

A Feminist Reading of Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things*
as Critical Dystopia

Asha Ryan

Bachelor of Arts in English and Creative Writing

Statement of Presentation

This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for the Honours degree of Bachelor of Arts in English and Creative Writing at Murdoch University.

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution, including Murdoch.

Signed:

Full name: Asha Mary Ryan

Student Number: 31248636

Date: 1 June 2018

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Author: Asha Mary Ryan

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Abstract

This thesis offers a close reading of Charlotte Wood's 2015 novel, *The Natural Way of Things* (*NWOT*) as a critical dystopian fiction, which modifies familiar dystopian convention through the spatial, rather than temporal, displacement of its subjects. This departure from the dystopian narrative's characteristic setting in the near or distant future intensifies the potent horror of the narrative by encouraging readers to consider that the suffering endured by the young female characters in the narrative is, to varying degrees, happening right now, every day, in contemporary Australia. Furthermore, the act of the women's containment within a prison setting invites a feminist critique of the myriad ways in which women in contemporary Australia are silenced, subordinated by and even sometimes complicit in the perpetuation of a social order that delimits what a woman is or should be, and what a woman does or shouldn't do. This will be demonstrated through a close reading of the novel that focuses on two key elements. The first is Wood's use of a distinctly Australian, pejorative rhetoric, the everyday familiarity of which accentuates the contemporaneity of the novel while simultaneously acting as a device for enforcing a male-based dystopic order. The second key element is central character Yolanda Kovacs' intense alienation from her body; throughout *NWOT*, Yolanda confronts the chronic, life-long objectification of her body and in so doing, offers a critique of the bodily objectification of women in contemporary Australia. Her eventual retreat into an animal-like state is an act of radical resistance. The implications of this retreat for the intertextual present, however, involve a damning critique of a social order in which the only way women can conceptualise an autonomous subjective existence is through escape, isolation and the abandonment of a human existence altogether.

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Introduction

Since its release in 2015, Charlotte Wood's Stella Prize-winning novel *The Natural Way of Things* (hereafter referred to as *NWOT*), has been lauded by many critics and readers as a feminist dystopian text of horrific proportions. Astutely described as a cross between William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaids Tale* (1985) in an unmistakably Australian setting (Osborn 2016, n.p.), the novel tells of ten 'girls' (this is indeed how they identify themselves and each other) who awake from a drugged sleep to find they have been imprisoned in a repurposed, but drastically under-resourced sheep station in the middle of the Australian outback. As punishment for speaking publicly about their involvement in scandals with powerful men, the young women are detained by what seems to be a private corporate detention services provider: Hardings International (Hardings), which promises, if its ubiquitous slogan is to be believed: "DIGNITY & RESPECT IN A SAFE AND SECURE ENVIRONMENT" (2015, 46). The story is told from the perspective of two of the imprisoned women, Verla Learmont, the politician's mistress, and Yolanda Kovacs, "the girl who should have known better than to go into that room alone with all those footballers" (Newman 2016). Together, all ten women are kept in dirty conditions and humiliating circumstances; they endure violence and near-starvation, and are forced to undertake back-breaking manual labour in preparation for the anticipated arrival of reinforcements. Like Golding's schoolboys, they are completely isolated from the world they once knew. Unlike the schoolboys stranded on an uninhabited island, these women are hemmed inside acres of Australian bushland by a towering electric fence. The lives, people and places they once knew still exist, but are simply, and inescapably out of reach. Throughout the novel, a devastating theme of female containment develops; represented literally through the physical confinement of the women within

Hardings, rhetorically through the use of pejorative language, and symbolically through Yolanda's intense alienation from her objectified body.

This thesis explores *NWOT* as a critical dystopia that modifies familiar dystopian conventions through the spatial, rather than temporal displacement of its subjects. In a departure from the dystopian narrative's characteristic setting in the near or distant future, *NWOT*'s setting in the present accentuates the potent horror of the narrative by inviting readers to consider that the suffering endured by the women at Hardings is, to varying degrees, happening right now, every day, in contemporary Australia. Furthermore, the act of the imprisoned women's bodily concealment and containment within Hardings invites a feminist critique of the myriad ways in which women in contemporary Australia are silenced, subordinated by and even sometimes complicit in the perpetuation of a social order that delimits what a woman is or should be, and what a woman does or shouldn't do.

Because of its tendency to identify and speculate about the socio-political institutions, norms and relationships that characterise the way we live, dystopian fiction is a suitable form to engage with contemporary feminism's discontent with the perceived subordination of women within the contemporary social order. It is important to indicate here that this thesis does not propose that the dystopian novel is inherently feminist; instead, it considers *NWOT* as a work of dystopian fiction whose reading invites a feminist inflection. Carolyn Korsmeyer remarks that: "feminist perspectives in aesthetics are ... attuned to the cultural influences that exert power over subjectivity: the ways that art both reflects and perpetuates the social formation of gender, sexuality, and identity, and the extent to which all of those features are framed by factors such as race, national origin, social position, and historical situation." (2017 n.p.).

Within *NWOT*, the culturally specific subordination of women is consistently reinforced: literally, through the physical containment of the women in Hardings, thematically,

through the use of pejorative language and symbolically, in Yolanda's intense alienation from her body.

A feminist reading of *NWOT* seeks to critique our current society by using the dystopian lens to magnify and exaggerate the myriad manifestations of female containment in our present. This magnification is made more powerful, more emphatically immediate, and in many ways more terrifying because there is no evidence of temporal distance. Instead, the placement of these women within the present, but just out of public view implores readers to conclude that the types of suffering the women in the text endure are happening now, every day, here in Australia.

Narrative Overview

The narrative opens in the early morning before dawn. Yolanda lies in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar nightdress, awoken by the sound of kookaburras. Believing herself to have been delivered to an asylum, she cries as dawn breaks, frightened by the possibility that she may indeed have lost her mind. Later, Verla sits alone in a different room, in a patch of sunlight on a folding chair as Yolanda enters. Both are confused, drugged, and have no idea where they have been brought. Verla is particularly upset and struggles to understand how it could possibly be allowed that she is detained against her will. At the sounds of men's voices approaching, the two women—who up to this point have kept their distance—dart across the room to stand together. They hold hands in fear as they wait to learn more.

Eventually, it is realised that Verla, Yolanda and eight other young women have been taken, forced away from their old lives, and imprisoned in the bush for their respective roles in scandals involving powerful men. Or perhaps more accurately, for their *public revelations* of their involvement with powerful men. They are beaten viciously and verbally abused by Boncer, one of two male guards, whilst Teddy—the second guard—seems to watch the abuse

unfold with a sense of apparent bemusement. Later, readers also meet a third Hardings employee, Nancy, who is hired to work at Hardings as a nurse (although there is serious doubt over the extent of her credentials). During their time at Hardings the women are restrained; chained together or locked up in the old shearer's quarters in cell-like tin rooms that Verla describes as 'dogboxes'. They are forced to perform back-breaking labour, hauling concrete blocks to build a road, by hand, in preparation for "*when Hardings comes*" (2015, 68; italics in original)¹. They are denied access to basic sanitation and fed sparingly on packet meals and powdered milk.

The crisis point for the camp occurs approximately half-way through the novel when it is revealed that Hardings is not coming and has apparently abandoned its prisoners. The power is shut off and all are now trapped in the camp with a rapidly dwindling supply of food and resources. Escape, however, is impossible, for the powerful electric perimeter fence hums on. Any sense of the authority and control that governed the camp breaks down, and the women are kept in check solely through the threat of sexual and physical violence. It is Yolanda who saves the imprisoned women and guards from starvation by learning to trap, skin and prepare rabbits for eating. She takes on this new task with ease, and becomes increasingly more animal-like as she embraces her new role as the provider for the camp. Approximately nine months pass before the novel's end is marked by the death of Nancy through an overdose. Then, Hetty, a young female prisoner summarily referred to as 'the Cardinal's girl', becomes a sacrificial sexual martyr who, pregnant with Boncer's child, commits suicide at the electric fence. Verla, finally realising she has been forsaken by her lover, the politician, intends to commit suicide by eating a poisonous mushroom, but is saved when, at the last minute Boncer eats it (thinking it a benign species) and dies. When the power is eventually restored, this is seen by the

¹ "*when Hardings comes*" is an often-repeated phrase in the early days of the young women's imprisonment. Although never explicitly explained, it is implied that Hardings International employees will arrive, with more supplies, and to relieve the guards and Nancy of their duties.

survivors as Hardings having decided to come to the “rescue”. Nevertheless, the last remaining employee of Hardings, Teddy, a menacing trope for the self-identified ‘good guy’, is killed by his own speargun. A bus from Hardings International arrives and the women, now variously wild, strong and intimidating, are coaxed onto the bus like animals, baited with great bags of corporate-sponsored luxury items to distract them.

Yolanda and Verla are the eyes through which the dystopian world of Hardings is viewed. As such, it is their memories and experiences of the intertextual present that colour their individual interactions with and responses to the dystopian environment of Hardings. Like many of the other characters, Both Yolanda and Verla can be read as tropes of the types of sexual scandals that occur often in the contemporary social order: the politician’s mistress and the victim of sexual assault at the hands of national athletes. Verla is brought to Hardings believing that Andrew, the politician with whom she was embroiled in a scandal, will come to her aid. She combats her feelings of despair at Hardings by clinging to this conviction: remembering lines of poetry from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855), she remains confident until the near close of the novel that her imprisonment at Hardings has been a mistake. Her eventual realisation of her utter abandonment drives her to near-suicide. Towards the end of the narrative, when the Hardings bus arrives to collect the women, Verla initially boards it. But realising that it was unlikely they were heading towards a better fate (whether that be home or simply, on), she demands to be let off the bus. Finally free, Verla is aware that she might die, but seems to take a measure of comfort in the notion that at least she has played an active part in determining her future path.

The character of Yolanda appears at first to embody the time-worn trope of female corporeality. The constant objectification of and simultaneous reduction of her personhood to the sum of her outwardly desirable body is a source of narrative tension in the novel, and of turmoil for Yolanda, whose ‘crime’ leading to her imprisonment was to reveal that she was the victim of

gang-rape by several football players. As the novel progresses, Yolanda discovers a measure of agency in the abandonment of all the trappings of female bodily comportment and motility,² and subsequent retreat to an animal-like state, or as it is described in the narrative, “animal freedom” (2015, 237). When the Hardings bus arrives at the close of the novel, Yolanda is described as “almost all animal now” (2015, 284), and she retreats into the bush rather than board the vehicle. The ultimate fate that befalls Verla and Yolanda remains unclear at the close of the narrative.

Critical and Theoretical Perspectives

My introduction to this novel is certainly a timely one. As a young millennial³ woman, living in contemporary Australia and in the final stages of an undergraduate degree, this novel is perhaps the first I have read that so emphatically articulates the experience of the powerfully pervasive, compulsion to contain young women within a very narrow, restrictive definition of what is to be accepted as a woman in contemporary Australia. I have been dismayed by *NWOT*'s revelations of both the breathtakingly obvious, and largely insidious, intricate ways that women are contained and perhaps more importantly, learn to contain themselves. I have seen male friends vilify and shame women they don't know online and, despite my disgust at this type of behaviour, have continued scrolling for fear of intervening, and being vilified myself. I have listened to, and admittedly sometimes participated in, wildly speculative and no doubt hurtful discussions regarding an acquaintance's sexual behaviour, or weight loss/gain amongst girlfriends, and have, in moments of careless, unthinking frustration or anger used those exact epithets that exist to vilify, shame or undermine women: 'crazy', 'mad', 'psycho', 'sly', 'desperate'. Despite a growing social trend toward so-called 'positive' body image, in

² A phrase here borrowed from Iris Marion Young's *Throwing Like a Girl* (1980).

³ A term to which I am admittedly ambivalent toward, given its colloquial connotations. Nonetheless, it is useful in demonstrating my particular viewpoint, to hint at the socio-political forces that have shaped my experience of and reaction to world.

which women are virtually impeached to feel ‘empowered’ or strong (implying that this is indeed a choice⁴) regardless of their body size, I have similarly felt the compulsion to conceal weight gain in stomach restricting underpants, to engage in painful (and expensive) hair removal. I have scrubbed away at dead skin cells with coffee grinds in order to coat my pale skin in layers of dihydroxyacetone for a ‘a *natural* sun-kissed glow’ and have believed, or rather have convinced myself, that I was making an individual, vaguely empowering choice to do this. I have read countless articles on websites built for the sole purpose of empowering their female readers to ‘be the best you that you can be’ and felt nothing but sheer exhaustion from the pressure to add another step to my skin-care regime⁵. *NWOT* is the novel that gives me pause on all of this. It is a heartbreaking revelation and furious articulation of the apparently insurmountable, both obvious and subtle ways in which women in contemporary Australia are contained, and then made to feel as though they chose this form of disciplining themselves.

This thesis takes a feminist perspective for two reasons. Firstly, *NWOT* speaks to (and speaks back to) a contemporary social order that delimits women’s potential as individual subjects, by delimiting what women are and how they should behave. Secondly, the text’s innovative dystopian form lends itself, as many studies of utopian fiction and the larger project of utopianism suggest, to a contemporary feminist reading.⁶ Both feminism and utopianism embody a desire to reconfigure our present, to imagine ways in which our lives could be better, or more appropriately in the case of *NWOT*, to warn us of how things can become even worse.

In order to address the theoretical aspects of this thesis, the next chapter will give a brief overview of the relevant critical discourses upon which my discussion will be based. Beginning with a broad discussion of the discourse of utopianism, establishing clear definitions from

⁴ See Megan Tyler, 2015.

⁵ One is reminded of Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight* (1993) which draws on Foucault’s ideas of discipline to critique the ways in which women collude in the disciplining of their bodies.

⁶ See Lucy Sargisson’s *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (1996).

scholars such as Darko Suvin and Lyman Tower Sargent, I then move to a study of dystopian fiction. By tracing the development of dystopian fiction through to the present I simultaneously demonstrate how the gradual expansion of the scope and capabilities of dystopian conventions has made the form particularly suitable to feminist concerns and perspectives. I then discuss the feminist scholarship that is most relevant in my discussion of the containment of women in *NWOT*. I draw on the work of Ildney Cavalcanti, who writes on the subject of utopian fiction with feminist hues, in order to make my claims about the role of language in the novel. I also draw broadly from a range of feminist studies of the body as a means for analysing the bodily experiences of characters in *NWOT*. From the broad foundational base of Simone de Beauvoir, and more specifically through to Iris Marion Young's 1980 essay *Throwing Like a Girl*, I show how a tension develops for Yolanda as she comes to realise the extent of her objectified bodily existence.

Thesis Outline

Chapter One offers an overview of the literature mentioned above. Rather than providing an exhaustive review of utopian fiction or feminist criticism (which space does not allow), I seek to develop a narrative that shows how the feminist perspective is particularly well suited to readings of critical dystopian fiction.

Chapter Two discusses how a particularly Australian vernacular, or pejorative rhetoric is utilised in *NWOT* to contain, control and humiliate the young female prisoners. The naturalised and casual, yet derogatory nature of the language works simultaneously to demonstrate the contemporaneity of the fiction while emphasising its spatial location within present-day Australia. Drawing on the work of Cavalcanti, I show how the role of language in feminist dystopian fictions is often utilised as a means for enforcing the dystopic male-based order.

Chapter Three analyses Yolanda's transformation into an animal-like state. Asserting that this represents an act of radical resistance to the naturalised objectification of her body, I demonstrate how this retreat into what Yolanda describes as animal freedom is brought about through the extreme re-orientation of her body in its new surroundings. In this instance, the spatiality of the dystopian imaginary becomes particularly significant as it is through Yolanda's spatial displacement within Hardings that she finds release from her conventionally objectified bodily existence.

Chapter four concludes the thesis and aims to reflect on how the potent horror of the dystopian environment of Hardings is emphasised by its contemporary setting and secluded concealment within the Australian outback.

Chapter One: Review of Relevant Literature

Dystopian Foundations: *Utopia*, *Utopia*, *Utopianism*.

In order to demonstrate how the horror of *NWOT*'s narrative is intensified by the modification of familiar dystopian conventions, it is necessary first to discuss the theoretical foundations of utopian fictions as well as the broader cultural discourse of utopianism. In articulating these foundational theories and concepts, one is better able to firstly demonstrate how *NWOT* can be seen to modify traditional conventions; and secondly, to indicate the significance of this modification.

Dystopian fictions are traditionally critical texts—most often set in strange, futuristic spaces—which serve to identify and speculate about socio-political issues in the present. Simply put, dystopia is viewed as the dark side of utopia. Darko Suvin defines utopia as “the construction of a particular community where socio-political institutions, norms, and relationships between people are organized according to a *radically different principle* than in the author’s community” (2003, 188-89). It is important to note that the particular community of utopia can be divided into the two categories of eutopia and dystopia:

Utopia may be divided into the polar opposites of *Eutopia* defined as in [the above] but having socio-political institutions, norms and relationships among people organised according to a *radically more perfect principle* than in the author’s community; and the symmetrically opposed *Dystopia*, organised according to a *radically less perfect principle*. The radical difference in perfection is in both cases judged from the point of view and within the value system of a discontented social class...as refracted through the writer. (2003, 189; italics in original)

Here Suvin, clearly organises the concept of utopia into two distinct categories of fictional representation. At the same time however, Suvin indicates that eutopia and dystopia are not essential or stable categories: they are not defined solely by any formal textual devices or fixed, genre-specific convention. Instead, Suvin indicates that the judgement of whether something is decidedly eutopian or dystopian is dependent on the perspective of the writer (and reader⁷). This thesis will follow the organisation of terms here discussed by Suvin: ‘utopia’ will be used as a broad descriptive term that indicates the general category of fictions under which dystopia falls; Dystopia will specifically refer to the construction of a utopian community that is worse than the author’s community, and, on the rare occasion that I will specifically refer to a utopian community that is better than the author’s community, I will use the term eutopia.

Scholarly debate in the West around the concept of utopia proliferated following the early 1500s when the term was first coined by English lawyer, scholar and writer, Thomas More in the famous work of the same name. In an edition of *Utopia* from 1901, editor Henry Morley emphasises the impact of More’s work, stating that *Utopia* eventually became more than a mere title: it evolved into an adjective to describe an impracticable, wild or fantastic scheme (More 1901). More recently, Terry Eagleton (2015) appears to support Morley’s claims regarding the significance of More’s work, asserting that *Utopia* gave rise to an entirely new genre of writing that has proliferated ever since. Over five hundred years since *Utopia* was first published, the central concept has transformed into a broad and hotly debated field of academic discourse known as utopianism.

⁷ Lyman Tower Sargent’s *Three Faces* describes utopia as a historical artefact which once created, “takes on a life of its own” (1994, 6) as such, utopian fictions take on meaning beyond merely what is intended by the author. Over time, the interpretations of readers will shift and change. It follows that so too, will the judgement of the extent to which a text is decidedly eutopian or dystopian.

Utopianism is a broad multi-disciplinary term that encapsulates the thought, theory and representation of the expansive concept of utopia. It refers to a particular way of seeing, interrogating and representing a perception of the world (Sargisson 1996, 3). Utopianism recognises that utopia or utopian ideals exist not simply within the pages of text, but in the ways human beings think, imagine, dream, feel, and even live. This last is important to note, given that utopian fiction so often represents a critique of an individual author's own society. It is thus necessary that the real, lived contexts of our own world are interrogated carefully in the study of utopian texts. Indeed, this thesis has a stake in asserting the importance of the above. Informed by modern utopianism, utopian fiction can thus be viewed as an exploratory *process* of alternative ways of being, rather than (as it is sometimes accused) a mere generic mode of imaginative escapism (Levitas 2003, n.p.). This process involves a utopian exercise: the mediation of current issues in strange new landscapes and societies encourages readers to take fresh imaginative perspectives on present-day issues, which may lead to paradigmatic shifts in thinking. Lucy Sargisson has discussed at length the suitability of contemporary feminism as a tool for informing academic enquiry into utopia. She argues that feminism is a utopian exercise in itself, as it envisions a society in which the socio-political organisation is radically different. Over time, feminism has interrogated its own internal fallacies and binarism and in so doing has embraced a much more open, complex, and rigorous mode of inquiry (Sargisson 1996, 63-66). Sargisson asserts that utopianism should do the same.

Some contemporary scholars⁸ conceptualise utopia by referring to Lyman Tower Sargent's notion of "social dreaming". Sargent—who was largely influenced by the theories of Ernst Bloch in *The Principle of Hope* (Sargisson 1996, 1)⁹—defines social dreaming as the primary utopian impulse, "the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups

⁸ Lucy Sargisson (1996); Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (2003, 2007).

⁹ Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (1986) is an encyclopaedic study of the utopia in which the term 'utopian impulse' was first used. It was originally written in three volumes in 1954, 1955 and 1959.

of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live” (Sargent 1994, 3). This definition—which echoes Suvin’s earlier identification of utopian social organisation around a *radically different principle*—focuses on the utopian impulse to envision different societies or different ways of being. This approach forms the foundation for my understanding of dystopia. The advantage of applying the notion of social dreaming to studies of utopianism lies in the broad scope offered by the diverse possibilities in representing our myriad dreams and nightmares. Critical of the desire to formulate rigid or exclusive definitions, Sargent proposes that the value of utopianism is found in its ever-changing nature: as the world changes, our ideas about what constitutes a dream, or a nightmare also change. In accordance with our changing contexts and experience, the ever-changing nature of our dreams and nightmares helps to resolve the colloquial understanding of utopia as a place of perfection. This is particularly relevant given that academics such as Suvin (as discussed above) and Sargent stress that utopia is much more complicated than a perfect society, simply because what constitutes a dream for one person, may be a dystopian nightmare for another. This ever-changing notion of utopianism is especially important in fictions such as *NWOT*, which, by its spatial but not temporal dislocation, modifies the conventions of dystopia or eutopia. By embracing an open and complex understanding of utopianism, scholars can ensure that the exploratory processes of utopianism are not essentialised.

Dystopian Developments: Twentieth Century to the Present

The classical or canonical dystopia first emerged in the twentieth century and is largely considered to have developed in response to the socio-political changes of the modern age. Following two World Wars, as well as increasing economic and social inequality between classes, the distinctly optimistic eutopian narrative popular in earlier eras was overtaken by an emerging dystopian predisposition. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan describe the imaginative capacities of the classic dystopia as a “prophetic vehicle”: a way for authors to

depict to the nightmarish latent potential of the socio-political tendencies of our contemporary world (2003, 3). These classical dystopias usually centred on a critique of the totalising hegemonic capacities of the state (Moylan 2003, 136) and tended to be bleak, depressing works, in which the opportunity for resistance, or the reclamation of a measure of individual agency is denied to characters. Examples of the classical dystopia include George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Yevgeny Zamaytin's *We* (1924) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). In these texts, the utopian impulse toward hope for a better world is maintained outside of the text: within the warning that it provides to its readers. As Moylan and Baccolini remark, "it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future" (2003, 7). For example, in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the utopian impulse is maintained entirely out of the text, since the dissidents of the authoritarian state of Oceania are completely obliterated by their regime. Thus, the text acts as prophetic vehicle in its illustration of the potential consequences of leaving the socio-political issues of the author's present unchecked. Consequently, the utopian hope for a different way of being is maintained in the hope that the author's society will adapt to avoid the nightmarish outcome depicted in the narrative.

Its imaginative and often fantastical capacities has seen dystopian fiction historically aligned with science fiction (SF) and later, in the broader cultural category of speculative fiction (Suvin 2003, 188). This historical association is due, at a basic level, to the non-mimetic qualities of the utopian genre. The utopian tendency to populate imagined spaces with societies and characters distinct from the author's empirical present is evidence of this (for example, Airstrip One in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*). As Suvin asserts, SF (and by extension, utopia) is a literature of *cognitive estrangement* (1972)¹⁰. It is this estrangement that is pivotal to the

¹⁰ Based largely on the approaches of Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky, cognitive estrangement is characterised by the experience of the *novum*, or strange newness in SF texts. This strange newness occurs when

utopian impulse. Baccolini's observations encapsulate this desire well: "[dystopia's] function is to warn readers about the possible outcomes of our present world and entails an extrapolation of key features of contemporary society. Dystopia, therefore, is usually located in a negatively deformed future of our own world" (2003, 115).

A counter-cultural surge in the West in the 1960s and 1970s—characterised by political and ideological struggle and upheaval, and the impact of various social resistance movements—resulted in the resurgence of a distinctly eutopian, but significantly altered narrative. These emerging utopian fictions were more diverse, self-reflexive, and conscious of their own limitations (Moylan and Baccolini 2003). Moylan and Baccolini observe these changes in *Demand the Impossible*, designating them as belonging to a new category of utopian fiction: "critical utopia" (2003, 2). The critical utopia emerged out of a broad dissatisfaction with the dominant Western bias in canonical literature, and a recognition that classic utopian fictions often resulted in a tendency toward singularity, closed futures, and narratives that predominantly served mainstream society. An antidote perhaps, to the static and inflexible classical utopias of the past, the emergence of the critical utopia would mark the introduction of a tendency to consider the role utopia could play in imagining a different world for minorities: "A central concern in the critical utopia is awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint, while preserving it as a dream" (Moylan and Baccolini 2003, 3).

The significance of this change in direction towards the notion of a critical utopia is that it allowed for the flourishing of alternative narratives; perhaps most relevant to this thesis is that the critical utopia allowed for the flourishing of feminist preoccupations. Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1975) is a prime example of the critical utopia's capacity to explore alternative

a reader recognises a subject or issue from the empirical present that is made strange or unfamiliar through textual manipulation. For more information on cognitive estrangement see Suvin (1972).

narratives (importantly, narratives of a particularly feminist inflection) while at the same time, carrying with it all the formal features of this new critical eutopia. *The Female Man* proffered open-ended ideas about the qualities of eutopia, which allowed for the dynamic consideration of roles and resulting limitations to which women in patriarchal societies have been confined. Rather than being restricted to offering the strategy or blueprint for the achievement of a perfect society (as a traditional utopia might), Russ allowed the consideration of a range of alternative possibilities. The same can be said of *NWOT* which, despite its overtly dystopian style, suggests even in a simple narrative device such as the novel's ending (in which some women stay in the custody of Hardings and others choose to remain in the outback) there are different possibilities or ways of being.

Heading into the 1980s, this critical utopian trend remained, although the eutopian was supplanted by the dystopian mode. To scholars such as Sargent it was clear that the emergence of these critical utopias had created the need to re-assess the extent to which eutopia and dystopia should be considered as distinct categories. A growing discourse of utopianism, as outlined above, championed an approach to utopia that recognised its own ever-changing status. Sargent warns of the complexity of this undertaking: "we are discussing living traditions which are always in process, only fixable at a moment in time and place" (1994, 3).

Dark Horizons (Moylan and Baccolini 2003) identifies perhaps the most important feature of the critical dystopia (and the characteristic that is most relevant to this discussion of *NWOT*) that separates it from the classic dystopia: its retention of the utopian impulse for social dreaming (and thus, hope or possibility for alternative ways of being) *inside* the text. Critical dystopias retain the utopian impulse within the text through the use of ambiguous narrative endings that resist closure: "by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those

collective ‘ex-centric’ subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule” (2003, 7).

There is a precedent in feminist critical dystopian fictions toward this resistance to closure. This is perhaps most notable in a feminist dystopian novel that is experiencing a moment of resurgent cult status: Atwood’s *The Handmaids Tale* (1985). In a climactic scene towards the end of the novel, protagonist Offred is loaded into a van and driven away, by whom—either the secret police of the dystopian order of Gilead, or the brave dissidents of the fundamentalist regime—it is not revealed. Setting aside the curious epilogue of historical notes within the novel, Offred’s fate remains unclear, thus allowing readers to take some small hope in the possibility of her escape¹¹. The critical dystopia’s resistance to closure shares a distinct affinity with the contemporary feminist tendency to embrace complexity and resist fixity. This is because critical utopian fiction is seen to value exploratory, creative and critical processes and as such, it gravitates towards forms that allow for the dynamic, open-ended interrogations of the issues that dystopia confronts (Sargent 1994; Sargisson 1996; Moylan and Baccolini 2003).

In summary then, the critical utopia appears to echo what Sargisson identifies as contemporary feminist utopianism. Sargisson develops a notion of utopianism that is open-ended, defined by the intended function or significance of the work over formal structural content, and by placing emphasis on the imaginative possibilities of utopian thought. In this way, utopia can act as both a critical and creative force: it can interrogate our socio-political problems whilst simultaneously constructing a world that allows for new ways of thinking

¹¹ This same resistance to closure is repeated in the ending of *NWOT*. It is interesting to note also that in the case of both novels, the subjugated woman or women are faced with the uncertain prospect of boarding a vehicle driven by a person/s whose intent is largely unknown, to a place most definitely unknown, and yet, the women (or at least, most of the women, in the case of *NWOT*) still choose to surrender their agency, and board the bus: a powerful metaphor for the containment of women within a space that is literally *driven* by the intentions and motivations of another.

(Sargisson 1996, 63). It is these imaginative possibilities that makes utopianism so well suited to fictional representation, and indeed it is these imaginative possibilities that allow for the flourishing of texts such as *NWOT*, which subvert convention and seek more nuanced explorations of pressing social issues.

Feminist Inflections in Dystopian Narratives

As previously mentioned, this thesis does not claim that novels such as *NWOT* are explicitly works of dystopian feminism. Rather, the narrative may be identified as having a particularly feminist inflection, or as lending itself to a feminist reading. Dystopian fictions that are described broadly as ‘feminist’ are identified as such because the dystopian mode is utilised to enter into a commentary or critique about the situation of women in the author’s contemporary society (Gilarek 2015, 35). Often, authors of dystopias that explore the worlds of women rely on the temporal distance afforded by futuristic settings as a means of reframing readers’ perceptions through cognitive estrangement¹². However, for other authors, the real world is already dystopian enough (Gilarek 2012, 221)¹³. When this is the case (as it is with *NWOT*), authors may utilise a present-day setting as a means for exploring the subordination of women in society, achieving defamiliarisation through the spatial displacement of the subjects of the dystopian order. The preference for spatially rather than temporally displaced dystopian fictions is rare, although this is not the case in Australian dystopian fictions, where some scholars¹⁴ have identified a historical proclivity towards spatially dislocated dystopias that are set within a perceived¹⁵ threatening and isolated Australian ‘outback’ landscape.

¹² See Atwood (1985), Suzy McKee Charnas’ *Walk to the End of the World* (1974).

¹³ See Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Joanna Russ’ *The Female Man* (1975).

¹⁴ The scope of this thesis does not allow for a thorough discussion of the ‘outback’ in Australian dystopian fiction. For more, see: Nan Bowman-Albinski (1987); Russel Blackford, Van Ikin and Sean McMullen (1999).

¹⁵ Increasingly, however, the incorporation of theories of Indigenous Australian speculative fictions into academic discourse is re-orienting this colonial inscription of the Australian landscape as a place of hostility, into one that represents a vital, vibrant source of life-giving. (Althans 2013)

In feminist theory as well as in feminist literary criticism, the particular ways in which language is used to either reinforce or liberate subjects from a perceived order of subjugation represents a large area of discourse. In this thesis, the discussion of the novel's incorporation of pejorative language as a means for containing, shaming and punishing the female prisoners and the characters' experience of extreme alienation from their bodies as a result of insistent objectification is a key concern. In order to demonstrate the feminist critique of language in *NWOT*, I rely on two main texts. First is Deborah Cameron's *The Feminist Critique of Language* (1990), which identifies the diverse ways language is used every day to prop up a patriarchal system in which women are contained as the subordinate 'other'. In particular relevance to this study of *NWOT*'s maintenance of the male-based dystopic order through language is Cameron's discussion of the issue of 'sexist language' and the ways in which the derogatory transformation of words has almost universally been applied in specific relation to women. Second is Cavalcanti's "Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Dystopia" (2000), which discusses at length, the use of language within dystopian fictions as a means for representing male dominance as well as women's resistance.

The literature regarding feminist studies of the body is rich and varied. For the purpose of this thesis, reference to feminist studies of the body will be limited to those which speak directly to the treatment of Yolanda's body. In this regard, I was initially drawn to the scholarship of Simone de Beauvoir who identifies the female experience of the body as a *situation* (Moi 1999, 59-72). De Beauvoir explains how, caught between a state of immanence and transcendence, the feminine bodily experience is one that is constrained upon by its surroundings: social, physical, political, economic, for example. However, Iris Marion Young's essay: "Throwing Like a Girl" (1980) better serves my claims about the liminal dystopian space of *Hardings* offering the potential for the transformation of Yolanda's corporeal existence. Young, building on ideas developed by de Beauvoir and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-

Ponty, argues that a woman's bodily existence in a patriarchal society is characterised by the experience of her body as a *thing* rather than as a *capacity*. With this in mind, Young identifies the ways in which the feminine bodily experience of comportment, spatiality and motility is defined by the situatedness of the body.¹⁶ In other words, the way a society constructs the meanings attached to the female body will govern the female experience of it. Within the essay, Young critiques the notion of 'throwing like a girl' as a reinforcement of patriarchal notions of the capacities of women's bodies which in turn result in a learned, over-stylised way of 'moving as a woman'. This critique is central in my analysis of the body in *NWOT* which suggests that women are contained within a narrow, restrictive definition of what it is to be a woman. Ideas about the physical capabilities, appropriate behaviours and bodily appearances of women are, in fact, not derived from any essential quality of being a woman. Rather, they are enforced and reinforced by the ways women are situated in society: by the ways in which they are contained.

¹⁶ I use 'feminine' in the sense prescribed by de Beauvoir and echoed by Young:

In accordance with Beauvoir's understanding, I take 'femininity' to designate not a mysterious quality of essence that all women have by virtue of their being biologically female. It is, rather, a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical *situation* of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves. (Young 1980, 143-144)

Chapter Two – Pejorative Language in *The Natural Way of Things*

Perhaps the most distinctive and obvious expression of domination in *NWOT* can be found in the particularly Australian, highly pejorative rhetoric that is used within Hardings, (and indeed within our own contemporary social order) as a means for containing women within a restrictive definition of what they *are* based upon what they are seen (or believed) to *do* (or have done) by their male counterparts. The fact that this type of pejorative rhetoric is so contemporary, so prevalent in the Australian social order intensifies the dystopian horror of the text, simply because it acts as a means for communicating the notion that Hardings is happening right now, in present-day Australia, just out of public sight.

Cavalcanti (2000) considers the role that language plays in feminist dystopian fiction, noting its capacity to act as a device that both enforces a dystopic male order, and that has the potential to facilitate feminist resistance and liberate female subjects. Cavalcanti argues that the male dystopic order is often enforced through the prescription of strict modes of address and highly contrived patterns of speech, and through the prohibition of all modes of public speech and reading and/or writing (152). In terms of the capacity of language to act as a source of female resistance and liberation, Cavalcanti points to the acts of resistance from female subjects, which serve to undermine the above structures of linguistic dominance. This can be seen through the processes of renaming, reappropriating speech in a subversive manner, storytelling and creative writing, singing and message-networking and in extreme cases, in the retreat from verbal language entirely (153).

In some ways, *NWOT* can be seen to support many of Cavalcanti's claims that language can act as a device for dystopic male-based dominance, as well as female liberation. However, Cavalcanti's observations regarding the methods of this linguistic control—which determine the rhetoric, register and hierarchical order shaping relationships between speakers and

interlocutors—are singularly based on the analysis of *futuristic* dystopian fiction. In the case of a spatially displaced, contemporary dystopia such as *NWOT*, the techniques identified by Cavalcanti that serve to constrain or liberate women within a dystopic male-based order are articulated in markedly different ways. The language used within the dystopic order of Hardings is casually deployed rather than strictly imposed; it is highly pejorative and misogynist rather than characterised by contrived patterns and clichéd scriptural references the likes of which, for example, Cavalcanti identifies in Atwood’s *The Handmaids Tale* (2000, 168). I claim that these differences are due to the displaced dystopian context of *NWOT*: the present-day temporal setting of the novel and its spatial setting within the harsh Australian outback produces a pejorative rhetoric of name-calling and labelling that is distinctly current and markedly Australian. This rhetoric is used within *NWOT* in ways that are similar to those outlined by Cavalcanti: it serves to delimit both what women are and what they do. Thus, the operation of language as a device for dominance and liberation within *NWOT* is affected by the contemporary spatial context of the dystopia. Furthermore, the ways language is thereby used in the text speaks to the narrative theme of female containment.

This compulsion to prescribe what women should do, and, by extension what women *are* through the misogynistic Australian rhetoric discussed above is perhaps most evocatively represented in the following powerful, disturbing, observation from Verla’s perspective:

Boncer’s words return. In the days to come she will learn *what she is*, what they all are. That they are the minister’s-little-travel-tramp and that-Skype-slut and the yuck-ugly-dog from the cruise ship; they are bogan-gold-digger-gangbang-slut. They are what happens when you don’t keep your fucking fat slag’s mouth shut. (2015, 47)[italics in original]

These lines represent much of what is claimed about the role of language in *NWOT*. Firstly, it is indicative of the relentless demand from the male order of Hardings that the imprisoned learn *what* they are. In fact, this compulsion to reduce them to the sum of their supposed transgressions is an omnipresent rationale for the dystopic order within the narrative. Within the first few pages of the story, this desire is expressed emphatically when Verla is ‘admitted’ to Hardings and demands to be told where she is: “She says, ‘I need to know where I am’. The man stands there, tall and narrow, hand still on the doorknob, surprised. He says, almost in sympathy, ‘Oh, sweetie. You need to know *what* you are’ (2015, 18; italics in original). The italicisation of *what* and *what she is* appears to underscore the reductionist aim to contain the women, object-like, on a proverbial pillory as figures of shame and disgust. Throughout *NWOT*, the prisoners are never referred to by name, or as women, or even as girls, by the male guards. To do this, would be to recognise the imprisoned as subjective autonomous beings and thus, would undermine efforts to contain and discipline the women while simultaneously punishing them for their apparent transgressions against the way women—in the contemporary social order—are supposed to behave.

Cavalcanti’s observations regarding contrived patterns of speech in feminist dystopias are also evident in the above excerpt from the text. However, the patterns that Cavalcanti refers to are most often seen through the manipulation of ancient, archaic languages, the creation of new ones (as in Suzette Elgin’s *Native Tongue* (1984)), or references to religious texts (as in Atwood’s *The Handmaids Tale* (1985)), and are often utilised in an attempt to give voice to the eutopian programme of the dystopic ruling order (2000, 158). For example, Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* devoted entire swathes of text to detailing the creation of the hyper-manipulated language of Newspeak and reifying its usage as a way forward for the people of Oceania. In *NWOT*, however, Wood draws on a highly contemporary and distinctly Australian vernacular as a means of overtly demonstrating linguistic dominance which—rather than serve to confirm

the eutopian ideals of the dystopic order—underpins the notion that the intertextual present is *already* its own dystopian order. It is in this instance then, that the patterns of speech within *NWOT* cannot be described as contrived. To most readers *NWOT*'s pejorative rhetoric is likely to be completely familiar; it appears transcribed directly from our intertextual present. It is not the nostalgic and arguably contrived Australian slang of 'bonzer', 'true-blue' or 'fair-dinkum' that is typically associated with traditional and fondly cited Australian idiom. Rather, the text, and indeed the quote above is littered with markedly contemporary, commonly Australian slurs such as "slags" (2015, 41), "dog" (2015, 87), and, elsewhere in the novel: "slurry" (2015, 62), "moll" (2015, 47), "Fucking *useless bint*" (2015, 174; italics in original), or "povo-bogan-bush-pig" (2015, 141).

Wood's incorporation of derogatory terms from contemporary Australian vernacular has the effect of a direct critique of the author's present as itself dystopian. By utilising the language that readers arguably encounter in their everyday lives (and indeed there is a litany of evidence to suggest this¹⁷) on a regular basis as the means for enforcing the dystopic male order in *Hardings*, Wood seems to invite readers both to consider the dystopic potential of the intertextual present and, through the repeated use of slurs, to observe how the persistent use of this language acts to delimit what women are, what they do, how they are spoken about, how they speak to themselves and to one another within a dystopic social order. As Deborah Cameron suggests:

¹⁷ For example: In her 2016 book, *Fight Like a Girl*, contemporary feminist figure Clementine Ford devotes an entire chapter to describing the abuse she has received online. In one instance, Ford details the response to a situation in which an online commenter was fired when Ford published his name on the internet after he had called her a 'slut': "The next few days saw me facing a relentless tide of abuse from people, most of them men, calling me a whore, a slut, a dumb cunt, a fat bitch who needs to get laid, a bitch who should kill herself and, in one particularly memorable moment, a woman who needed to be shot in the face and put in a grave" (2016, 177).

Language could be seen as a *reflection* of sexist culture; or (in my view a more satisfactory position) it could be seen as a carrier of ideas and assumptions which become, through their constant re-enactment in discourse, so familiar and conventional we miss their significance. Potentially, the ideas embedded in our usage could be challenged; actually, it is rare for this to happen. Thus sexism is not merely reflected but acted out and thus reinforced in a thousand banal encounters. (1990, 15)

If we consider Cameron's idea—that language is informed by ideas and assumptions which become conventional through overuse—in relation to *NWOT* and the intertextual present that the novel interrogates, the onslaught of misogynist rhetoric becomes a well-oiled machine that is perpetuated effortlessly, it is normalised and reproduced, often by the very people that it seeks to oppress. In foregrounding this derogatory language in the dystopian circumstances of *Hardings*, the narrative impresses upon readers, the harm caused by this type of naturalised rhetoric. Throughout, such language is often presented in italics, giving the impression that the phrases themselves have been lifted verbatim from another's written or spoken words in the public realm.¹⁸ For example, in the following, Verla imagines Lydia, (a prisoner who is detained after she reveals she had been brutally attacked, and presumably raped, on a cruise ship) as she might have been before being brought to *Hardings*:

Before everything that happened, when Lydia was just a pretty
Maltese girl at a party, a little drunk and up for it, when even that

¹⁸ See Sherele Moody's article in the Daily Telegraph entitled 'Blok's advice offers brutal and disgusting guide to raping women.' (2017). Blok's advice is a 'men's only' page on Facebook which claims to offer men a safe space to talk in the interest of promoting mental health. It is regularly shown to shame and degrade women and in some circumstances, promote the sexual and physical assault of women.

drug-fucked lowlife in the muscle T-shirt might have called her Lydia instead of *that thing, that black ugly dog* (2015, 112).

Again, the lines above illustrate the compulsion to reduce Lydia to a *thing*, an inhuman source of ultimate disgust. More importantly these, and the lined quoted at the beginning of this chapter, read like the type of trolling commentary that is encountered so often today, particularly on social media. In the threatening and dire circumstances of Hardings, in which the women face threat of violence, rape and starvation, the extent to which terms such as “bitch” or “dog” can be rationalised, justified or defended as a harmless joke is seriously challenged. In other words, comments such as “*She was up for it one hundred percent*” (2015, 52) cannot be written off as harmless or mere throwaway. Instead, comments such as these are drawn on and referred to repeatedly as a means for showing exactly how the language used in our intertextual, every day present firmly embeds and reinforces a pervasive attitude towards women that serves to vilify, shame, objectify and silence them—or—that simply, literally, keeps them in their place.

In *NWOT*, such recurrent practices of denigration, whether through the use of derogatory labels, or the languid, but nonetheless damning assertions about female characters’ attitudes, actions or motives, have the unnerving effect of normalising them. The very language that has been consistently deployed to keep women in their place is often co-opted by the women characters themselves. It is unclear whether this is done to curry favour with their oppressors or, as a means of self-preservation through deflection; perhaps it is both. Using the same techniques of analepsis and extra-digetic commentary, Wood shows the women’s complicity in their own domination by their policing of each other’s behaviour. For example:

Verla remembers another close-up: the Sunday-night interview,
Izzy’s smooth peachy face and her big glassy blue eyes filling the

screen ... Izzy's soft trembling voice speaking of her ruined career, of justice that must be done. And beyond the screen, behind it all, the voices of girls everywhere snorting into their vodkas, *not as if he even raped her*, sneering *all that for a snapped bra strap!* And imagine him going for a little fatty like that! (2015, 70; italics in original)

The above image of young women sneering, in an almost gleeful, mocking tone into the tops of their drinks is certainly a powerful one. It encapsulates entirely the particular ways young women police each other's behaviour, and reinforce each other's vilification and subordination. On the subject of gossiping and scandal, Cameron remarks that "the misbehaviour of women, especially sexual misbehaviour, is frequently seen as an attack on the job security of all women [as guardians of domestic morality], and therefore [it is] behaviour which must be policed" (1990, 247). Thus, in order to deflect the extent to which Izzy's "misbehaviour" can be seen as an indictment of all women, she must be turned into the butt of a joke: laughable fodder for a group of women sharing a calorie-conscious beverage. This type of imagined situation reads vividly, as if one could encounter this discussion happening on a Friday night, at after-work drinks, at any pub around the country. The true emphatic effect of this type of denigration however is felt when juxtaposed with the next image of Izzy:

... and so [Verla] stares now at famous pretty-but-fat television Izzy lying exhausted in the dirt, a grubby bonnet tied tight beneath her soft chin, her cheeks dotted with infected mosquito bites, oily with dust and tears, her closed eyes ringed with shadow, a yellowing crust of spit in the corner of her dry lips. All that money, Chloe boots and all, and now look at her. (2015, 71)

Throughout *NWOT*, readers are shown how language is used as a means for enforcing a male-based order, both within the dystopic space of Hardings, but also within the contemporary Australian social order. This is largely due to the fact that the novel is clearly set in present-day Australia, and the language in *NWOT* works consistently to underpin this. A sense of place is evoked through the dystopic order's distinctly Australian vocabulary; a sense of the contemporary setting is communicated in the usage of rhetoric that is identifiably common (despite its pejorative nature) and the critique of Australia's social order is evoked through the heavy italicisation of misogynistic slurs, producing an effect that makes the text appear as if lifted verbatim from the real world: perhaps from comment sections' on news websites, from snatches of overheard conversation or even from news headlines and reports. Within the dystopian space of Hardings, the cruel, damaging nature of this type of language is exposed and as such, the casual off-hand manner in which it is regularly used in contemporary Australia is exposed as a near ritualised act of female containment.

Chapter Three – Yolanda, The Body, *The Natural Way of Things*

Yolanda is brought to Hardings after a media fallout and public scandal following her revelation that she was gang-raped by several footballers. On this premise alone, Yolanda's narrative reads like a modern trope of the frequent occurrence of sexual violence in the Australian sporting industry.¹⁹ Of particular relevance to this thesis, however, is Yolanda's ongoing struggle with the seemingly inescapable and deeply internalised objectification of her body. Exploration of the body and its objectified status in a patriarchal society are common themes in feminist dystopian fiction, but usually these explorations are set in the future: in post-apocalyptic societies where women's bodies are objectified and commodified in the extreme.²⁰ In *NWOT*, a spatially displaced dystopia which, as we have seen, is very much of the present, there is no evidence of an apocalyptic moment or the enactment of official policy regarding the control of these women's bodies. In fact, Hardings International is unequivocally represented as a private security enterprise, one apparently beholden only to its own ambiguous moral order.

In her exploration of 'feminine style of interaction with space',²¹ Iris Marion Young identifies the tendency of women under a patriarchal system to live out their bodily existence as a *thing* rather than as a *capacity*. These two notions of feminine existence as *thing* and *capacity* are derived from de Beauvoir's observations of women's experience in a patriarchal society as characterised by a tension between immanence and transcendence (Young 1980, 145).²² The experience of the body as a *thing*, as an immanent object is the central source of

¹⁹ See Sally Rawsthorne (2015).

²⁰ Atwood (1985), Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy.

²¹ 'feminine' existence or style is used to refer not to a mysterious essence or quality that derives from the biological situation of femaleness. Rather, it refers, in the to the structures and conditions that define the typical situation of women in a particular society at a particular moment in time. Thus, this expression of feminine existence provides for the different degrees to which certain women enjoy a measure of transcendence or are subject to a measure of immanence in various degrees, in various moments in time.

²² On the subject of the tension between feminine existence as immanence and transcendence Young states: "The [patriarchal] culture and society in which the female person dwells define the woman as Other... as mere object

tension in Yolanda's narrative in *NWOT*. Within the liminal space of Hardings—in which Yolanda is isolated from friends, family and modern technologies (media, social media, etc.) that otherwise might be used to assert a sense of agency—Yolanda confronts and is confronted by the objectified status of her body both in the dystopic order of Hardings and in the dystopian order of her old life.

Yolanda's memories, experiences and thoughts and feelings at the beginning of *NWOT* appear to centre around the character's sense of tumultuous discontinuity with her body: between herself as a *capacity* and her body as a *thing*, which eventually culminates in her retreat from verbal language and human physicality, into a state of animal freedom. From the opening of the narrative, Yolanda's apparent disconnection from her own body is clear: "Yolanda Kovacs, nineteen years eight months. Good body (she was just being honest, why would she boast, when it had got her into such trouble?)" (2015, 5). This explicit description of her body as a separate empirical entity that actively causes trouble for a passive Yolanda is the first hint readers have of Yolanda's struggle to reconcile her awareness of her subjective self with the objectification of her body. The excerpt below expands on Yolanda's wonder at the obsession with her body as well as her increasingly apparent dissociation from it:

There were no mirrors here. Strange, but she could almost forget her body, that marvellous thing. Must be to cause such fuss. She would stand there staring at it, trying to understand, to see it as they saw it. Filling her hands with the bosoms, cradling the soft belly. Parting herself gently for a moment with her fingers. V for victory. That was a joke, at any rate.

and immanence... At the same time however, because she is a human existence, the female person necessarily is a subjectivity and transcendence, and she knows herself to be. The female person who enacts the existence of women in patriarchal society must therefore live a contradiction: as a human she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situations as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence." (1980, 144).

Was it the softness, perhaps, that made them want it so much?
And hate it so much? The body was separate from her, it was a
thing she wore. The things that were done to it had nothing to do
with her, Yolanda, at all. (2015, 51-2)

These lines demonstrate the clear division between the way Yolanda sees herself and the way others (through the heterotopic experience of gazing at her reflection in the mirror) gaze upon and interpret her body. Young describes this distancing as an essential part of the situation of being a woman in patriarchal society. As a woman, Yolanda is used to being gazed upon as mere object, as merely the shape of her flesh that presents outwardly to others and that is therefore simply an object situated in relation to the viewer, rather than as an individual subject: her own living manifestation of action and intent. In a patriarchal society, this objectification of the female body has the distinct effect of 'keeping women in place', as Young states:

This objectified bodily existence accounts for the self-consciousness of the feminine relation to her body and resulting distance she takes from her body. As a human she is a transcendence and subjectivity and cannot live herself as mere bodily object. Thus ... she cannot be in unity with herself, but must take a distance from and exist in discontinuity with her body
(1980, 155)

Yolanda's memories and reflections about her old life provoke a growing awareness of the objectified status of her body. In a particularly poignant moment early in her captivity, she contrasts two memories from her childhood. First, she recalls her mother's home-waxing salon in which Yolanda would be tasked with melting down used wax strips, sieving hairs through a stocking to re-use remnant wax on her mother's next clients. Next, she recalls her unsettling fear of a caged pet

mouse who produced countless litters of hairless offspring. She considers these memories together, sensing a strange connection between her fear of what she sees as the mindless spawning of naked, hairless babies and the ritualised removal of unsightly body hair, Yolanda reflects on the apparently passive acceptance of the imposed burdens of being a woman:

Yolanda feared that mother mouse and her cold, incessant production. It was something to do with her, she knew ... It had something to do with the hairlessness of the women on Gail's bench, the squirming babies, with all the creams and lotions, with their whispering to her mother, *what a beauty*, but meaning something adult and uneasy and expectant. (2015, 31)

From an early age, Yolanda's understanding of her body is governed by the adult expectations of her as a girl: she is exposed to the rigorous regimes of female body hair removal, is confronted with and frightened by the biological functions of the female body, and experiences anxiety over the sexualisation of her beauty at an early age. These early experiences of the bodily existence of women as object are what Young describes as the:

... ever present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention. The source of this objectified bodily existence is in the attitude of others regarding her, but the woman herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing. She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds and decorates it. This

objectified bodily existence accounts for the self-consciousness of the feminine relation to her body and resulting distance she takes from her body. (1980, 154).

As the novel progresses and the situation within the camp grows increasingly dire, the women too become more wild, their bodies change without the ritualised practice of pruning, shaping, moulding and decorating, as described by Young above. Yolanda, increasingly alienated from what she describes as “her dumb dog’s *body*” (2015, 92; italics in original) seems largely undisturbed by the regrowth of hair and views the relative horror of others with derision. For some characters, such is the internalisation of this type of bodily objectification, that the re-growth of their pubic hair is a matter of deep shame and humiliation:

In the first month, early on, they all scratched through their tunics as their pubes grew bristling back ... Girls stood straddling the concrete blocks, raking like mad at their crotches, some more horrified than others at this sprouting hair, all over. Joy cried; she had never even seen her own fully-grown pubes, her mother took her for waxing as soon as they began to appear ... Verla no longer cares about hair, nor does Yolanda, nor Maitlynd or Hetty. But Lydia and Joy have wheedled a pair of tweezers from Nancy and spend evenings poring over each other’s limbs, pinching out hairs one by one, wincing and yelping. Good for them, says Yolanda, they will be first in line when Boncer and Teddy finally decide they can have their pick. (2015, 114)

It is often in these moments in which the growing wildness of the women is emphasised that the contemporary setting of the novel is reiterated. Alongside the image of the women

raking themselves against concrete blocks to relieve the itch of regrowing pubic hair (an image that is confronting in its rare depiction of women behaving and acting in ways which are not deemed 'appropriate' according to the contemporary social order), with shock it is realised:

they are not children, not actually girls, but adult women, in the world, in Australia. Somewhere in this same country there are cities and the internet and governments and families and shopping centres and universities and airports and offices, all going about their business, all operating normally. (2015, 114)

These moments of explicit self-reflexivity in the novel act as urgent reminders to readers who, when confronted with such shocking images of intense, unfiltered female bodily experience may easily forget the contemporary setting of the novel. The effect of this is always unsettling; Wood draws a direct link between the present and the hyper-dystopian space of Hardings. It is in these moments of direct reference to the individual author's world that the dystopian nightmare of Hardings looms closest, on our own horizons, just out of sight.

The first crisis point in the novel comes when it is revealed that the women and the guards alike have been forsaken by their corporate antagonist, Hardings International. This point also represents a crisis in Yolanda's own narrative of alienation from her body when she is sent to the storeroom to look for more food supplies. Instead, she finds packages of sanitary napkins. In an unusual moment of emotional breakdown, and in boldly graphic style, Yolanda is moved to tears, and reflects bitterly on the humiliation they have endured at Hardings:

All these months, the disgusting shredded rags jammed into your underpants, soaking through. It was worse than anything, the beatings or the hunger, the infections or the insults. The wet wad of torn-up tea towels and fraying curtain and threadbare sheet of

old underpants and flannelette shirt ripped into patches and strips, somehow rolled and folded into a horrible lump, forced upwards to mould up into yourself ... the coppery smell, the chafing hatred in it. Then having to rinse them in dirty tank water ... Yolanda had retched into the grass the first three times she'd had to plunge them into the dirty water, clouding with her own trailing mess. And Boncer and Teddy standing on the veranda sneering down at them, laughing, hands over their noses and mouths, calling out, *Ugh, pigs, sharks bait, raw steak. Ah, gross—look out, it's wounded clam.* (Wood 2015, 120-1; italics in original).²³

This moment marks a turning point in the novel, occurring right before the revelation that everyone was now stuck, abandoned and imprisoned at the camp, reliant on a dwindling supply of food and medicine. It also marks a turning point for Yolanda, who on realising the full extent of her bodily objectification, slowly over the course of the following pages embraces markedly less recognisably human behaviours:

It was why they were here, she understood now. For the hatred of what came out of you, what you contained. What you were capable of. She understood because she shared it, this dull fear and hatred of her own body. It had bloomed inside her all her life, purged but regrowing, unstoppable, every month: this dark weed and the understanding that she was meat, was born to make meat.

²³The association of the natural with the grotesque occurs regularly throughout *NWOT*. In these moments, the narrator seems not only to draw out the internalised shame women may feel regarding menstruation but also speaks to the compulsion to hide it, to clothe it in euphemism lest the biology of the female body be afforded dignity. Readers are reminded of the ongoing debates in Australian parliament regarding the fact that Viagra and condoms are not subject to GST, yet tampons and sanitary pads are categorised as a *luxury* item.

But only now it became clear to her that her body and *her*, Yolanda, were not separable things, and that what she had once thought of as a self ... did not exist. This is what the footballers in the dark knew, somehow when they did those things to her. To *it*. There was no self inside that thing they pawed and thrust and butted at, only fleecy, punishable flesh. (Wood 2015, 122; italics in original)

This emotional, evocative and epiphanic moment is one of the last of clear insight into Yolanda's tormented mind that readers have. From this point in the narrative, she begins to retreat from a recognisably human existence. In two short paragraphs, the narrator throws the toll of Yolanda's lifetime of bodily objectification into sharp, despairing relief.

The animalistic actions of pawing, butting and thrusting accentuate the notion that Yolanda's "dumb dog's body" is simply an empty animal vessel; that she exists only as a biological meat-maker or an object upon which the actions and intent of the "footballers in the dark" (122) can be projected. It is in moments like these that the value of dystopian fiction is perhaps expressed best. The notion of a footballer engaging in sexual violence is a narrative that occurs so often in Australia it strays on the border of (horrific) cliché.²⁴ Often, the insight into the sheer horror of such crimes is lost through the relatively sanitised medium of news journalism. The imaginative worlds of dystopian fiction, however, have the capacity to elicit empathy in readers, exposing them vicariously to an experience of assault that a newspaper article simply cannot. It is easy to think of victims of the type of assault that Yolanda endured as faceless victims. But to read intimately of the torment is infinitely harder:

²⁴ One is reminded of the incidents of violence and harassment against women that abounds in Australian sporting codes. See Ferguson (2009).

They had whispered things to her while they used her body... as they rummaged and jerked in her, Yolanda, shapeless and formless and wordless in the dark. Their brothers watching. She did not move, she did not cry out, she would be blamed. She dug herself deep into the long dark corridor, this silent burrow inside herself. (2015, 222-3)

Young argues that the objectification of women's bodies is a weapon that "keeps [woman] in her place" (1980, 154), therefore it makes sense that in the dystopian setting of *Hardings*, Yolanda would experience her body as a place of similar imprisonment.. Guards Teddy and Boncer, overheard by Verla, even share a pseudo-ritual of hypothesising who they would have sex with after the women are locked up for the night: "Teddy says it's good they can't fuck these ones ... but also who wants sloppy seconds anyway? *You'd feel sort of soiled after*, he says, and Boncer, after a pause, agrees. *Definite sluts*, he adds" (2015, 58). Eventually both concede they would choose to 'fuck' Yolanda: "'So ...' says Boncer slyly. 'which one would you?'" Then he and Teddy both at once say, *Kovacs*, and break into sniggers" (2015, 99). Yolanda is subjected to this type of aggressive sexual objectification throughout the narrative. It is a measured attempt to remind her of her objectified status but at the same time reprimand her for her supposed moral transgressions against the patriarchal limitation of what a woman is and what woman should do.

Yolanda's gradual transformation is represented in the text as a liberating statement of newfound agency. In embracing her new role as the group's hunter and main provider of food, she finds a new sense of strength and, ultimately, power; She is transformed by her surroundings. As she experiments with a new-found sense of bodily comportment and motility that the strenuous and taxing work of hunting rabbits requires, she too finds a modicum of freedom within the contained space of *Hardings*, albeit an animal freedom.

Yolanda felt some primitive strength mounting as she scrubbed and stretched ... it was beyond her named self, beyond *girl* or *female*. Beyond human, even ... Covered in the reeking skins she crouched sometimes among the tussocks, watching Boncer looking for her and not seeing. She was becoming invisible. (2015, 193)

In this context, Yolanda's usage of the phrase 'Beyond *girl* or *female*' appears to critique the terms girl and female in terms of their restrictive capacities. The novel has stressed often the association of female with images of the natural world; with images of the grotesque, the supernatural and the biological. Here Yolanda actively describes transcending these categories, moving beyond them as she covers herself in the skins of rabbits, and crouches in the bushes, watching. She becomes invisible, because she is no longer identifiably *girl* or *female*.

It is through her eventual acceptance of the physical environment of Hardings that Yolanda's body is eventually radically reformed as she adapts to her surroundings and embraces what she describes as an animal freedom, Yolanda is able to shed the oppressive objectification of her body and thus embrace a transcendent existence in an animal-like state. She slowly becomes more wild and rabbit-like: adorning herself in rabbit skins, sleeping on the floor, refusing to speak, moving and orienting herself as an animal would.²⁵ Her retreat to a more savage state represents a radical reclamation of agency that is inextricably linked to her growing connection with and indistinguishability from the physical, natural environment of Hardings. In other words, it is through Yolanda's changing interaction with the liminal space

²⁵ In her analysis of Lisa Tuttle's 1984 short story *The Cure*, Cavalcanti describes language as a limiting dystopic structure in the story and the choice of its characters to refrain from verbal language entirely is a radical form of resistance to the dystopian order (2000, 156). Yolanda's retreat from verbal language can be read in a similar way.

of Hardings that she is able to realise the intensely ingrained objectification of her female body. As such, the spatial dystopia of Hardings is seen to force Yolanda and readers alike to acknowledge in particularly poignant, often despairing style, the extent to which feminine bodily existence in contemporary Australia prevents women from achieving the transcendent, creative and autonomous existences that their bodies, by virtue of being human, have the capacity to achieve.

Despite the outward abandonment of conventional feminine bodily existence and other characters' assumptions that she has gone mad, Yolanda still retains, at least before the close of the novel, a free, subjective space within her mind. She engages little with those around her but still reflects upon her past, with the qualifying distinction that the past belonged to an earlier, now superseded, version of herself:

She allowed herself to wonder, briefly if he missed her. The old her that was, the Yolanda of a lifetime ago. If Robbie saw her now he would not recognise her as his once-loved girl. He would curl his lip in revulsion and murmur to a mate, *Christ, check that out, would you hit it?*, and they would laugh into the open tops of their beer bottles as they turned away. (2015, 269)

Again, we observe in the above, a moment that juxtaposes the strangeness of the dystopian space of Hardings with the contemporary world of the characters. Yolanda's reflection on how her ex-boyfriend would react to her new rabbit-like self reveals the extent to which Yolanda has physically changed, and reminds the reader that Yolanda is a member of the author's worlds in contemporary Australia. This serves, again, to reinforce the notion that this dystopic space is ever present in our own world, albeit just out of our plain sight.

Yolanda's body is a vital site for interrogating the practice of objectifying women's bodies in contemporary society. These bodies are situated not in a futuristic dystopia populated with post-human bodies, or in a post-apocalyptic society in which women's bodies have been collectivised, commodified or re-categorised. There are no sophisticated new social systems in place or entirely new political orders, because there is no need to use these conventions when the present is depicted as already dystopian enough. Wood takes great care throughout the novel to demonstrate the fact that what these women experience is occurring every day in Australia. The dystopian spatial displacement of the women magnifies and exaggerates the issues of women's bodily agency by placing them in our present, but in severely more desperate circumstances, forcing readers to confront the everyday realities of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Within the camp, the persistent objectification of women's bodies is laid bare in the harsh, unfiltered light of Hardings International.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

The narrative of *NWOT* offers a powerful imaginative representation of the kinds of daily oppressions women face within the contemporary Australian social order. Given the setting of the novel in the dislocated space of the Australian bush, the sense of urgency with which the dystopia unfolds is heightened; there is no comfort to be found in the idea that Hardings is a temporally far-off nightmare, and no indication that we can change the current course of events, when so much of the text, as has been shown in this thesis, clearly speaks to the author's present. The implication that this dystopian world is flourishing in present-day Australia, hidden out of sight in the outback, is a frightening and bleak prospect, one that threatens to overwhelm the utopian aspects of the dystopian narrative completely. This is alleviated somewhat by the lingering ambiguity in the novel's narrative, and particularly in its closing pages. Readers find some small element of possibility, perhaps even hope, that Yolanda and Verla go on to thrive in the natural landscape. However, despite this potential for the novel's characters, the deeper conclusions to be drawn for our own world are markedly less hopeful.

Towards the end of the narrative, following a series of climactic deaths—Nancy's overdose, Hetty's suicide by electrocution at the perimeter fence, Boncer's poisoning and Teddy's stabbing—electricity is suddenly restored to the camp, and this is taken as a sign of the women's impending rescue. A few days later, a bus from Hardings International arrives. Yolanda, sensing the arrival of Hardings can mean nothing but bad news, escapes into the bush. Verla is initially persuaded to board the bus, where she plans to commit suicide. However, she then demands to be let off the bus. She is dumped on the side of the road, and, picking up the bottles of water thrown to her by her fellow former prisoners, she sets off in search of Yolanda.

The role of ambiguity in the dystopian narrative is particularly evident in the case of the feminist critical dystopia. In her study of contemporary feminist utopianism, Sargisson

asserts that to perfect is to complete, and by extension, to complete is to signify the death of politics (1996, 3).²⁶ The death of politics here means the death of debate, difference or alternative ways of being. This notion is summarily antithetical to the feminist desire to embrace complexity and to refrain from universalist assertions or claims, so it also makes sense that a critical dystopia with a particularly feminist inflection would be characterised by an ambiguous ending.²⁷ Most importantly, this aversion to finality or closure is important in *NWOT*, as it represents a resounding reclamation of agency by both Yolanda and Verla. Although the eventual fate of the two characters is not narrated, some hope is retained within the text through their final act of resistance against the male-based dystopic order of Hardings International and, simultaneously, against the real, social order of their lives in (the fictionalised world of) contemporary Australia. Readers may take some solace from the small fact that the narrative is suspended at a point at which Yolanda and Verla have been able to make this choice.

This sense of utopian possibility is not limited simply to Yolanda and Verla. The reader may also draw some hope in the knowledge that the other imprisoned women have won some sense of individual autonomy. This is shown in a powerful final image of the group, when they demand the bus driver let Verla off the bus:

Framed in his vision they stand: mud-streaked, teased-haired,
some with horrible orange lipstick now, some with garish beads
and ribbons. They have been made strong by labour and brutality.
They are ablaze. (2015, 312)

²⁶ This fear of perfection or completion is inherent in many dystopian texts, but perhaps is most evocatively represented in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), in which to 'complete' literally means to die.

²⁷ Other dystopian fictions with feminist narratives that are characterised by an ambiguous narrative ending include: Atwood's *The Handmaids Tale* (1985), Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017).

The excessive, almost animal ferocity of the women represented here is deeply powerful. They have indeed, been set ablaze, and in many ways it seems that they have been re-formed by the experience of Hardings. It is here in the ambiguous ending for Yolanda and Verla, and the final image of the other women characters that one observes the hallmark of the critical dystopia: an enduring utopian impulse and the possibility for hope operating within the text.²⁸

Although readers may certainly observe some reclamation of agency through Yolanda and Verla's decision to embrace an animal existence in the Australian landscape, the greater outcomes for our own society, beyond the text, appear markedly less hopeful. When the two characters' retreat into animal freedom is read in terms of its relation to the contemporary social order that the novel interrogates, the outcome for our own world appears utterly dystopian. Yolanda and Verla's retreat into an animal existence implies that the only way the women can achieve any subversion of their immanent objectification is through the abandonment of a (contemporary) human existence altogether.

In this thesis I have discussed how the spatial rather than more traditional temporal displacement of the dystopian order has resulted in a disturbing story of, and for, our times. It is this contemporaneity that has rendered the individual author's critique of the present more troubling. Without the imagined historical perspective granted in a futuristic dystopia, Wood has positioned her readers to consider the extent to which our own world is already dystopian. *NWOT* is a novel that speaks perhaps particularly to an Australian audience, both in terms of the social reality it critiques or interrogates, but also in terms of its narrative form. Within the scope of a larger project, an exploration of *NWOT* and its place within an Australian speculative

²⁸ Sanders notes the importance of utopianism in the study of feminist aesthetics which reflects this notion: "utopia is only viable if it is left permanently open, contested, in contradiction with itself, if it is never put into practice as unchanging entity, but remains a shifting landscape of possibility" (2004, 50).

tradition would yield fascinating insights. In particular, I am drawn to the text's atmospheric, gothic-inspired relationship with the natural environment. There are, for example, intriguing similarities between *NWOT* and Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967), as both texts deal with the construction and mediation of young women's bodies through their tenuous situatedness in the Australian landscape.²⁹ There is a fifty-year gap between the publication of Lindsay's modern masterpiece and Wood's *NWOT*, and yet it seems that many of the issues raised by Lindsay in 1967 remain largely unresolved, and are, in some respects, as we have seen in *NWOT*, aggravated in contemporary Australian society.

This thesis has discussed at length the immediate horror that is generated by the novel's clear contemporaneity: its suggestion that we are already living in the dystopian present, and Yolanda and Verla's choice to live (or very possibly die) in the isolation of the outback rather than return to their old lives is indeed proof of this predicament. To return to their former, habitual lives would be to live alongside the men and women who offered them up to Hardings, who shamed and humiliated them with an onslaught of misogynistic rhetoric, and who actively subordinated them to an objectified, merely bodily existence. There is certainly a temptation, after the intense experience of reading *NWOT*, to take comfort in the ambiguous hope sparked by awareness of Yolanda and Verla's survival, to imagine that they find peace roaming the landscape as animals, but one is left despondent about what this means for us, right now, in contemporary Australia. Herein lies *NWOT*'s most emphatic difference from its futuristic dystopian counterpart. Other dystopian narratives can afford their readers a measure of hope because there is usually some temporal distance between the dystopian narrative and their own world. There is some comfort to be found in the dystopian 'not-yet' of the future since it implies

²⁹See Marguerite Johnson's article in *Australian Book Review*, "Picnic at Hanging Rock Fifty Years on" which discusses this issue in detail. (2017)

there is an opportunity to re-orient, or to resolve the intertextual issues that the dystopia aims to confront. In *NWOT*, we are not granted such relief: there is no dystopian 'not-yet' but perhaps, simply, a dystopian 'too-late'.

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