultural industry in the 1970s which broke a custom of cringing, sycophantic deference to Europe. Still, in spite of this evolution, it is remarkable that there is still little internal dialogue about what it is that makes Australia, beyond falling back on relatively limited ideas of being a digger, a settler or a sporting hero—a form of identity that actually describes very few of us.

**Labor’s Role in the Identity Debate and the Themes of Independence and Diversity**

In terms of Labor’s role in promoting dialogue, there is a self-view of being the progressive party, which means that our sense of our country is to a degree utopian. Our sense of Australian national identity orbits around a vision of what it could be rather than what it was, be that in terms of a historical socialist objective, or in terms of aspects of progressive social policy. That sense parallels a process of reflection on a country that we see as evolving. That sense of not having yet achieved a meaningful and inclusive national identity outcome has perhaps coloured our ability to talk about it. Nonetheless, the Labor party has played an important role over the last one hundred years in broadening and developing our national identity. There are a couple of issues on that which are worth looking at from a historical point of view.

Firstly, there is the theme of independence. One can go back as far as World War One and look at Labor’s role in the conscription debates and the general war effort here. Although it was a cross party decision to participate in World War One, it was the Labor party that offered...
the independent view that it would be a volunteer army
that went to Europe to fight rather than the conscripted
army which Britain expected us to send. Most notably,
Curtin’s decision in World War Two to recall our troops
from the European theatre to the Pacific theatre marked
a shift in Australia’s relationship with the old world, even
if that was a shift forced by circumstance. Whether
looking to America quite constituted independence is
another story, but there is a cutting of the apron strings
there, and a reinvention of the Australian self. These are
impulses which extended through the Whitlam period
and particularly into the Keating republican agenda.
With due respect to Keating, though, it could be argued
that the Labor idea of an independent Australia reached
its zenith under Latham and his ‘conga line of suckholes’
(Latham 2003). In his short period as national leader,
Latham continued Labor’s tradition of fostering an
independent Australian identity, free from the racial
and cultural ties of mother England, and he demonstrated
an enduring Labor impulse around progressive national
identity and the spirit of the second R – the republic.

Secondly and relatedly, in terms of historical issues,
there is the theme of diversity. Relatedly, because
diversity is the result when the grip of monocultural
familiarity is loosened. Being the major proponents
of the white Australia policy, Labor didn’t get off to a good
start on diversity, but the post war story does see a
gradual improvement, firstly with the migration program,
although that was largely a Southern European
program. Whilst that program saw the world’s biggest
intake of Holocaust survivors per capita (see Smith
2009 for a recent Ministerial speech on this issue), it
was a program that was labour driven rather than purely
altruistic, and resonated with a Calwellian ‘two Wongs
don’t make a white’ (Calwell, 1947) recall of the white
Australia policy – a policy which caused an internal
battle within the Labor party for twenty years to remove
it from its platform.

It was really the Whitlam/Dunstan generation of
Labor that pushed a sense of diversity through Labor
platforms and into Labor governments. That generation
saw the emergence of the idea of multiculturalism and
a cosmopolitan lifestyle versus the austere paternalism
which had previously been a hallmark of Australian
culture and the policy landscape. Broadly, the idea of
women’s rights, reconciliation based on land rights, and
a distinctly Australian arts and culture agenda gained
traction at that time under the auspices of governments
which were well orientated at a leadership level to
capitalise on a more global progression of these sort of
social issues.

The Culture Wars: Keating and the Conservative
Backlash

But, from a Labor point of view, the diversity agenda
really peaked under Keating, notwithstanding Latham’s
rhetoric. Particularly, Keating’s emotional, committed
and aggressive approach to the reconciliation agenda
after Mabo, captured in his Redfern speech (1992), is a
hallmark of the Keating era. Further, a very strong focus
on the arts really came to the fore when Keating became
Prime Minister, as did a strong focus on linkages with
Asia that was, when one considers his occasional
remarks on matters like Churchill’s culpability in the fall
of Singapore during the war, often aggressively pursued
at the expense of our historical ties with Britain.

If one tracks recent Australian history in roughly four
segments—Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke/Keating and Howard
—whilst Whitlam’s push for a new and progressive
national identity was largely accepted by Fraser, Keating’s
was not by Howard. There was a significant conservative
backlash to Keating’s vision led by Howard and Hanson,
which we now describe generally as ‘the culture wars’.
To understand the different responses by Fraser to
Whitlam’s agenda and by Howard to Keating’s agenda,
we need to look at two things. Firstly, there is the issue
of the different personalities and personal ideologies of
the Liberal leaders. Fraser has always been an old style
small ‘I’ liberal in the Menzian or Deakinite tradition (See
Johnson 2007, 202, to position this claim historically and
within the broader context of an identity debate). Howard
never was. Howard is, and was, a completely different
ideological proposition, and part of any difference in
responses to Labor legacies rests there.

But part of Howard’s response to Keating needs to
be understood in terms of a populist surfing of public
discontent, reflecting the different economic policy
contexts which both Keating and Whitlam left. Keating
came at an agenda of social diversity or social
policy marked by a progressive move away from the
homogenous moorings of the nation’s past, fresh from
having wrenched the Australian economy out of a ninety-
year protectionist past. Keating signified a weighing of
historical, social and economic anchors. That was a very
significant factor in terms of Howard having fertile soil
to till for the purposes of nurturing his culture wars. The
base of insecurity and fear of change that flowed from the
wrenching economic reforms which Keating dragged the
country through, kicking and screaming, was significant.
Keating’s economic policy agenda was one that saw a
collapse of the Deakinite protectionist settlement of
fortress Australia, of tariffs and regulations and, also, of
very tightly controlled immigration policies which were
initially designed to protect Australian wages from being
undercut by guest labour. It is not drawing too long a bow
to see that the assault on the Australian status quo that
was Keating’s economic agenda helped to ignite and fuel
the rise of xenophobia, racism and conservative fears of
difference. And therein lies, in part, the beginnings of a backlash to Keating’s social agenda.

Hawke and Keating, very much affected by what went wrong with the Whitlam government in terms of the inadequacies of old protectionist agendas to deal with new global realities, had strong views about how to move Australia forward. These were essentially based on an understanding that any national reform, whether around health policy or superannuation, to mention just two examples, required the economic fundamentals to be right, and that was what Whitlam had got wrong.

The fundamentals for Hawke and Keating were about managing an inflation level that had spun out of control under the Whitlam government, as it would again under the Member for Bennelong’s stewardship. Amongst other key challenges, business investment had collapsed, so moving a significant share of the national income from wages to company profits was, within the labour movement, one of the more controversial hallmarks of Keating’s economic management. But the other prong was a strong focus on competition, through a reduction in trade barriers, the floating of the dollar, freeing up the banking sector and deregulating the labour market through the introduction of enterprise bargaining. These were huge and dramatic initiatives and changes which impacted on a whole population, with enormous numbers of people out of work in traditional industries. There were positives—the strengthening of Medicare under Keating, the establishment of a savings base in superannuation and improving women’s participation in the workforce through better childcare. These are important legacies. Doubtlessly, the prudent modernisation and renovation of the economy constitutes an enduring and necessary legacy too, but there was, in the short term, a lot of pain, with the longer-term economic benefits bequeathed to the era of Howard and Costello as the beneficiaries of good economic times who did little to build on that prosperity. Instead, what the Howard government was able to do, again largely due to the Keating legacy of economic reform, was to spend their energy stoking the fires of the culture wars for electoral advantage. It was a defence both of social democratic principles and of small ‘l’ liberalism on the Right of politics. Only a few weeks after that, Rudd assumed the federal parliamentary leadership of the ALP.

We then saw Rudd grab back the Keating legacy of economic reform. In a television advertisement which played early in his leadership, he said:

Some call us the lucky country, but I believe you make your own luck. We can’t just hope that the resources boom lasts forever (Australian Labor Party 2006).

He then went on to outline his education revolution. When Rudd said that we cannot be ‘China’s quarry and Japan’s beach holiday’ he grabbed back the ground on economic management by focusing on reform that spoke to the future.

The question then becomes one of how that leadership change and the subsequent electoral victory impacted on the ideas debate around the Australian sense of national identity, and a good way to start reflecting on that is to think about the image of ourselves which we portray to the international community. The international
perspective on Australia throughout the Howard years was one informed by imagery of a lock step with Bush and a disdain for multilateral processes. At a regional level, we exhibited a dismissiveness of the South Pacific Forum as an institution and indulged in the diplomatically disastrous idea of being America's regional deputy sheriff. This meshed with a general rebuttal of Keating's reinvention of an Australian future marked by an engagement with Asia and an embrace of diversity and cultural progress, rather than a clinging to the past.

Rudd's approach to engaging with the international community and the image of Australia that Rudd presents is a departure from the vision that Howard conjured. Rudd offers a very different approach to Australian international citizenship. In pursuit of a niche for Australia as an aggressive middle power working within multilateral forums, Rudd is not exclusionary in his continuing commitment to the US alliance. This is particularly evident in terms of his efforts at nurturing a productive relationship with China, and in terms of a sea change when it comes to the approach which the Australian government takes to interacting in our region, particularly in terms of engaging the South Pacific Forum, and the emblematic importance of the Bali Conference and the signing of Kyoto. There is a really important and symbolic story embedded in the successful conclusion of the Bali Conference, with various key stakeholders asking the Minister for Climate Change, Penny Wong, to chair the working party which ultimately precipitated the positive outcomes in Bali. As an example of a very different Australian approach to negotiations, the Minister agreed to chair the working party on the proviso that she co-chair it with a delegate from a developing country, as a result of which Brazil became a co-chair. Both of those things—the fact that the Minister was asked to facilitate the dialogue at the forum, and the approach that she took—are symbolic of a different approach to international dialogue and a different agenda, image and sense of self as an international citizen that Australia is developing under Rudd.

With Australia's attitude towards a quadrilateral alliance with the US, Japan and India, the push for Australia to have a seat on the UN Security Council, and Rudd's work on Tibet, we can see the underpinnings of a fundamental shift in the way that Australia portrays itself to the international community. This is indicative of a shift in foreign policy terms under Rudd, which is marked by a progressive social imagination and a self-identification around an inclusive social democratic impulse.

The Apology and the Other Rs
Within our own nation, the three Rs are firmly back on the domestic agenda. The apology to Australia's Indigenous population was received both overseas and at home in a deeply positive way. After reading the motion, Rudd opened his speech with the following lines:

Mr Speaker, there comes a time in the history of nations when their peoples must become fully reconciled to their past if they are to go forward with confidence to embrace their future. Our nation, Australia, has reached such a time. That is why the parliament is today here assembled: to deal with this unfinished business of the nation, to remove a great stain from the nation's soul and, in a true spirit of reconciliation, to open a new chapter in the history of this great land, Australia (Rudd 2008).

That business of opening a new chapter, of imagining a new chapter, and of seeing how that chapter can be built on the experiences and lessons of history, is the key theme here. It marks, in terms of envisaging a future and in terms of a vision of national identity, a huge departure from Howard's approach to our relationship with our past vis-à-vis our relationship with our future. There is much yet to do on reconciliation, but the landscape and the relationships have fundamentally shifted under Labor.

In terms of our treatment of refugees—an issue that was emblematic of the insularity of Howard's vision for Australia—there is, again, still work to be done. But there have been significant changes, including the dismantling of the Pacific Solution (see Evans 2008 for Ministerial statement), the abolition of temporary protection visas, the provision of legal advice to asylum seekers within excised territories, and overhauling detention policy to focus on risk not punishment. These are serious and symbolic steps towards unravelling an entrenched and complex system of cultural protection and exclusion.

There is now, I would suggest, an inevitability to a reignition of the third R—the republican debate. It was always going to be there as soon as Howard left the stage. Certainly, there are no perceptible roadblocks which Rudd has put in its way and no indication that there is a debate within Labor over whether or not to become a republic anymore—the only debate that remains is over the model and the timing.

Conclusion:A Coherent Vision?
In general terms, the central policy planks of Rudd's first term can be pulled together to tell a story about where Rudd wants to take Australia. The Labor government is serious about nation building, with a strong infrastructure agenda and a commitment to an education revolution. Tackling climate change is a priority, marked by a return to multi-lateral negotiations and the establishment of an emissions trading scheme. This Government is taking
on national leadership over water issues, especially as regards the Murray Darling Basin and urban stormwater. It has a commitment to social inclusion, a highly contested term under Howard, that is based on a multi-dimensional analysis of disadvantage focused on linkages rather than the narrow constructs of poverty measurements. This type of analysis is not revolutionary as such, after all there are not likely to be many undiscovered ideas about intractable disadvantage, but it is a new concept for Australia. Social inclusion is also about a multi-dimensional response in both policy development and service delivery.

These policies and principles resonate with a sense of a nation intent on moving forward in a sustainably egalitarian way. They resonate with a sense of social democracy, or even small ‘l’ liberalism and ‘mateship’ and a ‘fair go’ which have been obscured in our past.

So what does this all add up to? A hodgepodge of ideas or a coherent vision? I would argue the latter. Labor under Rudd has given us a coherent vision of an outward-looking nation keen to work with the world, a nation which recognises that our current economic prosperity should be used to build our future, but also that the tide—when rising—is not lifting all the ships.

It is an important part of a government’s first term to establish a vision. Labor has traditionally been out of the blocks quickly but has in the past shown a susceptibility to being sidetracked. Our focus on the key issues of nation building, education and reconciliation should serve us well for keeping our vision of fostering and broadening an inclusive national imagination on track.

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Introduction

Transitions to adulthood in Australia have changed significantly over the last 100 years. Prior to World War 11, most young people—particularly young women—remained at home till marriage. However, the second half of the twentieth century saw an increasing number of young people leaving home to assert their independence. But the last two decades has produced a reversal with many young people remaining at home longer in order to complete their education. Weakening labour markets and growing housing costs are also contributing factors (Cobb-Clark 2008).

To be sure, not all Australian parents are able to provide such support to their children. But many (probably most) middle-class families continue to support their children when they turn 18 years of age. They provide them with ongoing accommodation (often till 21 or even 25 years of age), money, food, clothing, health care, assistance with the cost of education or employment training, and emotional support. In contrast, young people leaving state out of home care are expected to transition to virtually instant independence with little if any ongoing support from their state parents.

Leaving care is formally defined as the cessation of legal responsibility by the state for young people living in out of home care. But in practice, leaving care is a major life event and process that involves transitioning from dependence on state accommodation and supports to so-called self-sufficiency. Young people leaving out of home care are arguably one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. Compared with most young people, they face particular difficulties in accessing educational, employment, housing and other developmental and transitional opportunities.

The Multiple Disadvantages of Care-Leavers

Many care leavers have experienced and are still recovering from considerable physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect prior to entering care. This process can reasonably be compared to undergoing rehabilitation from other significant traumatic experiences such as violent assault, torture, rape, and/or the murder of close relatives.

In addition, many young people have experienced inadequacies in state care including poor quality caregivers, and constant shifts of placement, carers, schools and workers. Some have also experienced overt abuse including sexual and physical assault, and emotional maltreatment. (CARC 2005; Cashmore and Paxman 1996). This lack of stability, continuity and consistency undermines their social and educational/training opportunities, and hinders their capacity to make a successful transition towards independence following discharge from care. Conversely, children who experience supportive and stable placements including an ongoing positive relationship with social workers and significant others are far more likely to overcome the adversities resulting from their pre-care and in-care experiences, and prosper when they leave care (Cashmore and Paxman 1996; 2006a and b).

Finally, many care leavers can call on little, if any, direct family support or other community networks to ease their involvement into independent living. In addition to these...
major disadvantages, many young people currently experience an abrupt end at 16-18 years of age to the formal support networks of state care. Care leavers are literally abandoned by their substitute parents, and expected to transition directly from childhood dependence to adult self-sufficiency.

In contrast to the accelerated transition to independence of care leavers, most young people— influenced by contemporary educational, housing market and labour market factors (Flatau, James, Watson, Wood & Hendershot 2007) still live at home until their early 20s, and continue to receive social, practical, emotional and financial support. The movement towards independence through leaving home generally involves a long transition period during which young people may leave and return home again on average three or more times. There is also not infrequently an intermediate or half-way stage between dependence and independent living during which young people may reside with extended family, or in a supportive institution such as a college or hostel (Maunders et al 1999).

The key factor here is the continued availability of most family homes as a ‘safety net’ to which young people can return over a considerable period of time. It is this safety net of extended support which is currently not available to most young people leaving care. They do not have the option of returning home if their initial housing or educational/employment or relationship arrangements break down (Cashmore and Paxman 2006a, 23).

**Pathways to Poor Outcomes**

International research consistently depicts care leavers as being particularly disadvantaged and as having significantly reduced life chances. In drawing this connection, we are not suggesting a simplistic causal relationship between any experiences of state care and poor later outcomes. Care leavers are not a homogeneous group, they have varied backgrounds and experiences in terms of the type and extent of abuse or neglect, the age entered care, their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, their in-care experiences, their developmental stage and needs when exiting care, including the quantity and quality of supports available to them.

The UK researcher Mike Stein (2008) suggests that they tend to fall into three categories. Firstly, there is the moving-on group, which is likely to have experienced secure and stable placements. This group is highly resilient, welcomes independence, and is able to make effective use of leaving and after-care supports. Secondly, the survivors group have encountered significant instability and discontinuity. Positive outcomes for this group tend to correlate with the effectiveness of after-care supports provided. Finally, the strugglers group have had the most negative pre-care experiences, and are most likely to experience significant social and emotional deficits. After-care support is unlikely to alleviate these problems, but is still viewed as important by them. It is the structural disadvantages experienced by care leavers compared to other young people that leave them more vulnerable to poor outcomes. One specific concern is their over-representation in the criminal justice system, and particularly in juvenile detention facilities.

**Australian Research**

A number of Australian studies have found a significant correlation between experiences of state care and involvement in crime. For example, Carrington (1993) discovered that one in five state wards from a random sample of 1046 female juvenile offenders were placed in detention during their adolescence. The NSW Community Services Commission (1996) found that young people in state care were 15 times more likely than the general population to enter a juvenile justice centre. The report by Justice Wood (2008, 556) cites two recent NSW studies which estimate that between 21 and 28 per cent of males and 36 to 39 per cent of females on community orders had previously lived in out of home care.

The Victorian Department of Human Services found in 2001 (cited in Martyn 2006) that 38 per cent of 13 to 18 year olds in residential care had been involved with the juvenile justice system. Stewart et al (2008a; 2008b) found a strong correlation between placement in out of home care and offending behaviour. Similarly, a 2008 Victorian study found that young people living in residential care were disproportionately involved in criminal activities (Wise and Egger 2008, 118-121).

A national study by Maunders et al (1999, viii & 63) found that more than half the 43 care leavers interviewed had committed criminal offences since leaving care. Four of these young people had spent time in prison. A Victorian study based on an analysis of 138 case files of young people aged 14–18 years discharged from custody or guardianship orders estimated that 29 per cent of care leavers had been involved in some form of criminal activity. Four of these young people were either in or about to be released from a Juvenile Justice Centre at the time of leaving care (Owen 2000, 85-86).

Another Victorian study by the CECFW (2005, 26, 42) based on a sample of 60 care leavers found that nearly half those interviewed had had some type of involvement with the police and justice system. This included a range of matters such as being charged with an offence, being served with an intervention order, evicted from a residence, domestic violence etc. Twelve per cent of...
care leavers had spent some time in detention in the twelve months after exiting care. In addition, two national studies by Morgan Disney and Associates (2006, 13-14, 48-52 & 108-116) and the AIHW (2008, 2) cite numerous studies from the states and territories confirming a link between time in out of home care and involvement in the juvenile justice system and later in the adult system.

**International Research**

Similar links between out of home care and criminal activities exist in the international literature. A small-scale study of care leavers in New Zealand (Yates 2000) found that the two young males interviewed both began to offend immediately after being discharged from care, one awaiting a prison sentence at the time of being interviewed.

UK and Irish research suggests a high percentage of those involved in the criminal justice system come from a care background. An early study by Ferguson (1966, 134-136) found that more than 30 per cent of boys who had been in the care of the local authority attained criminal convictions either before or soon after their eighteenth birthdays. Similarly, a Leeds University study found that 38 per cent of young prisoners and 23 per cent of adult prisoners had experienced local authority care as children (Prison Reform Trust 1991). An Irish study found that only two years after leaving care a high percentage of young people had either been in detention or prison (Kelleher et al 2000, 15-16). A 2002 study by the English Youth Justice Board found that 41 per cent of children in custody had some history of living in state care (Taylor 2006, 31).

Biehal et al (1995, 156-160) present a more optimistic picture, noting that more than half their sample of care leavers had never had any involvement with the police. About a quarter of the sample had been involved in minor offences whilst in care such as criminal damage, shoplifting, and fighting, but had not offended since leaving care. Only a small number of young males had moved into what they call 'incipient criminal careers'. Their activities correlated with school behaviour problems and truancy, involvement in a heavy drugs culture both in and after care, and a lack of housing stability post-care.

US and Canadian research also suggests that care leavers are over-represented in the criminal justice system (Casey Family Programs, 2001; Johnson-Reid and Barth, 2000). For example, one study found that more than one-third of the young people were arrested whilst in state care, and 24 per cent had been involved in criminal activities since leaving care. A total of 26 per cent had spent time in jail (Barth, 1990). A recent summary of various studies noted that between 18 and 50 per cent of care leavers had been incarcerated since leaving care (Tweddle 2007). Courtney and Dworsky (2006 and 2007) in their longitudinal study found that care leavers had high rates of offending across a range of behaviours from property crimes to using or threatening to use a weapon to serious violent crimes. 28 per cent of the young adults reported being arrested and nearly one-fifth reported being jailed since their first interview.

**Contributing Factors**

The key factor behind the over-representation of care leavers in the criminal justice system appears to be the absence of a supportive and caring parent or non-parental adult to ease the transition from child welfare dependence to adult independence. Many face independence alone and isolated without a safety net of extended family, friends, and wider community supports such as neighbours, school teachers, sports coaches, and religious or cultural associates (Cashmore and Paxman 2006b).

For example, they may have nobody except social welfare professionals based within the formal care system to help them with everyday tasks such as acquiring a driving licence, locating suitable accommodation, or accessing social, recreational and leisure activities. And too often these formal supports are time-limited and transient, and tend to be lost when they exit the care system.

The lack of formal support networks contributes to and is likely to exacerbate other risk factors. They may include ongoing trauma resulting from experiences of abuse or neglect, inadequate accommodation or homelessness, poor educational experiences and little employment experience, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems, limited social and financial resources, peer pressure within residential care facilities to participate in criminal activities, underlying anger and resentment towards the state care system, a need by some young people for the structure and support provided by the justice system in the absence of satisfactory support from the child protection system, the greater visibility of young people in care to corrective authorities which means that limit-testing behavior is more likely to come to the attention of police, the absence of effective legal advocacy and support which leaves state wards more likely to be convicted for minor offences, and the failure to provide after-care support to care leavers when they complete custodial sentences (Carrington 1993; CARC 2005, 169-170; Carlen 1987; CSC 1996; Martyn 2006; Taylor 2006).

Ainsworth and Hansen (2005) argue that the drift of young people from the care system to the juvenile justice system is caused by the absence of relevant preventative residential education or treatment programmes to meet...
the needs of disturbed and difficult young people. There also appears to be some anecdotal evidence that many young people leave care directly into juvenile justice detention, and that their care order is terminated at this point without further concern for their well-being. In short, juvenile justice becomes a de facto state parent for these young people.

**Monash University Qualitative Study**

Further information regarding the links between state care and juvenile justice is provided by a recent qualitative study undertaken in the Department of Social Work at Monash University (Moslehuddin 2008). The overall aim of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of young people leaving state care based on their own experiences, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between out-of-home care experiences and post-discharge outcomes. This study therefore targeted young people who have left State care under Guardianship or Custody Orders and were aged between 18 and 30 years. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data through in-depth interviews with a sample of 20 young people. The findings of this study are presented in this paper.

**Participants**

The 20 care leavers interviewed were aged between 18–26 years and comprised 12 females and 8 males. Their age range when they entered care was between birth to 15 years, and between 16 and 18 years when they left care. Out of 20 respondents, 11 of them were from rural Victoria and 9 were from the Melbourne Metropolitan area.

**Results/Findings**

A total of 14 out of 20 young people in the study had been in trouble with the law and 11 faced criminal charges both during their period in care and following discharge. Some of them had multiple charges including aggravation assault, arson, alcohol abuse, break and entry and assault with a deadly weapon, perjury, possession of drugs, theft, illegal debt collection, and destruction of property, drink driving and driving without a license. The most common forms of criminal behaviours included assault to others, theft, alcohol abuse, unlicensed driving and drink driving. The outcomes of these charges were varied, including: secure welfare, juvenile justice orders, detention in a Youth Training Centre, a community based order, fines and a good behaviour bond. Out of 14, four of the young people are still dealing with pending charges and awaiting a court hearing.

Some of the reasons for engaging in criminal behaviours frequently identified by the young people were: associating with the wrong crowd, financial hardship, breaking up with girl friends, feeding drug and drinking habits, boredom, underlying anger, and rebelling against the system.

**Potential Policy Reforms/Solutions**

All the available research suggests that significant supports and programs are needed to compensate care leavers for the disadvantages produced by their traumatic pre-care experiences, their lack of family support, and in some cases, their less than supportive substitute care experiences. At the very least, care authorities should aim to approximate the ongoing and holistic support that responsible parents in the community typically provide to their children after they leave home till at least 25 years.

To date, most Australian jurisdictions have refused to acknowledge that the state as substitute parent has a legal and moral responsibility to provide ongoing support to care leavers. The principal objection has appeared to be economic as reflected in Treasury departments being reluctant to commit funding to new initiatives even when the affected group is so obviously deserving of assistance. However, recent studies have provided overwhelming evidence of the social and economic costs of failing to support care leavers.

For example, a 2005 study by the Victorian Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare titled Investing for Success: The economics of supporting young people leaving care argued that there are significant costs to the State if young people leaving care are not supported during their transition from care into adulthood. They estimated the long-term costs to the state government associated with service use by these young people (for example, for health and mental health services, police, criminal justice, child protection, drug and alcohol, and housing) at $738,741 per person over a 42 year timeframe. That is, each annual cohort of approximately 450 young people would cost the state approximately $332 million per year over the next 42 years, and this is without counting federal costs such as income security and lost taxation revenue. Conversely, a supportive transition model for care leavers up to 25 years of age would only cost the state 11 per cent of this total. The CECFW advised the government to ‘spend a little more now to save a lot in the future’.

Most states and territories have been influenced by these social and economic arguments for greater assistance for care leavers, and have introduced some legislative and policy supports. But the level of social investment still remains far smaller than that required to significantly promote the social inclusion of all care leavers in mainstream social and economic life. An effective leaving care model would arguably include
a flexible and functional process for transitioning from care based on levels of maturity and skill development rather than simply age, assistance with accessing and maintaining affordable and stable accommodation, help with renegotiating relationships with family members and to develop wider informal support networks and friendship groups, access to adequate health care including ongoing therapeutic support if necessary to overcome experiences of abuse and trauma, programs of parent support for young mothers, subsidies to undertake higher education, supported employment programs, and financial assistance to access appropriate furniture and household items and pay advance rent and bond if necessary. There are some obvious similarities here with a support model recently proposed for young homeless people in inner-city Brisbane (Wilks et al 2008).

Holistic leaving care models are likely to address many of the key factors such as lack of stable accommodation and supportive relationships, substance abuse, and lack of income that leave care leavers particularly vulnerable to involvement in criminal activities. But further specialist supports may be needed to assist those young people who are already involved with juvenile justice whilst living in out of home care in order to prevent them becoming long-term participants in juvenile and later adult criminal systems.

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**The Christmas Card List**

is saved in Household Files
typed in Times New Roman in Word
da document conveniently amended
to delete a name
add another
sometimes place a person on probation
usually for neglect

it was on this list
that once more I saw your name
and your old address in Devon
where you scanned the restless channel
from history’s eroded cliffs
and walked
in the chill promise of the morning
upon deserted moors

it was from Devon that you wrote
and sometimes sent me little gifts
which I rarely found the equal of
for you
and it was in Devon I imagined you
as I posted off my letters
or while we gossiped on the telephone

then the night your mother rang
and spoke of the secreted pills
an argument
her shock
the arrangements for the funeral
in the medieval church
to which your fellow patrons
of The Mermaid’s Arms all came

then at last I struck Delete
watched your name dissolve
to white
and someone else’s leap
into your place
but not before I’d saved
my clamorous questions
all backed-up and burned
but wordless
in the plangent software of my heart

*B N Oakman
QUARRY HILL, VIC*
There is much truth to the saying that one person’s utopia is another’s dystopia (Nandy, 1987). This has proved true in many areas touched by modernity’s utopian project—the paradoxical quest for freedom (freedom from want, from ignorance, from responsibility, from vulnerability) via the creation of vast systems of control (Miller, 2006). Schooling is a great example of this—we seek to free ourselves from ignorance by creating a system that confuses information with knowledge and creates institutional empires of surveillance that oppress the young, terrify and coerce parents and kill curiosity (Gatto, 2002, 2008). Like all utopian projects, difference is trampled under foot and conformity is elevated to a virtue (Giroux, 2003).

What would happen if the modernist dystopian nightmare of heterogeneity, of fractal and micro differentiation, of rhizomic multiplicity was in fact what we do best? How might our cultural systems respond? I want to suggest that we would do well to consider such a proposition. To do this it is better to apply what Louis Marin (1990) termed a utopic lens to culture and imagine a way forward less constrained by habit and violence. Let’s rethink curriculum for instance. Poetry offers an interesting utopic disjunction (Greene, 2001). It turns disciplinary logic on its head by offering soft structure, analogy, rhythmic variety, cultural harmonies as a response to human need for ontological and existential coherence.

Poesis in the Greek means to make or create—so teachers and students make and create knowledge via a poetic sensibility (Henderson, 2004). Poetry models this and also models form across time and culture—ancient Greek poetry, the poetry of the Mahabharata, the poetry of Shakespeare—all lay cultural foundations, all weave meaning into context if the ear, the mind and the heart are open to it (Calasso, 1993, 1999). Poetry takes a person as they are and leads them forward into what they might be—the poet suggests a perspective, a new way for the reader. A new learning. Utopian curriculum regimes take much of the creativity out of this (Scott, 1998). Poesis emphasises the ‘becoming’ of students and their teachers—each encounter making them anew (Semetsky, 2006). Poesis, the making of the moment, in relationship to what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) called the Chaosophos—all open ended, all full of possibility and multiple readings.

To paraphrase Wallace Stevens (1990), let’s take our utopic lense and look into a classroom. The students come in and see a strange site:

The teacher bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day is green.

They say, ‘You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are.’

The teacher replies, ‘Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.’

And they say then, ‘But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are.’

So curriculum runs the route towards a tune beyond us, yet ourselves. It is pure rhizome, multiple, layered – like Altamira, a dark labyrinth filled with promise and mystery (Deleuze, 1987). We run the course of it, making and begetting and becoming along the way. A poetry of sorts, a shamanic shearsman leading us on into the messy wonder of it all. Poetry sketches a possible trajectory but leaves the map up to each learning context. It is inviting, playful, and rich in human moments—like a ship rich in possible destinations but also a heterotopic space in itself (Foucault, 1986). It generalizes only in order to illuminate the specific. Thus it embeds the micro in the macro and delineates the macro always present in each unique encounter. Maths, as Jardine and his colleagues (Jardine, 2006) argue so well, can be, should be poetry—not dry dust in the mouths of teachers who have forgotten how to dance.

We can turn to Kevin Hart (2002) for help in all this mess and joy. Freed from constraints, students and teacher, teachers and student discover what it means to learn:

This stone brimming with darkness, this weed
Taking its first breath,
This body intent upon the pure moment,
Will change: they are leaning into the future
And the future
Is bending like a river bank.

It is the guts of things...

The future, (that place of dreams where utopia spawns a new nightmare to control the darkness chaotic), can be benevolent too.

The music in your room
Will change the room into itself, it will
Undress the objects around you
Thus science can be transformed by a teacher who can sing the skin away from a fact and put heart into a stone. This is the poetry of curriculum run crooked (Sells, 1994). Not the straight and narrow for us! We need a future bending like a river bank; one that promises the sea and desert islands where Robinson Crusoe, as Shapiro (1992) reminds us, is saved by Man Friday.

The learner sees the world refreshed and hearing a new tune (a tune beyond but yet ourselves) stretches out in the sun to soak up its warmth, to dream and to sustain (Berry, 1990). This is an abundant curricula approach (Jardine, 2006). It responds to divergence with a creative thrill and leaves habit safely tucked away, cosseted with other memorabilia that tells us where we were but does not define us (Arendt, 1958). Hart again:

You are moving towards yourself, the one
Who will give up the world
As the afternoon blossoms from the cool morning,
As the flame reaches from the wood.

This is learning to be transient within a world of change, a shaman on the brink looking in, looking out (Bussey, 2009). It is the light touch of the poet's eye who does not trust the utopian dreams of the haters of life, the lovers of empty ritual (Loy, 2002). Rabindranath Tagore sees it so, saying to Shiva of the joys of living:

I see them through all ages,
Play them on my vina in your consort's raga,
For I am a poet.
Your attendants, life-hating lovers of burning grounds,
do not know me:
They cackle with the devilish rancour of the mean of spirit...

Our schools are burning grounds. They burn today's dreams in yesterday's utopian schemes. To teach freedom requires a poet's eye. Theirs is the inner discipline, the order of the creative fire. If we run the curricula race of the safe, the cursus honorum of the domesticated cattle of modernity, we learn nothing but our own ignorance and our prize is the death of the imagination in the cremation of our hopes.

Endnote

1 I am thinking here of the quest for order represented by the social experiments of fascism (Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Italy, Pinochet's Argentina) and communism (Soviet Russia, Mao's China, Pol Pot's Cambodia).

References

Let us live
in the small mind
of the politician.

X = X.

Y = Y.

The earth
and the sky.

The clever ones
take our money
we made with our energy.

And turn it right away
into perversity.

X = X..

Y = Y.

We go to war
for Y.

We live
and we die.

George Gott
Superior, WI.

Zarathustra
It is not without a wrench I have
to take leave of the reader* and him
so peaceful with his Nietzsche
there on the couch relaxing, the doors
(as he thought) locked, and the windows,
a brandy beside him, all the comfort
the will to power affords. Upstairs his lover
is waiting, rocking gently on the waterbed.
Goest thou to women, he reads, be sure
to take your whip. He smiles, looks down
at his manicured hands. Their silky touch
is good enough, he knows, and the doors
they open. Sleeping now, she will not hear
hear the soft footfall. And when she wakes,
a late sun streaming through the curtains,
she’ll stretch and turn. No need of alarm:
surprise will shake her upright. She’ll call,
toss a wrap around her naked beauty, and,
coming down the stairs, discover
it was not without a wrench I had
to take leave of the reader.

* Mahatma Gandhi: Truth and Ahimsa

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Research Centre. He has published extensively in the
areas of education and future studies.
HAVING A FIELD DAY

Jane Downing

'It's not fair,' I shouted. Not shouted loud, we were in public after all. More that kind of shouted whisper, enough to make it clear to Mum that I wasn't going to take it without a protest. 'It's not fair and it's not right.' Mum was implacable. I knew I was going to have to take it after my protest. She turned from rummaging in the back of the ute and sniped back. 'Yes dear, not fair and not right, like a blackfellas left leg.'

I looked outside the family circle. The car park stretched over four paddocks and was close to full. People were coming from miles around to make the most of the Field Day. I couldn't risk continuing the protest. You never knew when Mum's upbringing was going to let her come out with something really racist. Friends and acquaintances and complete strangers might hear her and that mattered though I knew it shouldn't, and that I should have been growing that thicker skin Dad was always going on about.

So we followed the crowd and trailed off toward the next lot of paddocks where the annual Field Day had set up like one huge open air supermarket for agricultural machinery and all things farm. The boys, the irritating little brothers I was being lumbered with in a way that was not fair and not right, sped off the foot-beaten track into the gully beside it (for run-off: a joke, for when had it last rained?).

For years I'd not wondered why they were so much younger than me and Dougal. You don't. Everyone thinks their family is normal up until that point when it becomes starkly obvious they aren't, which was when a new girl back in Year Eleven asked. When I, all innocence, no act, passed the question on, Mum simply said she'd had Jordyn so Lachlan would have someone to play with. And Lachlan? I didn't ask. You just know when conversations have ended. Like when we followed the boys from the height of the road that day. With each step in the long, dry grass of the gully they were disturbing grasshoppers. The bugs hopped as high as their flowerpot hats. They pranced in a fluttering cloud like they were in a poem. Mum was handing over money and instructions. The boys hopped as high as their flowerpot hats. They pranced in a fluttering cloud like they were in a poem. Mum was handing over money and instructions. End of conversation. She was needed to help Dad, already way ahead of us, to look for a boar to join with the sows. For all the sex going on around the farm (note: two little boys running ahead) I'd hit puberty with a curious lack of usable vocabulary. Boars were joined with sows, the stallion was brought in to cover the mares. I didn't know what was going on when Mrs Hamilton started using the prescribed language, which, without showing me, Mum had signed a note to allow me to hear in the euphemistically named Health and Personal Development class.

Once I would have described Mum as a Sherman tank. Personality and looks. Only it seemed a little Yankydoodle these days. The new heroes up and down the road were hand-drawn. Nips and Japs (and Yanks) were history—Grandpa banging on stuff. We watched Japanese anime obsessively and thrilled to hipless teenagers with eyes as huge and liquid as a milk cow's. The anime heroes donned metal battle suits to make them warriors. Gundam they were called. I watched Mum go in a gundam suit of post-childbearing flesh, muscled up by never-ending farm work.

Lachlan and Jordyn noted the dramatic drop in power. 'Be good,' were Mum's last words. As if. 'Martha, Martha,' they chirped. From Jordyn's lisp it was obvious I was being set up as a martyr. They wanted to do everything right now only Lachlan wanted the Dog Trials first and Jordyn wanted the tractors and balers and big cultivators. He was still small enough to fit inside the wheels of the big ones, standing, kind of like the naked man Molly and I found in the art textbook in Year Nine (hardly a great discovery: the book fell open at the page, its spine broken by generations of Year Nine girls who got the language but not the graphics in Mrs Hamilton's Health and Personal Development classes). Da Vinci was drawing something about human proportions, arms and legs wide within the circumference of a circle, not that we were concentrating on those particular stretched appendages. We had no culture. Da Vinci was a code. Dad said in his day people with Culture could listen to the William Tell Overture without thinking of the Lone Ranger. Ditto Da Vinci for our generation.

And do I dare remember the school excursion to Melbourne? One evening after the galleries and gaols we were dragged to an auditorium to sit through Handel's Messiah. I'd felt comforted and included, no bumpkin from the Big Dust after all, as I sang along. 'For we like sheep,' with nary a nod to punctuation. Of course we like sheep, we survived off the sheep's back. The laughing (at me) when I dared to say this, taught me more about the importance of commas than anything grammar Nazi Mr Jenkins ever did.

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The crowd at the gates to the Field Day were pushing us down Main Road so the boys and I followed the path of least resistance (making neither Lachlan nor Jordyn happy, it’s good to be equitable in these things). For we comma like sheep followed meekly the farmers in front of us.

This last Field Day was really very little different from any of the others. Same bickering, same family, same machinery, same smell of beer, perfume and sausages uniquely combined around the Swimming Pool fundraiser bar-b-que. The same locals were there, and maybe not the same blow-ins but they looked the same (with hats, it was the bigger the brim, smaller the property. Citysiders could’ve sheltered a herd). In a twinkling, as it did every year, this temporary city had materialized in the middle of nowhere which was the somewhere of our region. Maybe it was only me who’d changed. Nine months since school finished, for good and all, had given me even more time to think.

I had no work outside the farm. We were seven gates off the tarmac. I was blooming unseen, and I was blooming furious about it. Maybe I was fresh-faced now —didn’t need to put my face on to come out like Mum—but we have a few dairy cows and I knew fresh turned curdled all too soon.

This was my one day out in too long and I wasn’t going to meet anyone with these two monkeys gibbering for attention at my ankles. I tried texting Molly but the mobile coverage didn’t reach these particular paddocks. She was here somewhere but the crowds were worse than that Melbourne trip. I was alone. (You can be so alone when you have kids with you).

I made the boys stop to have a look at the weed exhibit. Some were so pretty, dainty oxalis, cape weed with its flowers a mirror to the sun, the thrusting agapanthus. ‘Pissabeds,’ an old man was telling his companion as they bent over the sickly looking dandelion. There was no romance allowed. No-one around our parts thought of weeds as plants that just happen to be in the wrong place. They were pests to be eradicated.

The old man was then talking about a neighbour who was acting like a pork chop over the blackberries. Next it’d be rabbits, and in my day, and something about skinning one of them like pulling off a glove. Rabbits: underground mutton. My sainted aunt (I’d bet anything that was one of the old bloke’s swear words) they go on about the youth mutton. My Molly, dishevelled, carefree Molly was all his jeans, ubiquitous country dust blue, and his Fosters Hand-Cock — Parts). They were holding hands. Tony in his t-shirt. My Molly, dishevelled, carefree Molly was all his jeans, ubiquitous country dust blue, and his Fosters Hand-Cock — Parts). They were holding hands. Tony in his t-shirt. His hat to wipe a hanky across his brow and his bald head dazzled like a disco ball. I once heard Dad calling a bald head the solar panels for the sex machine. He’s definitely going bald. Mum giggled. Solid Gundams don’t giggle. It was all too much for a teenager to think about.

At school we were paired off by height for dances. I hated it. The day the hippies’ son Tree had to put his hand on my waist so we could waltz is a permanent scar. I jumped when a hand landed on my shoulder. ‘I thought you’d be here.’ It was Molly. Molly who’d been my mate forever, a friendship forged down the back of the bus an hour each way to school and back. Only when I got off the grass did I see her shadow was solid.

‘You know Tony,’ she said. Not looking me in the eye. Tony? It was Parts from the abattoir, one of the breed of bottomless men. Personality ironically as shallow as a creek in summer, but with no actual bottom. A flat board where their bums should be. He’d gained some status if she was allowing him his real name (Toe-Knee Hand-Cock — Parts). They were holding hands. Tony in his jeans, ubiquitous country dust blue, and his Fosters t-shirt. My Molly, dishevelled, carefree Molly was all hevelled up for the day and looked beautiful.

I love Molly. We did everything together. We came out together. Around here that wasn’t like it sounds. It means we did our Deb in the same group. Debutantes in white being presented to the Mayor and thus what
goes for society. While the boys were outside the Town Hall butting against each other like bull seals (in penguin suits).

‘What are you doing?’ I asked. Inadvertently an edge in my voice distinguished my question from what I honestly meant, a simple what’s happening kiddo.

‘You give me the shits,’ Molly snapped back. If she’d been more confident about Tony Hancock’s hand (one of his parts) in hers she wouldn’t have had so short. At least that’s what I convinced myself later, only not in time to stop me escalating the exchange with a retort.

‘With friends like you who needs enemies.’

‘You shit.’ We were locked eyeball to eyeball. She hadn’t given herself time to find a new word.

I was nothing if not gracious. ‘I apologise from the bottom of my digestive tract.’

She went then. It was my fault. Parts was no catch, but maybe if he’d asked me I’d have been as desperate.

I sat back with the boys and cried behind my sunglasses while Danny-boy, aspiring champion of the Dog Trials, wove his three sheep up the paddock, through the gates, onto the ramp, into the run. Everyone clapped. Dougal, two years older than me and gone away to work (I was his someone to play with like Jordyn was Lachlan’s) once said, ‘you’re so sharp I shouldn’t run with you.’ I would have cut my tongue out with scissors if I could.

Then Sharon was baring down on me, yahooing one arm around like Grandpa’s windmill, like the rotors of the helicopter taking joyflights above and drenching her words.

Jordyn’s attention span hadn’t reached the other bank of time when Mum would reappear so I was herding them down Footrot Flats Lane. I’d just bribed both them with caps. Not that they had cap guns to explode the tiny rings of potassium chlorate and red phosphorous in. None of us had ever been allowed any form of toy gun. My Mum, contrary to city mothers who I’d read banned them in the naïve belief this was a strike against the perpetuation of patriarchy’s violent paradigm (I was the only person to even borrow that book from the school library), put the ban on because guns were for killing and any we had in the house were the real deal. For killing rabbits and crows and foxes and pathetic wild-dogs who through no fault of their own, only the fornicating practices of their grandsires who forgot to keep the bloodline dingo pure, were legitimate targets. Life was life, not a game. Guns were guns, not toys.

Life was life was upon me. The kid in the stroller in front of Sharon wasn’t up to toys yet. Judging by the lump between her and the stroller, a playmate was on the way. Sharon was only two years ahead of me at school. We’d been on the disaster of a debate team. More long bus trips to schools even further away. She’d been a bright girl. She’d put her face on for the Field Day. Blue eye-shadow and a pink smear across the lips that once argued There can be peace in our time.

She was now saying, ‘...’ which when you hear it really means you’re about to be told and it’s ending that’ll be the problem. Tinielle grizzled in the stroller between us. I listened to the time bomb about to blow as Sharon whittled on about her man, who was the salt of the earth type (hadn’t she heard about our salinity problem?) and about how dear everything was. Not dear, darling; she meant dear, expensive.

The man with the long-necked ducks distracted the kids briefly. He’d walk them through the crowd each year, in green coats and straw boaters. With the Potter-ducks’ tails gone the kids had only our knees to stare at. Yet it wasn’t terrible twos Tinielle in the stroller who blew first. I didn’t have eyes in the back of my head like Mum so Lachlan and Jordyn had taken advantage of the situation. They’d found two fist-sized rocks in front of the SES stand — that is the State Emergency Services, which was kind of appropriate. A little percussion on the caps, the flash and bang of potassium chlorate and red phosphorous, and I was practicing yelling the whole you’ll be the death of me gig and Tinielle was bawling, and everyone passing was thinking I was a terrible mother and then it came in a flash like a rock on a cap that this was me. And not in the far future either. Newly Gundam-suited-solid Martha, hollering at her brats. Not even remembering how much fun the sex that created them could be (not that I even knew yet; it was all over before it’d begun).

A sea of women washed around me. Women who’d lost their breast and had boosies instead, women with cleavage in their back fat, women tough and unyielding and enduring and ugly. Women who weren’t good examples but horrible warnings.

‘Come on Huey,’ Dad would scream at the sky when we needed rain. Every passing cloud got this inexplicable shout of prayer. ‘Come on Huey,’ I wanted to scream. Send me something — anything — good.

And now I’m on a road I don’t know the name of, in a town with a name I can’t pronounce. And I’m so scared. I don’t know how I got here and I don’t know when the next roadside bomb will go off and I saw a man whose
'someone’s hit you with the silly stick. Of course you can't join up. Hasn’t anyone told you armies are sent to fight when there’s a war?’

And I want to go home. I’m so scared. Our boys are brought in after roadside bombs. They get sent back home in flag-covered coffins.

A boy no bigger than Lachlan just ran across the road in front of us. We’re supposed to be here to help but I can’t help him. I want to go home but all these people don’t even have that hope. For them this is home and it’s a brave face we all have to put on.

Author
Jane Downing is a writer of poetry, short stories and novels living in regional New South Wales.

Bent Nails

There were plenty of witnesses. Still, years after the judge’s death the barristers & the solicitors argue their cases, not knowing whether the judge who walked the streets collecting bent nails to straighten with a hammer and who knows? Nail had been harder on a bent copped a bent lawyer or a bent judge, although on the balance of probabilities now, the money’s on the judge being harder on a judge.

Graham Rowlands
Hyde Park, SA

In the decade 1993-2003 Wittner published a trilogy of scholarly volumes on the history of the international anti-nuclear weapons movement, which arguably grew into the largest grassroots movement of all time. The three tomes, which collectively covered almost 1800 pages and thousands of footnotes, began with the prophetic warning in H.G. Wells’ novel *The World Set Free*, published in 1914, about a fictitious war fought with ‘atomic bombs.’ The outcome of this war was devastating, but Wells’ book had an upbeat ending. To avert an even greater catastrophe the survivors rallied to create a world government and save humanity.

The modern story that Wittner chronicles over 90 years does not quite emulate the novel. Humans still have a long way to go before establishing a world government, but some progress is being made. Despite calamitous outbursts of religious, ethnic and power motivated killings, a process of globalisation is gradually moving homo sapiens in the direction of a world community. Moreover, as in the Wells plot, after witnessing the disasters of two relatively localised atomic attacks, humans have managed thus far to escape the horrors of a nuclear holocaust. How the ‘great escape’ eventuated is the story that unfolds in the scholarly trilogy, and is now encapsulated in a slimmer and single work aimed not only at academia but also concerned members of the general public.

In the condensed version under review, Wittner sets out at the very beginning the major question that his well researched and highly readable narrative addresses. Since nations are inclined to use the weapons that they develop, how is it that nuclear war has been avoided since 1945? Moreover, only nine nations possess nuclear arsenals, while 186 for diverse reasons possess none. Those that have acquired ‘the bomb’ have entered into some restraining measures that indicate they are very much aware of the special dangers attached to nuclear weapons: for instance, the Partial Test Ban Treaty; Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties (SALT); Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START); Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

The prevailing rationale attributes the nuclear restraint to the deterrence power of nuclear weapons. But if that is the case, why the motivation to enter into arms control and disarmament agreements? Why have the nuclear powers refrained from waging nuclear war against the unarmed nuclear nations, sometimes at the cost of losing a war? Wittner’s book uncovers an answer that is not part of the conventional wisdom, even in some sections of the peace movement. He concludes ‘that the missing ingredient is a massive nuclear disarmament movement—hence that has mobilised millions of people in nations around the globe, and, thereby, saved the world from nuclear war’ (xii). Admittedly that mobilisation has been uneven globally and has waxed and waned over the decades, but in terms of the nuclear threat levels the movement has responded by mobilising gigantic numbers of ordinary people as well as the key institutions of civil society.

The evidence that Wittner presents in support of this assertion is overwhelming. He has extensively inspected the files of disarmament organisations, and has had access to formerly secret government records. He has interviewed countless anti-nuclear activists and government officials, and he has perused numerous memoirs, periodicals and other published materials. The details of this extensive research are laid out in the trilogy (each book of which had previously been reviewed in *Social Alternatives*). In *Confronting the Bomb* the reader receives mainly the argument and narrative. Nevertheless, he does spell out a most critical point: namely, that most government officials were not favorably disposed to nuclear arms control and disarmament measures. ’(T)hey grudgingly accepted such policies thanks to emergence of popular pressure…. Confronted by a vast wave of popular resistance, they concluded, reluctantly, that compromise had become the price of political survival’ (221 & 222). This is not to say that the movement was lacking the public support of a few politicians. Most prominent were Jawaharlal Nehru, Olof Palme, Michael Foot, and Mikhail Gorbachev. They deserve the accolades, along with the millions who comprised the citizens’ crusade.

We all, however, need reminding today that the peril has not diminished. The proliferation of nuclear weapons has greatly increased and the number of nations on the threshold of becoming nuclear powers has also grown. Despite the dismantling of more than 40,000 nuclear weapons, there are still 26,000 held worldwide, some of these on hair-trigger alert. The biggest arsenals remain Russia (15,000) and the United States (10,000). The Doomsday Clock, which registers the world's
Vulnerability to nuclear extermination, is currently set at five minutes to midnight, the third highest period since the Clock began operating in 1947 and the first time since the end of the Cold War.

Wittner poses the question why do so many of the world’s leaders tolerate the existence of weapons that are capable of dooming the human species to oblivion? ‘The answer,’ he maintains, ‘lies in the pathology of the nation-state system’ (222). A mind-set of ‘power over’ one’s rival is seen as necessary to prevent the adversary exercising ‘power over’ you. Maximum force has always been the ultimate sanction when other methods fail, and nuclear weapons provide the maximum threat force in the modern era. While warfare was never an intelligent way to resolve conflicts, nuclear weapons introduce a new dimension of suicidal madness whether fired intentionally or accidentally. In effect, they are not weapons at all, and if sanity were to prevail, would be totally eliminated — the stockpiles of these monstrous ‘things’ reduced to zero.

But how can the world come to its senses and ban the ‘nuclear things?’ From what this book demonstrates of the past, the impetus and responsibility will in all probably have to come from that same vigilant and diligent citizenry. The focus this time, according to Wittner, should extend beyond the limited goal of total disarmament and also deal with the deeper factor of the pathology that afflicts a system of anarchic sovereign nation-states. Considering the multitude of global issues that beset humanity, it should be obvious the nation-state has long passed its ‘used by date.’ The world needs a revolution that transfers sovereignty to an institution commensurate with the specifications of its age, and for Wittner that means creating an international authority with fair electoral representation and the power to enforce its will. While the idea of a federated world order has long been on the agenda of forward thinking individuals like H. G. Wells, in today’s world what was once a choice has now become a necessity. It is also, however, necessary not to lose sight of the fact that a two-pronged strategic goal is called for. In Wittner’s words:

(T)aming the war-making nation-state through the creation of an effective international security system does not eliminate the need for pursuing a short-term strategy of fostering nuclear arms control and disarmament. Indeed, the two are complimentary…. (B)y pursuing both strategies simultaneously, we have the possibility of turning back the threat of nuclear annihilation and, along the way, transcending the disgraceful international violence that has accompanied so much of the human experience (224).

This book, if I had the authority, would be prescribed reading in every Australian high school and university, and on the shelves of every municipal library throughout the land. RALPH SUMMY BRISBANE


There is no question that Jean Calder is an incredible human being. It is impossible to read this account of her work with underprivileged, disabled Palestinians, without admiring her absolute dedication. Now in her seventies, Jean Calder recounts her experiences with the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) in the Refugee Camps. Calder’s account of working with the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) in the Refugee Camps. Calder’s work with severely handicapped children under the most horrendous circumstances in war torn Beirut and siege conditions in Gaza, demonstrates courage. She uses the phrase ‘doing what we can with what we have’ (Calder 2007, p. 312) which not only describes the lack of resources but also the incredible obstacles put in her way by bureaucracies and governments.

It is in Beirut where Calder first meets Hamoundi, Dalal and Badr, three children with whom she forms a strong bond and who are still with her today. Hamoudi, suffering from severe cerebral palsy, needing total care, Dalal blind and Badr who has an intellectual and physical disability. Calder takes them with her to Cairo working for PRCS in Al Shams, a poor suburb in the city and later to Khan Younis in the southern area of the Gaza strip where Calder helps establish the Medina Al Amal (Hope City) Centre of Ability Development.

The functioning of the centre is hampered daily by the hostile treatment the Palestinian people have to contend with from the Israelis. This often includes violence – shootings, bombings, destruction of homes, assassinations as well as constant insidious spying from the zanana, spy drones which fly over Gaza.

The reader learns of the difficulties of being a Palestinian person living under such stressful, and often dangerous, circumstances but Calder is non-judgmental, simply stating the facts without anger. She writes of difficulties she has had to cope with over the years, frustrations, lack of resources but always with a positive view that a way
will be found to overcome any situation. Calder’s writing calls to mind Jill Ker Conway who discusses how from the late nineteenth century although professional women examined the meaning of their lives and were able to comment on their society ‘they did not create or control great fortunes, so their power was discreetly veiled in good works’. Conway further expounds how ‘pioneer women professionals were silent about their ambitions and recounted their lives as though their successes just happened to them...’ (Conway 1998, p. 15).

Calder seems to reflect this silence. She gives us little detail about what her rehabilitation programmes exactly were and her writing appears at times carefully constructed to avoid any controversy.

This is a frustration in reading Calder’s story and there is a concurrent lack of any sense of place. She worked in Lebanon, Egypt and Gaza but descriptions of these countries are sparse and the reader is left wanting to know more about her working environment. What was Beirut like (apart from being in the midst of civil war)? Similarly, there is absence of detail on the many people she has worked with over the years. Some are given names but others, who must have been important given she praises their work, are simply referred to as ‘the men’. This gave her story at times a feeling of being a chronological listing of key events rather than encouraging total reader involvement.

Calder’s work has touched the lives of so many. There is no question that she has provided hope to people who otherwise would have been forgotten. Without her the lives Hamoundi, Dalal and Badr, now young adults, as well as many other children, would have been very different. She also reminds us all of the senseless violence in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict and that there will be no end to the violence unless the Palestinian people are recognised and allowed to live in safety with respect.

Calder may have strengthened the work through a memoir of a segment of her life, providing the reader a more in-depth and emotive understanding of her work. As this book stands it provides a background read for someone interested in the Middle East and the plight of the Palestinian people.

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Conway, J.K 1998, When Memory Speaks, Random House, USA.

My Uncle’s Face

The coast road is a long straight line in warm Autumn light on the way home from a Sunday afternoon drive to Pottsville. In the cockpit backseat of my Uncle’s brand new Holden the crackle of cellophane stripping fizz of sulphur as a match is struck and my Grandma begins to drag and pop her way through the first in a packet of Craven A. I Want to Hold Your Hand is on the radio my feet can’t reach the floor it’s 1963, I’m seven years old and everything is new-The Beatles, the new-car smell of vinyl; pretty shoes already too small. The windows are all rolled up, to save Aunty Betty’s hairdo; the bottom of the window too high for my eyes. I wobble, I squirm, the cabin thick with smoke...The motion... pothole clunk and roll...I can’t speak up My stomach speaks for me. Blue eyes in the rearview mirror Oh, his face My poor Uncle’s face.

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