
Desiring Perception: Finding Utopian Impulses in Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing*

Debra Dudek

In his picture book *The Lost Thing* (2000), Shaun Tan visually depicts a futuristic Melbourne, Australia as a dystopic industrialised modernist cityscape. Melbourne flattens into a sepia-toned city comprising buildings and people that echo each other in their rectangular uniformity. Rounded edges exist as pipes and dials and the tops of umbrellas; the overwhelming ethos of this place is a world of boxes and machinery. There is but one space of relief and difference, which is named UtOqIA. Here cages perched in tea-cups sprout wings, dirigibles gesture with dangling limbs, a peeled banana with a light bulb head chases a miniature space ship. It is a world of fluidity and delight and difference and play. In this paper, I shall investigate the poetics of these two sites and shall argue that utopian impulses exist in the characters of the child, the artist, and the hybrid custodian, all of whom act as figures of resistance and hope in a dystopian world ruled by rigid and repetitive empirical discourses.

In their Introduction to *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, titled 'Dystopia and Histories'. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan utilise Lyman Sargent's definitions of utopia, eutopia, anti-utopia, dystopia, and critical dystopia.² For the purposes of this essay, I am most interested in the critical dystopia designation, which Sargent defines as 'a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than the contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia' (2003, p. 7). Baccolini and Moylan elaborate on this definition by speaking of a 'utopian impulse' within critical dystopias, and it is this impulse that pervades *The Lost Thing*; a utopian enclave exists and remains behind closed doors, but three figures of resistance move within this dystopia and provide a utopian impulse in the text, an impulse that translates into the pleasure of the reading act, which seeps into the dystopian narrative.

Given that one of the crucial aspects of the critical dystopia is the presence of the utopian impulse, I need to define the utopian impulse that is specific to *The Lost Thing*. In his article, 'Science Fiction and Utopia: A Historico-

Philosophical Overview' Carl Freedman distinguishes between three meanings of the term 'Utopia': 'a generic meaning, a political-economic meaning and a philosophical and hermeneutic meaning' (2001, p.72). In the generic description, Freedman traces the history of the literary genre from Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) through *Frankenstein* (1816) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and on to more recent texts, such as H.G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974). Freedman attributes the political-economic meaning to Marx and Engels' deprecation of a non-scientific socialism as 'utopian', and he identifies Ernst Bloch as the most important philosopher of the utopian hermeneutic, which can be understood as 'not so much a matter of description or planning as it is a way of thinking and of reading . . .' (2001, p.73). This concept of Utopia as a way of privileging the act of reading forms the basis of Tan's visual poetics. *The Lost Thing* urges the reader to engage in a radical act of reading that defies linearity; while the narrative may follow a seemingly linear trajectory, the composition of each page challenges the reader to move beyond the linear narrative and into the layered margins.

Each page, except for one page that represents newspaper advertisements and two pages that represent UtOqIA, uses as the background a collage of 'Dad's old physics and engineering textbooks', which is overlaid with the visual painted text and the narrator's hand-written text. In effect, then, each page contains three texts, which can be read separately and in conjunction with each other: the narrator's story unfolds in sentences printed on lined, or ruled, notebook paper seemingly cut and pasted on top of the background collage; the collage of physics and engineering texts underlie and supplement the paintings especially; and the paintings themselves are richly-textured, detailed depictions of a machinistic, industrialized cityscape.

The basic narrative of the text is that a young boy, whose primary pastime is collecting and categorising bottle caps, has found the so-called lost thing on a beach 'a few summers ago'. After trying, without success, to determine to whom the lost thing belongs, the boy takes the lost thing to his artist friend Pete's place, who explains that some things do not 'belong to anyone' but are 'just plain lost' (p.9). From Pete's place, the boy brings the lost thing home, but

the boy's parents do not see the lost thing until the boy brings their attention to it. After hiding the lost thing in the back shed, the boy sees an advertisement in the paper from the Federal Department of Odds and Ends, which advertises 'pigeon holes' to file away 'Objects Without Names', 'Troublesome Artifacts of Unknown Origin', and 'Things That Just Don't Belong' (p.15). The boy takes the lost thing into the city and attempts to find a place for the lost thing via bureaucratic channels. When inside this monolithic bureaucratic space, a custodian hands the boy and the lost thing a card with a squiggling arrow on it, which redirects the boy and the lost thing away from this bureaucratic place of 'forgetting, leaving behind, smoothing over' (p.20) and towards Utopia. The boy leaves the lost thing in this misspelled Utopia and returns to his dystopian world of symmetry, uniformity, classification, and straight lines.

The overwhelming ethos of this on-the-streets dystopia and the lingering urgency of the story is that the world of *The Lost Thing* is a world in which people have lost the ability, or lost the desire, to see or read a world beyond the television, the newspaper, the signage, the dollar. Almost everyone has closed eyes or wears sun-glasses or eye-glasses. It is a world of transaction not interaction, of negotiation not conversation, of work not play. It is a toxic world of sickly-green skies, rusty pipes, and industrial-grey buildings. It is a world in which women look like men, children look like adults, and people look like rectangles. It is a world in which a boy can no longer remember stories and loses the ability to see difference. I read the lost thing as a metaphor for difference, for change in a capitalist world that has ceased to imagine itself beyond its own busyness (read business too) and the disappearance of the lost thing as the disappearance of difference, of imagination. If envisioning or imagining social change is the first step to its implementation, then *The Lost Thing* represents a world of stagnation, a critical dystopia in which Utopia can be glimpsed but never fully seen or imagined, except in the act of reading or seeing differently.

In *The Seeds of Time*, Frederic Jameson offers another way of thinking about Utopia—which can be read usefully alongside Freedman's categories—in order to bring

practices of reading to the foreground of my argument. Jameson claims that:

the dystopia is generally a narrative, which happens to a specific subject or character; whereas the Utopian text is mostly nonnarrative and . . . somehow without a subject-position . . . the dystopia tells the story of an imminent disaster . . . waiting to come to pass in our own near future . . . But the Utopian text does not tell a story at all; it describes a mechanism or even a kind of machine, it furnishes a blueprint rather than lingering upon the kinds of human relations that might be found in a Utopian condition or imagining the kinds of living we wish were available in some stable well-nigh permanent availability.
(1994, p.55-56)²

By bringing together Bloch's idea of Utopia as a 'way of thinking and of reading' with Jameson's notions of the narrative and non-narrative qualities of the dystopia and Utopia respectively, I shall demonstrate how *The Lost Thing* circumscribes the question of whether or not one can imagine the future by suggesting that it is more important to be cognisant of difference and always to read the world beyond a seemingly ruled discourse, even when one is located inside it and subjected by it. *The Lost Thing* invites a radical reading strategy that defies the traditional self-actualisation narrative of children's literature in order to gesture towards, or perhaps glimpse, a vision of a world that celebrates difference.

In his 1982 article, Frederic Jameson asks 'Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?' His short answer to this question is 'No.' En route to this answer, however, Jameson considers the role of Science Fiction (SF) as the genre seemingly created to answer this question in the affirmative; he contends that SF is the genre 'which now registers some nascent sense of the future, and does so in the space on which a sense of the past had once been inscribed' (p.150). One of the ways in which *The Lost Thing* works to inscribe present and future into a space of the past—to describe and transcribe a then and now into a here and now—is by mimicking famous paintings, such as John Brack's 'Collins St., 5p.m.', a painting that I shall discuss later.

Registering some emerging idea of the future is different, however, from *imagining* it, and, in fact, Jameson argues that instead of providing images of the future, SF allows readers to ‘defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*’ (1982, p.151, emphasis in original). Or, as the well-known phrase, which appears on a sign in *The Lost Thing* reminds readers, ‘Today is the tomorrow you were promised yesterday.’ The desolate landscape of this (futuristic) today, through which the boy and the lost thing travel, however, stands as a testament and a harsh critique of (today’s) today, an Australia under the Howard government that advocates uniformity and conservatism.

Jameson’s long answer, then, states that SF’s ‘deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future, to body forth, through . . . the atrophy in our time of what Marcuse has called the *utopian imagination*, the imagination of otherness and radical difference . . .’ (1982, p.153, emphasis in original). It is this ability to imagine, to recognize, and to depict otherness and radical difference that is the foundation of the Utopia that is glimpsed in *The Lost Thing*, and this ‘imagination of otherness and radical difference’ is embodied in the very presence of the lost thing as it moves through and works against the polluted concrete world of tomorrow’s today.

The lost thing does not, however, move through and work against this dystopian world alone. There are three agents of change who facilitate the lost thing’s movement into Ut©qIA: the child narrator, the artist Pete, and the hybrid custodian, all of whom I shall discuss in more detail later in this essay. What I believe is crucial to note here is that Tan embeds his most overtly political statement, a statement that speaks directly to the idea that the book’s dystopia is contemporary Australia, on the same page that the custodian redirects the lost thing away from the bureaucracy of the dystopian world and towards the freedom of the utopian world. In the centre of the page layered into the background collage, there is a typed definition of a vacuum: ‘A perfect vacuum would be an absolutely empty space. This has never been achieved and probably never will be.’ Directly following this definition is a handwritten notation in uppercase letters: ‘HOW ABOUT THE HOWARD GOVERNMENT?’ This question, which

acts as an assertion, challenges the reader to consider what the Howard government has emptied from Australia.

Tan visually articulates two versions of this empty space. One version fills the space with people, buildings, pollution, signs, movement, all exemplified by the collage of words and images pasted as wallpaper, as background, as visual noise; literally there is no space that is not filled. This space, however, is empty of humanity, of interaction. Bodies that can be read as human occupy the page, but they are workers holding signs, flinging docket, reading newspapers. A man tries to smoke and eat an ice cream at the same time. A dog, tied to a post, strains against its leash to bark at the lost thing. A man in a wheelchair faces a rampless staircase. This is an overworked, empirical world that is constructed via visual signifiers of science, mathematics, and economics. Beaches are surrounded by rusted pipelines, which emerge bowel-like from the sand. Suburbs comprise row upon row of sloped red roofs, a modernist dream of repetitious functionality. The central business district rises against the sickly-green sky in monoliths of grey concrete slabs. Logarithms, equations, and statements—such as ‘You are here’, ‘MORE’, ‘MORE’, ‘Per cent by Volume’—appear on signs. This poetics of the number, the straight arrow, the dial, the pipeline highlights ideologies of rationalism, capitalism, and containment.

Tan exemplifies the stagnation, futility, and uniformity of this world by referencing John Brack’s famous painting ‘Collins St., 5p.m.’. Painted in 1955, ‘Collins St., 5p.m.’ depicts a world of workers coursing down Melbourne’s Collins Street in peak hour. Tan’s version, published 45 years later, represents the same mundane robotic existence, although the figures in the foreground are looking even worse for wear. An already gaunt face sports a forehead bandage. Expressionless mouths now pull down into grimaces. A metal circuitry signpost replaces a tree, the singular piece of natural growth in the original. All second floor windows now exist as concrete walls adorned with cogs, a symbol that echoes the drudgery of the masses, who trudge in the same direction.

The curator’s remarks on the placard for Brack’s painting, which hangs at the National Gallery of Victoria, claim that T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Wasteland’ was a source of inspiration

for the painting. The following excerpt from the poem is printed on the placard:

*Unreal city,
Under the brown fog of the winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many,
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.*

Both Brack and Tan visually translate Eliot's narrative poetics of repetition, of the so many walking dead who no longer see a world beyond the space into which their feet will fall. Both paintings represent a middle ground of a faceless trench-coated mass, who tonally blend into the bland building background. Only the monstrous red body of the lost thing towers, for even the boy blends into the crowd. This crowd, however, pays no attention to the lost thing, for the people do not see past the space of their own homogenous mass.

I have been discussing one of Tan's versions of empty space as visual noise, which exemplifies a uniform regularised metronomic beat of marching feet. A second version of this empty space is visual silence. This is a poetics of the grey monolith looming, a desolate backdrop that both diminishes and emphasises the boy and the lost thing. They are shrunken beside the enormity and solidity of the buildings, and they are larger than life because they are the only life. Here is a square devoid of people, except for the towering statues of businessmen with video camera and television heads. Here is an empty road, a plethora of signs, buildings without windows, streets without cars. And within this bleak landscape a small boy rides upon a gigantic red being looking for the squiggling arrows that lead them towards Utopia.

If Tan mimics 'Collins St., 5p.m.' to describe how time and place fold against each other to represent stagnation, futility, and uniformity, then in order to create a poetics of silence, desolation, and alienation, he calls upon the work of Jeffrey Smart.³ Smart's paintings, such as 'Cahill Expressway' (1962), which also hangs in the National Gallery of Victoria, encapsulate a tension between progress and social alienation. The very inventions and innovations that were meant to bring people closer to each other are the

ones that detract from interaction. Smart paints images of stark concrete landscapes, which depict monolithic sweeps of freeway and buildings. In 'Cahill Expressway', a lone individual stands on the curb shadowed by the gloom of an overpass, while an empty freeway ramp curls around and towers above him.

In a similar gesture to what he does with 'Collins St., 5p.m.', Tan mimics the scope and feel and lines of 'Cahill Expressway' for the cover of *The Lost Thing* in order to introduce the tone and critical dystopia that he creates throughout the rest of the book. As with the buildings in 'Collins St., 5p.m.', windows have been filled in, except where they are replaced by toothed wheels. Signage and paper debris clutter the stark desolation, exemplifying the toxicity of the environment. The lost thing and the boy replace the lone figure on the curb, and, ironically, they stand beside a sign that states, 'No Loitering'. A statue shares the horizon and the domination of the horizon with the buildings. In the original, Smart's statue is a war memorial with three soldiers who face away from the viewer, the tallest of whom points to the right, a line that follows the freeway. In Tan's version, the statue facing the viewer is a businessman holding a briefcase whose head is a television. Tan's political revisions create a palimpsest, whose layered meanings serve as a criticism of capitalism, technology, heroism, industry, militarism, and regulation.

Additionally, Tan's version of Smart's silent cityscape serves as the perfect liminal setting for the boy and the lost thing in dystopia looking for Utopia. Against a stark silence of sameness, a silence that is not serene, the lost thing's posthuman, hybrid, enormous body writes against and challenges a poetics of the straight line, of a ruled—which I mean to signify the linearity of the narrative, the straight edges of the buildings, the lined-pages of the boy's story, and this dystopian world governed by a ruler—discourse that seeks to contain. In one of the most revealing images of this series, four large arrows spaced equidistantly from each other direct traffic, but the only traffic is the lost thing that moves out of the corner of the frame so only its top, tail, and backside are visible. The squiggling arrow the lost thing follows is placed in the middle of the four arrows, and it points in the opposite direction. The lost thing's tail echoes the shape of the sign the two characters follow.

While the lost thing embodies difference and resistance as it moves against the dominant pointed discourse, the lost thing's utopian impulse always already exists embedded within the dystopian scene. What is missing from this image is someone to see this act of resistance. Only the reader is positioned as watcher.

Indeed, when the boy and the lost thing finally reach the doorway to Ut⊙qIA, which is located 'in a dark little gap off some anonymous little street', the narrative exemplifies that it is '[t]he sort of place you'd never know existed unless you were actually looking for it.' These words connect ontology to sight, which advocates for a radical close reading of the world, a reading that focuses on the physical act of looking and reading beyond the biological sense of seeing. The non-narrative visual poetic that accompanies this narrative of words combines emptiness, presence, danger, and distance as the reader peers down at the lost thing and the boy through a shadowed maze of smoking, rusted pipes and a toothed wheel, which frame the sunlit doorway to Utopia. The back alley is seemingly empty except for the boy and the lost thing, but the foreground of pipes becomes animate and seems to threaten the two figures who lean towards the darkened doorway, through which the boy and the lost thing must step in order to reach the buzzer on the wall that opens the door to Ut⊙qIA. This threshold scene positions the reader as watcher and watched, someone who is both part of the machinery and part of the group about to discover Ut⊙qIA.

When the reader turns the page, the image of Ut⊙qIA unfolds sideways across both pages, which forces the reader to rotate the book clockwise. Ut⊙qIA exists on a different reading plane, and, in turn, must be read differently. The reader is no longer distanced from the boy and the lost thing, and, instead, sees exactly as they do. Baccolini and Moylan speak about 'eutopia's potential for providing an education of desire and dystopia's potential for providing an education of perception' (2003, p.11). What is revealed as the reader gazes upon this Ut⊙qIA is that the text has been bringing these two concepts together: lost things desire perception. For every closed and sunglasses eye in the dystopia, there is a bevy of open eyes in Ut⊙qIA. An eyeball floats kite-like from the top of a being whose head resembles the toothed wheels ominous outside the

door. A single eye peers out the front end of a dirigible. An accordion-typewriter prints cat's eyes from its head. A heavy-lidded eye on the side of a bird-like instrument rises from a pothole.

That Utopia is glimpsed but is not fully seen or developed and that neither the boy nor the lost thing are shown within the doorway image of the Utopia demonstrates the simultaneity of what I call the 'yes here' and the 'not yet', which I believe are characteristic of Utopias. These phrases intimate Utopia as 'nowhere' and 'now here' and remind readers that Utopia comprises a future that has not happened, a future that comments upon one's present situation, the 'here' of a particular moment, but a future, also, that has not yet, and never will, arrive.

Another way to configure this idea, however, is to consider the hybridity of a critical dystopia that represents both Utopia and dystopia. Baccolini and Moylan state, 'the typical dystopian text is an exercise in a politically charged form of hybrid textuality' (2003, p.6). *The Lost Thing* epitomises this notion of hybrid textuality in both form and content. It blends genres by being both a children's picture book and an adult's commentary about a contemporary political situation. It is narrative in that it follows the events of what happens to the boy and the lost thing, and it is non-narrative in its depiction of a Utopia that is without a singular subject position. Furthermore, the most transgressive act that is being advocated within the pages of the text is also the act in which readers themselves are urged to participate: the very act of transgressive reading, of reading outside the narrative, of reading beyond reading.

This reading beyond reading means recognizing, re-knowing, a figure beyond that which is known. Looking at the overlooked. The lost thing itself is overlooked and is a hybrid text, which no one but the boy sees in the first instance, and his ability to read it extends only as far as his ability to classify it as something that does not belong. In this gesture, the reader, too, seeks to know it and to name it. The lost thing defies classification, however, except in its hybridity, and the text celebrates hybridity by depicting a utopian space in which hybrid beings can and do belong. Here the beings are animal and machine and human and organic and musical instrument. They are grounded yet

they fly. They are caged but have wings. Buildings are permeable, unlike the monolithic density of the dystopian cityspace, and the predominant way of reading this space is to understand it as a site beyond narrative or at least beyond the narrative of the singular and the linear. Here in this misspelled Utopia is an excess of non-narrative tumblings that elude closure, exceed the line, resist the block. Here is delight; it is of light. It is lightness and play and pleasure.

Baccolini and Moylan speak of the paradox involved in finding pleasure within dystopian narratives. They write, 'Paradoxically, dystopias reach toward . . . the non-narrative quality of Utopia precisely by facilitating pleasurable and provocative reading experiences derived from conflicts that develop in the discrete elements of plot and character' (2003, p.6). In this picture book, however, the conflict resides in the experience of reading, but it is a conflict between reader and text rather than a conflict contained within the text itself. Here, too, the radical potential for transformation refuses to stay on the page. The book does not stay still. Readers must send their eyes beyond the ruled lines of the story and into the margins of the page. Turn the book upside down and another reading reveals itself.

These revelations exist in the visual structure as well as the narrative structure. While I have primarily been analysing the margins as visual innovations that challenge linear reading practices, *The Lost Thing* also resists the normative through marginalised characters. As Baccolini and Moylan write,

the new critical dystopias allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse within the work. In fact, 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, p.7)

While *The Lost Thing* is not a novel and the individual—if one thinks of 'the individual' as the child—does not rise

above his subjugation at the end of the text, the reader is offered hope in three ways: firstly, the book resists closure; secondly, three 'ex-centric subjects' resist hegemonic rule; and thirdly, a space of contestation opens when the reader derives pleasure from the oppositional reading the text invites.

Jameson advocates for a theory of the political unconscious through which 'groups of a given collectivity at a certain historical conjuncture anxiously interrogate their fate, and explore it with hope or dread' (1982, p.148). Part of the problem of this interrogation by way of, or through, narrative is the contradiction between requiring closure and acknowledging that 'closure or the narrative ending is the mark of that boundary or limit beyond which thought cannot go. The merit of SF is to dramatize this contradiction on the level of plot itself, since the vision of future history cannot know any punctual ending of this kind, at the same time that its novelistic expression demands some such ending' (p.148). The picture book itself moves beyond the plot of the usual SF text, and the back of this picture book loops into the beginning of the plot, so the reading process cycles back on itself, refusing closure, resisting fixity.

Indeed, reading the plot is not the most fruitful way to read *The Lost Thing*. The visual text operates as a political unconscious, as a more complex and enriching way of transforming both reader and text, which places the characters of the artist and the boy—who is the focaliser for the reader outside the text—as figures of change. Jameson claims that a 'structural impossibility of utopian representation' leads to 'the transformation of the cultural [and utopian] text into an *auto-referential* discourse, whose content is a perpetual interrogation of its own conditions of possibility' (1982, p.156, emphasis in original). This picture book reshapes this 'structural impossibility' by changing the structure of text itself. *The Lost Thing* refuses to be entirely contained by such boundaries as front and back covers, for instance. The image on the front cover refers to yet does not exist in the body of the book, even while it refers to another image beyond its own pages. *The Lost Thing* positions the reader to read beyond reading. It invites the reader to read the margins, which announce the book's competing ideologies—'REGULATORY FUNCTIONS' and 'DIFFERENTIATION'—and to engage

with the subtitle, 'A tale for those who have more important things to pay attention to', which challenges the reader to think of anything more important than how the Howard government threatens to turn the city into a space emptied of humanity. The 'conditions of possibility' to which *The Lost Thing* refers are those conditions that allow for the imagination and inclusion of difference, which may be realised via agents of transformation: the child, the artist, and the hybrid custodian. Indeed it is the narrator's post-card to his artist-friend Pete, which appears on the book's back cover, that urges the reader back into the book. Pete becomes the holder of the child's memory; the 'you' to whom the story is being told are both the narrator-reader and Pete, both insider-outsiders, who still retain the potential to imagine and to perceive.

Children in general often represent hope and transformation because of their assumed innocence and their anticipatory futures. They have their whole lives ahead of them, and they have not been tainted by the polluted world. *The Lost Thing* challenges this assumption and instead demonstrates how children embody the ideologies of the world to which they belong. Indeed, given that the ideology of capitalism permeates this picture book, the child narrator initially can name the thing only as lost because apparently it does not belong to someone. The main characteristic of the boy narrator is that he collects and classifies bottle-tops, demonstrating how fully he has entered into an empirical epistemology, one which relies on positivism and linear thought.

A more hopeful way of reading the narrator, however, is to recognise that collecting bottle-tops relies on a close reading of his world. The boy must both look for and see the bottle-tops that litter the ground. Part of the problem, however, is that, like the Collins Street masses, the boy usually does not look up; his eyes roam the ground. Regardless, on this particular occasion, he 'stopped to look up', which is when he 'first saw the thing'. That the boy still has the impulse to look up and to see difference, to see something that defies his classification, suggests that he may be considered an ex-centric subject, who is a potential agent for transformation. Additionally, if one reads the boy as an individual who ultimately has failed to resist being subjugated by the system, then hope transfers

to the reader, who is positioned to learn from the boy's experience—and by the visual poetics of the text—to look closely and to read difference.

Another agent of transformation, who embodies a utopian impulse in this dystopian world, is the narrator's friend Pete, the artist. He is the character to whom the child turns when he does not know what to do with the lost thing: "'I'm trying to find out who owns it,'" I told him.' Pete's response, and his gesture while responding, identify him as a liminal character, a figure who is a potential agent for change. Tellingly, Pete takes off his sun-glasses and wipes them, which links him to the shaded world but also demonstrates that he has the flexibility to move between worlds, that he has not yet become entrenched within the ideology of that dystopian world. 'Maybe it doesn't belong to anyone,' he says. Pete's utterance opens the possibility for another way of being for both the boy and the reader, and it is at this juncture that the boy takes the lost thing home with him.

While Pete's utterance acts as a crucial turning point for the narrator's potential development, Pete's appearance connects him more fully to the utopian space and to the lost thing itself. Pete's blonde hair tentacles out from the top of his head, which recalls both the lost thing's tail and the squiggling arrows that point towards Ut⊙qIA. The taps on his shirt anticipate the taps in the utopian world, a world of fluidity and excess that highlights the stagnation of the rusted-pipe dystopian world. Pete's studio, his shirt, even the flesh tone of his body, defy the dun-coloured world around him. He is all brightness and colour. His painting is an abstract composition with squiggled fragments of pinks and yellows and blues. A squiggling arrow points to his left ear. Inside his studio, Pete defies the world of ownership, the world in which people see through sun-glasses to keep out light that does not exist. Tellingly, Pete is not a figure who moves in the public space of the city, and it is up to the child to move through this dystopian world to help find Utopia.⁴

The final figure of transformation who guides the child to Ut⊙qIA is the hybrid custodian. A figure who passes as a worker, by dressing and acting the part, becomes the most transgressive agent for change. The reader sees the

custodian from the back, so the only signs by which to read this being are via the tentacle-shaped tail that pokes through its jacket and the analogue tape reels that serve as shoulder blades. Thus, the custodian is connected to Utopia and to memory. Its body displays its ability to remember on the outside of its form, exceeding the limits of flesh and clothing. Another figure, like Pete, whom the reader does not see in the public cityspace, the hybrid custodian is a figure from Ut⊙qIA who resides in the dystopian world in order to guide beings away from the place of ‘forgetting, leaving behind, smoothing over’. The hybrid custodian passes the squiggling arrow card to the boy, so that he might lead the lost thing to Ut⊙qIA.

Naomi Jacobs, in her article ‘Posthuman Bodies and Agency in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis*’, argues that the posthuman hybrid subject offers a ‘radically changed relation to difference, identity, and agency’ and is therein a ‘compelling image of hope’ (2003, p.92). The lost thing, the hybrid custodian, and all the figures in Ut⊙qIA may be characterised as posthuman insofar as they challenge what it means to be human in both body and subjectivity, especially when placed beside or outside the impenetrable dystopian world where humans appear to have lost their ability to relate to each other. These posthuman figures cross over the textual threshold between Utopia and dystopia to bring a hopeful utopian impulse into a seemingly impenetrable world. That these figures do exist and have permeated this ruled discourse suggests that there is a reason to hope that a future world might include such a poetics of difference as suggested by the difference of their bodies which exceed the line and cross the borders, bringing a hybrid visual poetic into a homogenous repetitive world.

The Lost Thing creates a poetics of difference and play, which is most powerfully conveyed through the visual text and which socially grounds a world that is textually pre-constructed. While the child narrator may represent a product of an empty space that the Howard government creates, together with other liminal figures such as the artist and the hybrid custodian, this child narrator brings a utopian impulse, an impulse whose imperative it is to see difference and to resist uniformity, into a dystopian space. By creating liminal figures who are capable of resistance and of change, Tan offers strategies for ways of

navigating and changing a textuality that erases difference. By challenging the reader to engage in a close reading of his own text, Tan advocates for a close reading of the world beyond the text.

NOTES

1. ‘Utopia—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space; Eutopia or positive utopia—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived; Dystopia or negative utopia—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived’, as distinct from ‘Anti-utopia—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or some particular eutopia’, in R. Baccolini and T. Moylan, ‘Introduction: Dystopia and Histories’, p.11.
2. In his article “‘Look into the dark’: On Dystopia and the *Novum*’, Tom Moylan calls attention to problems with Jameson’s rather extreme characterisation of dystopia as narrative and utopia as mostly non-narrative. He states, ‘however much I disagree with its extreme opposition, [Jameson’s point] does clarify how ‘dystopias’ privilege the plot elements of the discrete register of the text . . . and how ‘utopias’ work from the iconic register . . . wherein what is significant about the alternative utopian world is not so much what it describes but rather what it does not, what it has negated in the author’s social environment’ (p.70).
3. On the back acknowledgement page, Tan apologises to Jeffrey Smart and John Brack, which I read as an allusion to his stylistic mimicry of their work.
4. Naomi Jacobs, in ‘Posthuman Bodies and Agency’, claims that in dystopian narratives, ‘the individual who would choose or act ‘otherwise’ . . . will be reprogrammed, exiled, or killed, so that the social fabric may maintain its impenetrability’ (p.92). This danger exists for all three

agents of change, so all must in some way 'pass' as though they are not acting 'otherwise', or, they must live as exiles, which, in effect, is the way the artist and the hybrid custodian survive, by remaining away from the public space of the city. This notion of the impenetrability of the social fabric also helps clarify the poetics of the utopian space as one of openness.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Debra Dudek received her PhD in literature from the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. At present, she works as a Research Fellow at Deakin University, where she is involved in an ARC-funded project with Clare Bradford and Wenche Ommundsen, which analyses multiculturalism and Children's Literature. She is especially interested in the picture book. She has published internationally on poetics, Postcolonial Studies, and Comparative Literature.