

Past, Present and Future Worlds

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Recently I was in conversation with the social researcher, Hilary Cottam whose work involves running large scale experiments with communities in order to work out how we can live in better, more cohesive and caring communities. She wanted to know where the utopian fiction was that envisioned what a better quality of life might look like in the future world. She was trying to look to fiction for some advice, for a little creative inspiration, she said. I couldn't think of any novels set in utopian futures other than a book I had read at school, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and all I remember about that was that everyone in that novel liked the same things, had the same things, seemed to speak in a really similar way. Conversely, I could think of dozens of novels about dystopian futures I'd read: All works whose primary function is really to look at contemporary anxieties about how our past and present lives might affect our futures.

Sometimes utopias and dystopias aren't really that far apart. A dystopian novel like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* is actually really similar to a utopian novel like Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. In both stories everything is perfect and complete and everything is taken care of but there is little creativity, imagination or personal liberty: The stuff of life really. It's probably why there are so many more dystopian novels than utopian ones, who wants to read a book about people standing around being nice and polite, when you can read something where the world collapses in on itself and there are always some kind of badies to be overcome. Think of Mad Max. It's just so much fun.

When I did my PhD I read a lot of books that explored dystopian Australian future worlds. I read novels like *White or Yellow*, arguably the first Australian book ever published, it's an alarmist didactic work of fiction in which White Australians are enslaved by Asians after contemporary governments were not cautious enough about the number of migrant workers they were allowing into the country. I read other much more contemporary texts like John Marsden's *Tomorrow* series, a collection of novels aimed at young adults in which, an unidentified nation to our north has invaded, banned local cultural practices and languages and decimated the population.

But I've never really been that interested in those science fiction or fantasy genres that gave birth to the dystopian novel. I'm actually much more interested in the social realist novel but I'm also very interested in researching and writing about nationalism, anxiety, place and its roots in our fears of immigration and if you are interested in those topics, particularly in Australia, you can't really get away from novels about dystopian future worlds in which, depending on the time period, Australia is invaded by an Asian, a middle eastern country or, in more contemporary work, by displaced people from all around the globe. There are more than 200 works of Australian fiction that fall into this category of 'Invasion Fiction' according to the researcher Catriona Ross – a sizeable amount for a country with a relatively short and small publishing history.

Australia is a large underpopulated island ripe for the taking according to the popular imagery of yesterday, tomorrow, today, probably that of many decades into the future. As the social theorist Anthony Burke points out in his book, *In Fear of Security*, our anxiety about our ownership and sovereignty over our space, since colonial times, is not merely an economic or political problem but the anchor and contested site of Australian identity. He argues that to worry about security is to be

Australian. 'Imagined in such terms, security is a practice of exclusion: a practice of identity and being through exclusion. It's a way of claiming an indigenous status for the non-indigenous Australian, as people whose country is being invaded, rather than as people who were the original invaders.

Here's the thing though, even though most of the texts I read fall into the sci-fi/fantasy genre they are also presented as believable and realistic. They feel like social realist texts. One of the things I realised in reading these books is how close those genres could be, particularly when we are talking about fears that are deeply rooted in our national psyche. I'd always considered my own work to be part of the social realist genre but a lot of it probably never really was. All of my books have had ghosts from the past, present and future walk into the contemporary world, all of my work has involved characters slipping off, even if only momentarily into fantasy worlds.

The thing is that future worlds, really only ever begin in the past. At the very least the future begins now in our present imagination. Our current emphasis on border control may not stem from a literal fear that Australia will be invaded and captured by one specific country (like the Japanese threat in World War II) but it does show that many Australians feel that migration is a threat to their ownership over their space and their Anglo-Australian core identity. Migration indicates to us the necessity and the challenge of rethinking the language of home, self and nation; it opens up spaces at the margins in which 'being Australian' can be imagined differently. The positioning of Australia as a country under threat of invasion simplifies a lot of these complex issues.

I've been thinking a lot lately of literature's capacity to point to and demand a more complex analysis of issues like this. Part of literature's capacity to speak to the world of the future is by taking us back to the past. I think, for a writer like me, it would be very difficult to talk about our anxieties for the world of the future without talking about the world of the past that has shaped the one we live in now. The past is a complex layered thing that sits always beside our present imagining of ourselves, always shifting and changing according to the desires and conflicts of our present culture. Like William Faulkner famously said, 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'

Here's a way of putting all those ideas in real and concrete form: A few streets from where I live is the mouth of the Parramatta River. It's the place where early colonial settlers could take their boats no further as they attempted to find an inland into the interior of NSW. It's also the place where the Indigenous Warrior Pemulwuy led a legendary battle against all those early white invaders, it's not so far from Villawood Detention Centre a place where so many refugees and displaced persons have been held indefinitely after arriving by boat. Generations of new arrivals from the British to the Italians, to the Lebanese to the Indians have made this place their home. Now it's 'Australia's Next Great City' according to the local council's promotional material. Here in this one place that forms the backdrop for my last novel, *No More Boats*, we have the past, present and the future always in dialogue about what exactly migration means to this country, how we can and can't live with each other and how we want to imagine our future selves.

No More Boats is often spoken about in terms of what it says about the present: Some reviewers say it's about the refugee crisis, our anxieties about mass migration, globalization. It is and it isn't. My favourite quote from one of the reviews of that novel is: 'If we need new ways of speaking

novels like this can only help.' I like that idea that fiction can help us find new ways of speaking, and inevitably that makes me also wonder if the form of the novel can help us find new ways of listening. As the writer of many dystopia's, Ursula Le Guin argues, 'listening is not a reaction, it is a connection. Listening to a conversation or a story, we don't so much respond as join in — become part of the action.' I think, ultimately, this is why fiction is a much better space for exploring the major political and social issues of our time, not just because, as is often argued, that fiction humanises debates but because it forces the reader into a conversation. Ideally, in my mind, fiction that attempts to deal with the defining issues of our time should be fiction that, rather than screaming its politics at the reader, allows the reader to sit with many different ideas and images they have to sift through themselves. As Rebecca Solnit and Teju Cole have argued it is the writers job to ply the darkness, to sit with ambiguity and the vital discomfort of uncertainty: To admit they have no real answers only many questions. It's from this place that the writer, they argue can involve the reader in a kind of endless conversation.

We live in a culture of sound bites, of speaking and screaming rather than listening. We get so used to hearing things that they have no meaning because we have seen it all before, heard it all before. So that when the T.V tells us again that we are being flooded, inundated, drowned in tsunamis of human beings just waiting off our shorelines for the moment when we let our guard down and they can invade, we can't really recognise it as a future dystopia we have imagined out of our present anxieties.

Perhaps then the job of the writer is to show the reader how to listen to the world by asking them to sit in small moments of time in the present and to consider what is there. The kind of writing I do is often labelled 'quiet writing' and certainly there is a restrained quality to it but that doesn't also make it deeply political: I write about the streets nearby where there are McMansions and old fibro shacks and multimillion dollar apartments and housing commission sitting side by side. I write characters from migrant backgrounds who are frightened of migrants themselves. I write about kids breakdancing in the parking lots of McDonald's at night. That's where a really complex conversation about who we are and who we will become has to stand: In those 'ordinary and everyday spaces.' That's as utopian as we can ever aim for in our future worlds: a space of listening and speaking, of conversations that are too complex to every end.

《过去，现在与未来》

菲利瑟提 卡斯塔格娜

我最近跟社会问题研究员希拉里·科顿姆见了一次面。她和一些社区正在进行一场颇具规模的试验，看如何把社区建设得更团结更具爱心。她问我乌托邦小说是如何展望未来世界生活质量的。她说她是想从中找到些答案，至少得到点儿灵感。可是除了上学时看过的爱德华·贝拉米写的“回顾以往”以外，我不记得有哪本小说是展望乌托邦未来的。在“回顾以往”里，人人喜好相同的事物，使用同样的东西，连话都说得相似。而反乌托邦小说我倒是读了不少。这些小说注重当前，探索眼前的人是如何看待过去和现在以及对未来产生的影响。

有时乌托邦文学与反乌托邦文学未必就那么背道而驰。比如伦纳德·赫胥黎的《美丽新世界》就跟贝拉米的《回顾》差不多。他们俩描绘的社会都具备完美无缺滴水不漏的特点，而同时人的创造性与个体自由却缺失了；丧失了生活的气息。这大概就是反乌托邦小说多于乌托邦小说的原因吧。与其看几个“高，大，全”式的人物在小说里晃来晃去，还不如看世界大乱，征服一个个坏蛋来得痛快。想想电影《疯狂的麦克斯》，那多好玩儿呀。

我读博士学位的时候，看了很多探索澳大利亚反乌托邦未来世界的小说，比如《白色还是黄色》。这本小说据说是澳大利亚发表的第一本具有警示意义的小说，警告澳大利亚的白人，不警惕的话就会被亚洲人奴役。小说认为现在的政府忽略了他们允许入境的移民人数。我还看过一些更近的读物，像约翰·马斯顿的《明天》系列。“明天”系列登载的都是面对年轻读者的小说，暗示北方来的某国已经侵入，罢免当地的文化习俗与语言，并且实施种族灭绝。

反乌托邦是科幻小说的发明，对此类小说我不是那么感兴趣。实际上，我更感兴趣的是现实主义小说。我的写作关注民族主义情绪以及人们对外来移民的担心与忧虑。如果你对这类题材感兴趣，你就免不了要浏览那些反乌托邦类型的小说。此类小说按照时代的变迁描述外来人的入侵，先有亚洲人入侵，又有中东人入侵，或者按最新说法，世界各地来的散户入侵。据研究员喀特罗纳·罗斯讲，澳大利亚有两百多本属于这类所谓“入侵题材”的小说---这个数字对于一个出版规模不大历史不长的国家来讲是比较大的。

澳大利亚是一个人口稀少的大岛屿，她给人们的印象是不管什么时候，昨天，今天以及未来，都随时准备好了被瓜分。社会学者安东尼·伯克在他写的《危机感》一书中指出，我们从殖民时代开始就一直担忧对这片土地的所有权甚至自主权。而这样的担忧不仅仅出于经济或政治的原因，更多的是对自己澳大利亚人身份认同感的焦虑与不安。伯克认为澳大利亚人的危机感是本源的，因为澳大利亚人一直是由非原住民的身份号称原住民的身份，以曾经入侵者的身份声称被外人入侵。

应该承认的是，多数科幻类型的小说还是现实可信的。这些小说读起来没感觉脱离现实。我的印象是这些小说很贴切现实生活，尤其对我们根深蒂固的那种危机感没有回避。我曾经坚信自己的作品属于现实主义类型，但实际未必。我小说里的幽灵都是从过去，现在和未来走进当下的。所有的人物都或多或少地陷入幻想世界。

问题是，所谓未来世界其实也起源于过去，至少起源于当前人们的想象。也许我们目前对边界的捍卫不是因为害怕澳大利亚被侵略，被某个国家掌控（比如二次大战时日本的入侵），而是因为很多澳大利亚人害怕外来移民的到来会威胁他们的土地所有权以及他们央格鲁-澳大

利亚人的民族性。对我们来讲，移民意味着我们将被迫重新认知自我，家庭，以及国家。而且不得不从另一个角度认识自己澳大利亚人的身份。然而把澳大利亚定位为被入侵的国家显然是把问题简单化了。

我近来一直在思考文学如何指向以及更深入地探讨这些问题。文学一部分的功能是引导人们走回过去从而对话未来。作为一个作家，我知道不回往铸造了我们今天的过去，就很难理解我们对未来的焦虑。我们的过去如此错综复杂，无时无刻不在影响着我们的自我认知，也会因为当下文化环境造成的欲望与冲突而改变。正像威廉-福克纳所说，“过去仍存，无提过往。”

现在我来把所有这些观念说得具体一些：我家离帕拉玛塔河就隔着几条街。当初英国殖民者就是把船停在这个地方想找一个能进新南威尔士州的小岛。也就是在这个地方，土著人首领彭姆维曾经带领他的部落跟入侵的白人打了一场传奇般的大战。如今又是在这个地方附近的维拉沃德建有一座拘留所，无限期扣押着无数乘船而来的难民和散户。而同时，世世代代的英国后裔，意大利后裔，黎巴嫩以及印度人的后裔都已经在此落户为家。据当地市政厅的宣传，此地将成为澳大利亚下一个伟大的城市。我的小说《不要难民船》就以此地为背景开始叙述：外来的船不要再来了，我们用我们自己的过去，现在与未来注解着这个国家的移民政策，我们来决定能否与外来人共处，我们自己估价自己在未来世界的位置。

我的小说《不要难民船》讲的是现在的故事，所以被大家理解为是大量难民危机以及全球化给我们造成了普遍的焦虑感。这么理解对也不对。我最喜欢这么一段书评：“如果我们需要新的叙述方式，这本小说告诉了我们了。”我很赞成说小说能帮助我们找到一种新的叙述方式。我也好奇小说是否也能帮助我们找到新的倾听方式。正像反乌托邦文学作家额尔苏拉-勒-坤说的，“倾听不只是反应，更是主动连接。听一段对话或者一个故事，我们不是响应而是介入---参加到行动当中去。”所以说小说为我们探讨当下社会政治问题提供了更好的空间。不只是像人们说的那样小说把问题人格化了，更多的还是因为小说迫使读者参加对话。我心目中比较理想的小说如果想讨论当下的社会问题，与其直接向读者喊话，不如让读者领略形形色色的思想与人格，耐心地等待小说中的人物自己实现人生蜕化。丽贝卡-索尔尼特和泰鞠-科尔都说过，作家的工作就是凝视黑暗，与疑虑和忐忑同在。作家要承认他们能给与的不是明确的答案而是接踵而至的问题。恰恰是在这个位置上作家把读者带入无尽的对话当中。

我们的文化是快言快语，自说自话的文化，最缺乏的就是用心倾听。我们能听到的不过是一些毫无意义的老生常谈。当电视上又告诉我们说，一放松警惕就有人侵犯我们，我们会被等待上岸的人群包围淹没，我们有谁能识别这不过是由人们当下的焦虑感而想象出来的危机呢？

也许作家的任务就是提示读者如何倾听世界，使读者静下心来关注眼前的事物。我写的小说常被挂上“静心写作”的标签。自律因素当然有，但这并不意味着政治僵化：我写的场景就是附近的街道，那里既有挺拔的豪宅，也有破旧的陋屋；既有价值数百万的公寓，也有政府给穷人盖的福利房。我写的人物有害怕新移民的移民后代，也有晚上在麦当劳停车场上跳霹雳舞的孩子。百感交集的对话从他们而起，在平凡的场合讨论着各自的现在与未来。那才是我们追求的未来乌托邦：有倾听有叙述，没有任何一个对话者可以一锤定音他们繁杂的思绪。