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 impulse 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).

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 toward 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 politick 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 honed 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 as 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.

Pawlides, P. 2009 'Back to the Future in Dead Europe' Social Alternatives 28:3.

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

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