Editorial

Introduction—Special Issue "Dystopian Scenarios in Contemporary Australian Narrative"

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The main aim of this Special Issue is to expose how a variety of contemporary Australian dystopias delve into a number of worrying global issues, thus making it clear that our contemporary world is already corroborating and bearing witness to a number of futuristic nightmares. In order to do so, a brief introduction to the concepts of utopia and dystopia will first be given, to then focus on the importance of this ever-present tradition in Australian literature, as the papers included in this volume attempt to show. According to most critics, although one of the first utopian models can be found in Plato's *Republic*, the word *utopia* was actually coined in 1516 by Thomas More when he used it as the title for the book that laid the foundation stone for this genre. As Fátima Vieira affirms, it was More who managed to set up a "tension between the affirmation of a possibility and the negation of its fulfillment" (Vieira 2010, p. 6). In other words, utopia offers an impossible ideal world but is an excellent vehicle to criticize the writer's society. This being said, it is undeniable that the concept itself is much older, as utopian traces can be found in many ancient writings, myths, and fairy tales, which ratifies humanity's unwavering longing for a better place and a better life (Sargent 2010). The term *utopia* comes from ancient Greek, in particular from the conflation of *ou*—negative affix—and *topos*—"place"—so it literally means "a place that does not exist". With the passing of time, however, the term came to be understood as both a "no place"—*outopia*—and a "good place"—*eutopia* (Abensour 2008, p. 406). Furthermore, it could both refer to a good place and its opposite, namely, a negative utopia or *dystopia*—an alternative non-existent/non-desired reality—another long-lasting trope in literature, as humans have from the very start been dominated by fears, whether real or imagined. On the other hand, somebody's utopia can often mean and become somebody else's dystopia, which makes these two terms structurally inseparable (Claeys 2013, p. 20). Actually, it is utopia's inevitable ambiguity that has become one of its main strengths (Vieira 2010).

As Gregory Claeys explains, utopian speculation reached its climax in the sixteenth century and became very popular in the following three centuries, to be replaced in the late nineteenth century by ever-increasing pessimistic predictions on the human condition (Claeys 2013, pp. 20–21).[1] The nightmarish future scenario displayed by these latter works eventually materialized in twentieth-century totalitarianism and, shortly afterwards, in worrying global issues, such as the rise of populisms, ecological disasters of all kinds, and the global refugee crisis, to mention but some. This being said, it is undeniable that what is nowadays understood as literary utopia is in clear decline, whereas literary dystopias are unquestioningly taking the upper hand (see, among others, Walsh 1962; Jacoby 1999; Bauman 2002; Mazlish 2003; Castillo 2004). To quote Krishan Kumar's words, contemporary writers "no longer turn to the utopian form or genre for imagining a better or more perfect future [. . .]. The 'imagination of disaster' fares infinitely better, and this at least means that utopia's [. . .] alter ego, the dystopia, continues to flourish" (Kumar 2010, p. 555).

In clear contrast with utopias, which depict models of society based upon equality, friendship, and mutual trust, dystopias alienate individuals from one another by disman-

tling the social fabric and prompting a number of disintegrating processes. As Julia Gerhard argues, in dystopias, "the concept of individuality is vanishing—personal life merges with the social, human body and mind are appropriated according to the communal needs of the state" (Gerhard 2012, p. 101) and "not only the state and its police apparatus fulfill the role of 'disciplinary mechanisms,' regimenting the human body and permeating all layers of society, but ordinary people as well" (Gerhard 2012, p. 56). Despite all these common features, critics have classified dystopias into several kinds and have consequently given them different labels. As Seeger and Davison-Vecchione (2019) explain, prestigious critics, such as Kumar (1987) and Jameson (2005), to mention but two, have often used the term dystopia as equivalent to antiutopia (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2019, pp. 52–55). Kumar, who prefers the term antiutopia to dystopia, defines it as "a reaction largely to the socialist utopia of the nineteenth century and certain socialist practices in the twentieth century" (Kumar 1987, p. viii), in other words, a model of society in which the results of the attempt to carry out a utopian project have proved to be disastrous in some relevant respects. This does not mean, however, that the main aim of all dystopias has been to warn about the dangers of the authoritarian attitudes that many utopian schemes hide. To quote Jameson by way of example, some dystopias can, in turn, be the denunciation of "a conviction about human nature itself, whose corruption and lust for power are inevitable, and not to be remedied by new social measures or programs" (Jameson 2005, p. 198). In this respect, Tom Moylan's theories deserve special mention. For this influential critic, the genre of dystopia is an open form that conflates and lies in between the impulses of utopia and antiutopia: "Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination" (Moylan 2000, p. xi). In tune with Menippean satire, dystopia, according to Moylan, tackles "the causes and effects of social and ecological evil as systemic" (Moylan 2000, p. xii). He goes on to distinguish between dystopias and antiutopias: Whereas he describes antiutopias as closed worlds that bring to light the negative inclinations of humanity and often end up in despair, dystopia, on the other hand, looks for alternatives and solutions, no matter how feeble these may be. Furthermore, he introduces the concept of *critical dystopia*—also called *flawed utopia* by Sargent (2003)—to point to the implicitly utopic or redemptive aspects of a dystopian text. In conclusion, for Moylan critical dystopias preserve a utopian perspective that somehow strives to make up for the worst dystopian scenarios (Moylan 2000, p. 190). It is true that many other classifications have been suggested (see, among others, Atwood 2011; Claeys 2017; Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2019). Yet, it is also clear that some of them have things in common, to the point that they may even overlap, and that coining many other categories could also be possible in the near future. Broadly speaking, the most useful and all-embracing labels, and thus the ones most used by critics, are antiutopia and critical dystopia, as they can easily comprise all different types. Last but not least, the different perspective that utopias and dystopias on the whole offer should also be taken into consideration (Claeys 2013; Czigányik 2015; Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2019). In general terms, utopias are mainly concerned with social and political structures rather than individual agency, while dystopias tend to focus on the helplessness of individuals against external forces (Czigányik 2015, pp. 20–21). In addition to this, utopias stick to a generic convention by virtue of which they offer the perspective of a visitor or outsider and seldom articulate a highly organized plot narrative with thoroughly developed characters. Some examples of this are More's Utopia (1516), Edward Bellamy's *Looking* Backward (1888), and William Morris's *News from* Nowhere (1890). On the other hand, dystopia is often described from "the point of view of someone living under the regime in question and whose subjectivity has been shaped by that form of life" (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2019, p. 57). George Orwell's *Nineteen* Eighty-Four (1949), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's* Tale (1985), and Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of* Joan (2017), among other titles, might well corroborate this

claim. This no doubt explains why most dystopias manage to have a rather more powerful effect on readers, and why this genre has become so popular in recent years. As a matter of fact, not even during the Cold War were books about the apocalypse and its aftermath so popular. This is what has led critics like Weaver (2011) to conclude that we are living in a post-apocalyptic Golden Age. As is well known, dystopian and post-apocalyptic books first became very popular during the 1950s, when communism and nuclear war became many people's main concerns; around 1980, when it was mainly plague and danger from space that aroused fear; and from 2001, the year of the terrorist attacks of 11 September against the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York, until the present moment, still suffering from the consequences of the 'Global War on Terrorism' ensuing in the wake of this traumatic event and, more recently, the lethal effects of pandemics like that caused by Covid-19. The main reason why this third phase has been labeled as 'Golden Age' is that people now are worried about almost everything: War, viruses, fundamentalisms of all kinds, ecological global disasters, genetically modified humans, computers that can no longer be kept under control, and global warming, to mention but some of the most important. Dystopias and apocalypse books have consequently become particularly popular all over the world, and have managed to appeal to a wide range of readers, including youngsters—the *Divergent* trilogy (Veronica Roth 2011–13) and *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy 2006), are but two well-known examples.

In this respect, Australian fiction is a very special case in point. The apocalypse has always been a recurrent trope in human culture, and, as Weaver goes on to affirm (Weaver 2011, pp. 1–8), Australia, in particular, has often been chosen as the site for stories about the end of the world in science fiction and speculative works. These narratives range from precolonial apocalyptic maps (*terra australis incognita*: Australia as both *utopia*— as described by European idealistic visions of colonial potential—and *dystopia*—as the outcome of the harsh realities of the outback, which prompted fears of invasion from without and indigenous rebellion from within), to well-known literary works from the last decades. It was mainly after the Second World War, though, that ever-increasing industrial and ecological damage, in addition to ethnic tensions and anxieties, became cardinal themes in Australian dystopian and post-apocalyptic fictions. The list of titles dealing with these topics is quite long: Neville Shute's *On the* Beach (1957), George Turner's science-fiction eco-catastrophe series, inaugurated in 1978 with the publication of *Beloved Son*, Lee Harding's *Waiting for the End of the* World (1983), Penny Hall's *The* Paperchaser (1987), Sam Watson's *The Kadaicha* Sung (1990), Caroline MacDonald's *The Eye* Witness (1991), John Marsden's *Tomorrow, When the War Began* and its sequels (1993/1994/1999), Tess Williams's *Map of* Power (1996), Simon Brown's Winter (1997), Sean McMullen's The Great Winter Trilogy (1999/2000/2001), Ian Irvine's The Human Rights Trilogy (2000/2003/2004), Andrew Sullivan's *A Sunburnt* Country (2003), and Andrew McGahan's Underground (2006) and *Wonders of a Godless* World (2009). Distance had proved totally unable to protect Australia from the focal points of political, religious, and military conflict, and the inhospitable Australian landscape, mainly as portrayed by George Miller's seminal Mad Max film trilogy, also contributed to making it clear that delayed action in response to nuclear, industrial, and ecological catastrophes could only lead to outright destruction. Victor Kelleher's *Taronga* (1986) and *Red* Heart (2001), Kerry Greenwood's *The Broken* Wheel (1996), Gabrielle Lord's Salt (1999), and Merlinda Bobis's *Locust Girl: A* Lovesong (2015), winner of the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in 2016, are other acclaimed Australian novels tackling similar matters.

Finally, there is one more issue worth mentioning in relation to critical dystopias, namely, the prevalence of the feminist approach and the fact that the most rebellious character often happens to be a woman. Broadly speaking, these feminist critical dystopias strive to reject the antiutopian subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel by offering some hope and subversive force in an otherwise pessimistic scenario. As Baccolini argues, these texts "open a space of contestation and opposition for those groups (women and other 'eccentric' subjects whose subject position hegemonic discourse does not contemplate) for

whom subjectivity has yet to be attained" ([Baccolini 2000](), p. 18). Giving voice and agency to the dispossessed, they explore ways to undermine the dominant system and advocate a new model of society that enhances human self-determination and ecological sustainability rather than the lethal favoring of sheer competition and profit growth for the benefit of a tiny minority. These novels incorporate, to quote Ildney Cavalcanti's words,

> The negative critique of, and opposition to, patriarchy brought into effect by the dystopian principle; the textual self-awareness not only in generic terms with regard to a previous utopian literary tradition (in its feminist and non-feminist manifestations), but also concerning its own construction of utopian 'elsewheres', and the fact that the feminist dystopias are in themselves highly critical cultural forms of expression (for the two reasons pointed out above), which, in turn, may have a crucial effect in the formation or consolidation of a specifically critico-feminist public readership. ([Cavalcanti 1999](), pp. 207–8)

Feminist critical dystopias strive to bring to the fore the transformative power, not only of language and textuality but also of memory and history. They emphasize their potential as cultural artifacts while also pondering on the limits and possibilities of the dystopian genre itself. The papers in this Special Issue attest to the importance of this feminist dystopian branch. Iva Polak's article "Native Apocalypse in Claire G. Coleman's *The Old Lie*" examines Coleman's 2019 novel as an example of Indigenous futurism, whereby the dystopian events and landscapes the novel imagines to take place in the outer space in the future are but the re-enactment and ultimate consequence of the abuses that Australian Indigenous peoples have continuously suffered since British colonizers deprived them of their land. Polak looks at Coleman's use of the key ingredients of the space opera genre as her main tool to uncover the injustices that have been perpetrated in Australia ever since the British colonizers' proclamation of their first old lie, that of *terra nullius*, and which have for so long remained unknown to the general public: Namely, the unfair treatment of Indigenous war veterans, the Stolen Generations, the country's callous contemporary refugee policies, and British nuclear tests in Australia done on Indigenous land after the Second World War. Coleman's denunciation of such injustices through the use of this science fiction genre, Polak argues, constitutes her main strategy to raise awareness of the dystopian postcolonizing present and future which await, not only Australia, but also humanity worldwide.

In tune with Polak's article, Jessica Aliaga-Levrijsen's "Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Nursing in Feminist Dystopia: Marianne de Pierre's *Transformation* Space (2010)" attests to the dissenting power of the new space opera genre. Her article reads de Pierre's inclusion of the topics of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing as a feminist and postcolonial critique against the white-dominating patriarchal ideology that has traditionally dominated this Science Fiction subgenre. Relying on Adrienne Rich's distinction between the concepts of 'motherhood'—understood as a patriarchal institution—and 'mothering'—regarded as female-defined and centered, the article examines the instances of female empowering and bonding that De Pierre's novel describes between Mira (the protagonist mother), Leanne (the midwife who attends to her childbirth) and Insignia (the spaceship where she gives birth to her baby Nova), to finally conclude by focusing on the positive meaning that de Pierre's novel attaches to Mira's hybrid gender-neutral child. For Aliaga-Levrijsen, this ending contributes to sowing a grain of hope in the overall apocalyptic/dystopic scenario presented in this novel and critical dystopian novels by and large.

Unlike the two aforementioned space opera novels, Bárbara Arizti's article focuses on one whose dystopian scenery does not occur in the future, but rather in a sheep-shearing station located in the present-day Australian outback where nine young girls have been confined. In particular, this article discusses Charlotte Wood's 2015 dystopian novel *The Natural Way of Things* as an example of Rodríguez Magda's definition of "narratives of the limit, of resistance" ([Rodríguez Magda 2019](), p. 28), i.e., narratives which bring to the surface, not only the deep-rooted misogynist nature of patriarchy but also women's potential to challenge this ideology through their questioning of the nature/culture di-

chotomy. For this purpose, Arizti relates the relationship that Yolanda and Verla—the two women protagonists of Wood's novel—keep to the ecosystem of the prison in their joint attempt to survive and escape from it, and to Rosi Braidotti's and Jeremy Rifkin's differing views of the primacy of zoe/nature over bios/the human in the nature/culture continuum. In contrast to Braidotti's zoe-centred ethics, the dystopian ending of Wood's novel highlights the importance of human relationality and invites to see the animal force as an inherent part of human beings that, rather than distancing them from their culture, contributes to strengthening their meaningful bonds with the ecosystem, their family, and their community.

The fourth article in this Special Issue, written by Alejandra Moreno-Álvarez, analyses Michelle de Krester's dystopic novella *Springtime. A Ghost* Story (2014) by looking at the text's treatment of the topics of home, belonging, and love within contemporary dystopian scenarios. It offers a deep analysis of the Australian novel's subversion of the main narrative and stylistic conventions of the classical ghost story as its main strategy to dismantle the western binary thinking upon which dystopias tend to be created. Inspired by Braidotti's understanding of the notion of the posthuman, the article studies the examples of trans-spatial, trans-temporal, and trans-species alliance included in the novella as an effective disruption of the I-native/Other-non-native, inclusion/exclusion dichotomies.

Maarten Renes's article "c Wright's *The Swan Book*: Tracing a 'Swansongline' Into and Beyond Indigenous-Australian Dystopia" (2013) focuses on Indigenous writer Wright's dystopic epic novel. Set in 2100, this text depicts the bleak dystopian scenario resulting from the assimilative measures imposed by the Australian government on Indigenous people and, more specifically, the enforcement of the so-called Emergency Response in the Northern Territory and its concomitant capitalist exploitation of the land. *The Swan Book*, Renes argues, can be regarded as the literary equivalent of the songline, whereby Wright appeals to Dreamtime knowledge in an attempt to establish a Native title of the mind and warn both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers against the impending catastrophic consequences of disempowering and annihilating Indigenous culture. Rennes analyses *The Swan Book* as a retelling of her two previous novels *Plains of* Promise (1997) and Carpentaria (2006), all of which become part of the same never-ending Swansongline. In order to do that, he delves into the cross-referential similarities and differences between the Indigenous female protagonists and plots of *The Swan Book* and Wright's two previous novels and, last but not least, the symbolic meaning of the trope of black swans.

To sum up, although it is true that the idyllic future pledged by utopias has proved to be unattainable, and that the world we are living in is much closer to dystopia than utopia, with the resulting calamitous consequences that this may have for social coexistence, these Australian feminist critical dystopias strive to demonstrate that things can be different and that we, humans, are responsible for bringing real change. This is undoubtedly in line with the critical utopianism put forward by Bauman (2000, 2002), see also (Bauman and Tester 2001), for whom the advent of liquid modernity has done away with the all too optimistic illusions and ambitions of the previous era that he, by contrast, refers to as solid modernity. According to Bauman, contemporary liquid society can no longer dream of controlling the present or improving the future, but this does not prevent it from formulating hyper-individualized, short-term utopias, as humankind is still in dire need of a utopian impulse. Utopia allows for critique and change but is never final. It impels us to keep on moving in the right direction but promises no specific destination. It is both categorically inescapable and precariously unpredictable. To quote Michael Hviid Jacobsen's words by way of conclusion, "in times of uncertainty, as the present, utopia may be the first casualty, but it may also be our last hope" (Jacobsen 2006, p. 339).

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Note

1   Although literary dystopia is not completely new—it has its roots in Menippean satire (see Kaplan 1999, p. 200)—the novels that are regarded by most critics as laying the foundations of dystopian fiction are E. M. Forster's *The Machine* Stops (1909), Yevgeny Zamyatin's We (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New* World (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949).

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