



Decoding the Dystopia of *The Water Knife*

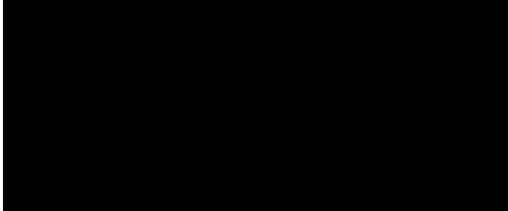
Taylor Sheppard

Acknowledgment

This book is dedicated to my six fluffy angels; Sullivan Kat Cobain, Bellatrix LeStrange, Taurk Makto, Renu, Tompa and Mawey. This is also dedicated to Sara Knox, for her patience, kindness and helpful guidance.

Authenticity Statement

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.



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Introduction

In dystopian fiction, texts contain speculations of a nightmarish future, which can be uncovered through a close literary examination. Paolo Bacigalupi's timely dystopia *The Water Knife* offers insights into the environmental issues around water resourcing that currently shape the southwestern United States water crisis, imagining a future for that crisis in social upheaval, unending drought, the displacement of populations and bitter political—and para-military—contests over water. This project aims to conduct a reading of *The Water Knife* as a contemporary dystopia, and to contextualise that reading by use of the non-fiction texts about the Southwestern United States water crisis. In what ways does this text demonstrate the dystopian genre is rising to the challenge of environmental crisis?

The dystopian literary field has been well established for the last 80 years. Science fiction has been identified as a genre since 1926, when Hugo Gernsback coined the term, and began publishing the science fiction pulp magazine *Amazing Stories*.¹ Dystopian fiction was a subgenre that existed beside science fiction since its official birth, with books like *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and *The Sleeper Wakes* by H.G. Wells. However, it was never fully popularised until after 1945, when the Western world, particularly Britain, felt the rising fear of Fascism. This was a result of the memory of the Holocaust, the reports of Stalinist atrocities, and the insidious spread of right-wing populism, particularly in the United States.² The literary analysis of science fiction officially began in 1947, with the publication of J. O. Bailey's historical study *Pilgrims through Space and Time: Trends and Patterns in Scientific and Utopian Fiction*.³ There are many academics who study the dystopian literary field, and some scholars are particularly of note, such as Gary K. Wolfe. His focus is predominantly on the blurring of lines between science fiction and other genres such as fantasy and horror. He has acknowledged that the dystopian genre plays a key role in this relationship. Wolfe writes:

Destroying the world, or the universe, may well be the endgame of science fiction's long, troubled affair with time and history (...). There is the tradition of utopian and dystopian fiction, in which stasis begins as an ideal and ends as a nightmare. Although utopian fiction for much of its history sought to be an active agent of change, the twentieth century has seen it largely supplanted

¹ Tymn, "Science Fiction," 45.

² Hammond, "The Twilight of Utopia," 664.

³ Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres*, 193.

by its sister genre of dystopian fiction, which tends to portray societies in which change is nearly impossible to achieve.⁴

The dystopian narrative shows the myth of human progress, both social and technological. Darko Suvin broadly concurs with Wolfe, but suggests there must be strict characteristics that define the dystopian genre. Suvin praised modern science in his series of essays, *Metamorphoses*, as ‘an open-ended corpus of knowledge’, which is why he thinks that “SF will be the more significant and truly relevant the more clearly it eschews final solutions, be they the static utopia of the Plato-More model, the more fashionable static dystopia of the Huxley-Orwell model, or any similar metamorphosis of the Apocalypse.”⁵ It is quite clear that dystopias must propagate some form of hope, where a solution can be found for the current social and political problems. In *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*, Suvin made this clear when he argued that dystopias that are “static and closed” are not truly dystopian but anti-utopian, and that these anti-utopias don’t do “justice to the immense possibilities of modern SF in an age polarized between the law of large numbers and ethical choice.”⁶

Andrew Milner agrees with this. He argues that science fiction, particularly dystopian fiction, is a good place for any thought experiment about political social issues, particularly the politics of climate change.⁷ He suggests that climate change based dystopian fictions are not taken seriously by society, but they are important in understanding the environmental issues that need to be resolved. This is likely due to utopias being more appealing to an audience looking for a confirmation of perceived pre-existing utopia that formed in the 1980’s. This a capitalist pseudo-utopian ideal rational choice and the free market, with a hidden dark side of “total exploitation and administration of workers and consumers through a worldwide division of labour in a world market of goods and services,” which abandons the desire to protect and preserve multiple environments and vulnerable communities to prioritise a more brutal and merciless economy.⁸ I think that dystopian fiction is just as important as utopian fiction. The utopia is the contemplation of possibilities and “historical and collective wish-fulfilment”⁹ while the dystopia is the contemplation of solutions by challenging a problematic social order.¹⁰ If we dismiss dystopian fiction as a genre worthy of study, we would fail to acknowledge the

⁴ Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres*, 66.

⁵ Suvin, *Metamorphosis*, 100.

⁶ Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions*, 106-107.

⁷ Milner, “Changing the Climate,” 834.

⁸ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 184.

⁹ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, xiii.

¹⁰ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 182.

possibility of a future that is problematic, and we would fail to contemplate possible solutions those problems. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* was one environmental dystopia that has had critical and scholarly attention, as has Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. A fair few environmental dystopian novels have been released in the past decade, and the most recent ones have not been studied by the literary field.

This brings us to the novel that I plan to study: *The Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi. It is a dystopian novel that was published in 2015, and it is an imagining of what the present southwestern United States water crisis might become, and the environmental issues that surround it. It contains 47 chapters, which are split between the narrative perspectives of the three protagonists, Angel, Lucy and Maria. Angel Velasquez is a detective, assassin and spy who 'cuts' water for the Southern Nevada Water Authority, which ensures that its lush archology developments can thrive in Las Vegas. His boss, Catherine Case, sends him on a mission to investigate an incredibly important water source that was allegedly discovered in Phoenix. His quest to find it takes him through an oppressive desert landscape that is a near-future South-Western United States devastated by climate change and government-corrupted water management. Along the way, he runs into Lucy Monroe, an independent Canadian journalist who has hardened to the desert. She is searching to answer to the suspicious murder of her friend Jamie Sanderson, a water department lawyer who found the explosive documents connected to the Phoenix water supply. After their encounter in the morgue where Jamie's body was found, they form an alliance to find the documents. Meanwhile, the narrative follows Maria Villarosa, a young Texan refugee who dreams of escaping north for a better life. As she navigates the perilous conditions of the narco gang who own her shelter and her own attempt save money for an escape, she caved in to the pressure of her prostitute friend Sarah, and they both gave sexual service to an archology fiver, Michael Ratan. Michael Ratan gives Maria a copy of *Cadillac Desert*, with the documents hidden between the pages. He and Sarah are killed as Maria and Angel meet each other, and they are chased the Californian Feds and Julio, and former colleague of Angel's who went rogue. Julio kidnapped Lucy as she pursued Michael for the documents, Angel kills him to save her. Angel and Lucy go on the run together, and they discover that Case has sent out to kill Angel under false allegations of disloyalty. This is where they figure out that Maria has the documents, and she has travel to the Colorado River swim across it to escape North. After she has escaped the narco gang, and the refugee city has burn to the ground, she is determined to leave Phoenix for good. This is where Angel and Lucy find her and demand she hand over the documents. Angel promises Maria that she will have a

place to live in the archology in exchange for the documents. Maria agrees, only to have Lucy pull a gun on Angel and demand he give it to her so she can use it to save Phoenix. Maria shoots Lucy in the neck and tells her that Phoenix cannot be saved, and she wants to live in the archology. Angel takes Lucy in his arms, and the three of them wait for helicopters to take them to the archology.

There has been little scholarly attention paid to *The Water Knife*. There are critical responses in the form of book reviews of *The Water Knife*, but it has not been studied at any depth. I will also gain insight into the cultural moment of reception by the United States. This thesis will be separated into two chapters. The first chapter of this thesis will be a close reading of *The Water Knife*, focusing on the novel's use of cognitive estrangement and how closely it ties to common dystopian tropes. Cognitive estrangement is the presence of a novum (constructions of other-worlds or innovations) in a story or novel, which acts a new device that compels the reader to imagine a different way of conceiving the world. The last chapter will discuss *The Water Knife* in the context of the Western American water crisis, and the many references to this present issue in the novel. This chapter will also connect the present Western American water crisis to the novel's dystopian future, which will unveil the novels message on the crisis. This brings us to my research question: how does the dystopian novel *The Water Knife* represent the political and environmental fears of its time?

Reading *The Water Knife*

The Water Knife is a 2015 dystopian novel based in the south-western American desert. It is a future that depicts what may happen if the Californian water crisis continues without an intervention or a solution. This chapter will conduct a close reading of the novel through the literary theories of Thomas Moylan, Darko Suvin, Fredric Jameson, Raffaella Baccolini and Brian Stableford. These theorists are experts in the dystopian and utopian genres. They examine common dystopian tropes and literary techniques such as cognitive estrangement. Their work is a solid starting point to examine the novel. I will examine the novel's use of cognitive estrangement, and its ability to depict the horror of its desert nightmare. I will compare the novel to a variety of dystopian tropes to explore which ones are aligned with it, and the way the novel might subvert others.

Cognitive estrangement

One of the most common literary techniques in any science fiction narrative is cognitive estrangement. The term was coined by Darko Suvin, who describes it as a technique unique to science fiction. According to Suvin, “[t]he effect of such factual reporting of Fictions is one of confronting a set normative system - a Ptolemaic-type closed world picture - with a point of view or look implying a new set of norms;”¹¹ this creates cognitive estrangement. As I have mentioned in the introduction, Cognitive Estrangement is simply defined as the presence of a novum (constructions of other-worlds or innovations) in a story or novel, which acts a new device that compels the reader to imagine a different way of conceiving the world. Cognitive Estrangement can make a narrative read as the personal biographical accounts of a science fiction character, with a normalising feel and assuming common knowledge in what the reader does not know; almost like the diary of a modern teenager, read by an 18th century scholar. Cognitive estrangement is a technique that is used heavily in *The Water Knife* to depict the horror of the south-east American desert in the throes of apocalyptic drought. This section will explore the novel's many operations of cognitive estrangement.

The first operation we see is in the first chapter, where assassin and detective Angel Velasquez receives the legal documents to complete his next mission, which is not yet revealed to the reader. Here, he expresses his thoughts on Charles Braxton, a lawyer working for the C.E.O. of Southern Nevada Water Authority, Catherine Case;

¹¹ Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 6.

Angel, in turn, had spent the meeting trying to figure out how a man like Braxton had gotten so large. People outside Cypress didn't fatten up like Braxton did. In all Angel's early life, he'd never seen a creature quite like Braxton, and he found himself fascinated, admiring the fleshy raiment of a man who knew himself secure.¹²

This highlights how unusual it is to see a fat person in this drought-ravaged and economically collapsed dystopia. This is a world where it is abnormal to live in a healthy and comfortable condition. This hints at the starving world that exists outside of Cypress 1. It is also an early hint to the horrific conditions of starvation and suffering that this dystopia has to offer. As well we see hints at the extremity of this dystopia's environment through Angel's comparison between its dry heat and the wet moisture of humans through a helicopter's heat vision;

Human beings. Some of the coolest things out there. Each one tagged, not a single one knowing it.¹³

This shows a sweltering and barren landscape so oppressive and extreme that the human body is one of coldest and wettest things to exist in it. This can create a feeling of shock, not only at the magnitude of this nightmare desert, but the way that it is normalised by Angel and the other characters. Further on in the chapter, Angel describes the view from a window of the archology:

Billboard promises of shows and parties and drinks and money filtered through military glass, and became attack and entry points. Close-packed urban canyons designed to funnel desert winds became sniper alleys. Iridescent photovoltaic-paint roofs became drop zones. The Cypress arcologies became high-ground advantage and priority attack zones, thanks to the way they dominated the Vegas skyline and loomed over everything else, bigger and more ambitious than all of Sin City's previous forays into the fantastical combined.¹⁴

This describes the finer details of the dystopian world, giving it the same importance as the narrative. This is a classic trope in science fiction narrative context. This ties to Thomas Moylan's argument in relation to cognitive estrangement. Moylan argues that the reader of science fiction must take the text's alternative world seriously. He argues that this "iconic

¹² Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 5.

¹³ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 9.

¹⁴ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 10.

textual register” and its “bits of information accumulating down the pages” must be imagined and learned to understand the whole meaning of the text. To Moylan, this is more important than the characters or the plot.¹⁵ The above quote supports this, because it is a depiction of the state of mind that citizens of the South-Western United States have in this future. The town below the archology is simply another battlefield for war. This shows that chaos and violence is normal in this future, and peace is a foreign concept. Near the end of the chapter, the reader can finally see the nature of Angel’s mission; the destruction of the Carver City water treatment plant, which was supplying water to suffering citizens. The plant’s owner, Simon Yu, fought hard to stop it, and this was a surprise to Angel;

Angel decided he kind of liked the balding bureaucrat. Simon Yu was dedicated. Had the feel of one of those good-government guys who got a job because he wanted to make the world a better place. Genuine old-school civil servant genuinely dedicated to the old-school benefit of the people.¹⁶

In this dystopia, altruistic politicians are a dying species. People do not care about each other anymore, unless there is money involved. This is what makes Yu’s actions seem so bizarre to Angel. This rapacious and jaded perspective is a tie back to present-day America, where state politicians in the South-Western states were rarely interested the welfare of its citizens. This is supported by Marc Reisner, as he states that water projects were prioritised by politicians in the West. He argues that this water-obsessed corruption was so rampant that “[p]oliticians of every stripe have sacrificed their most sacred principles on the altar of water development.”¹⁷ I will not delve deeper into the text’s parallels with the present-day America until the next chapter. Nonetheless, cognitive estrangement is used in this narrative to show political corruption having reached a horrifically new level, to the point that basic empathy is considered odd.

In the following chapter of the novel, we are introduced to the journalist Lucy Monroe. Lucy is determined to expose the water-hungry corruption that created this drought-ravaged dystopia, regardless of the consequences to her life. This chapter starts with a description of her living conditions as she checks the amount of water left in her personal supply;

The few streetlights that hadn’t been shot out by gangs stood as dim moons struggling against a reddish haze. The storm was thickening even as she

¹⁵ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 25.

¹⁶ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 16.

¹⁷ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 12.

watched, the streetlights collapsing into blackness, leaving retina stains of imagined glows in their place. The light going out of the world. (...) Somewhere outside, a dog was howling for safety. A stray maybe. It would be dead in the morning, another victim of Big Daddy Drought. (...) Unconsciously, she checked [her water tank's] level, knowing before she saw the numbers that she still had twenty gallons, yet unable to prevent herself from checking the little LED meter anyway, confirming the count she had in her own head.¹⁸

Here, the reader sees how deeply this torrid landscape impacts the daily routine of its citizens. We also how this world has become familiar to the character, through their experiences being described in a tired and cynical tone. It has become normal for her to hear brutally violent sounds outside her home. The off-the-cuff thought of a dying dog appears shocking for the reader, but it speaks to the extremity of death and destruction of this future through its commonality. Her casual paranoia about her water supply reinforces the water being so scarce that it is worth its weight in gold. This shows the reader how a torrid dystopia can permeate into all aspects of life until it becomes normalised. This normalisation plays out in the daily news stories and individual post that Lucy reads on social media;

More sites were lighting up with the story. Arizona local stations and personalities, beating the drums of regional anger, generating hits and ad revenue off the battlefield images as they inflamed local hatreds. More revenue would be flowing in as the comments blew up and people threw the story onto their social networks. (...) Dozens of new comments, hashtag #PhoenixDowntheTubes:

Supposed to leave again today, except for another damn storm. #Depressed
#PhoenixDowntheTubes

How you know you're at the end: You're drinking your own piss and telling yourself its spring water. #PhoenixDowntheTubes #ClearsacLove

Score! We're going North! #BCLottery #Seeyoubitches

Choppers in the canyon. Anyone know who's out there? #CoRiver
#BlackHelicopters

¹⁸ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 22.

They're still outside my door! Where the fuck is the cavalry?!!

@PhoenixPD

Don't use Route 66. #CaliMilitia #DronePack #MM16

WTF? When did Samm's Bar Close? #Ineedadrink

#PhoenixDowntheTubes

Pic: PHOENIX RISING Billboard stuccoed with Clearbags. LOL.

#PhoenixDowntheTubes. #PhoenixArts #PhoenixRising¹⁹

This not only shows Lucy's pessimistic perception of Phoenix and its gradual collapse as just another day of work and shows that this dystopic portrait of witnessing disaster would not be unfamiliar to a reader from their own world. Social media is used to document this dystopic horror, to point that it is almost normalised. This reinforces Moylan's argument on the historical context behind dystopian texts. He references Suvin's argument of science fiction being a political genre; one that is "a literary form capable of: breaking open the prevailing hegemonic hold on reality."²⁰ This is Moylan extension of Suvin's analysis of science fiction as a genre "distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional novum (...) validated by cognitive logic."²¹ A novum is the construction of a different fiction world that is usually created by or exposed to extreme environmental change.²² I agree with both of them, as it highlights the importance of dystopian texts being products of their time. As such, it is no surprise the world depicted in the *The Water Knife* would perform the normalisation of horror through the Twitter post of its suffering citizen. This is a critical reflection of the armchair political protests seen in present-day social media. Through Lucy's internal musings, she describes the population of Phoenix, which is part of the horrific dystopian drought. Here, the reader can see what kind of journalist she was before she became emotionally invested in Phoenix;

The residents of Phoenix and its suburbs were the new Texans, those Merry Perry fools, and Lucy and her colleagues from CNN and Xinhua and *Kindle Post* and Agence France-Presse and Google/*New York Times* were more than happy to feed on the corpse. The country had watched Texas fall apart, so

¹⁹ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 25.

²⁰ Moylan, *Scapes of the Untainted Sky*, 45.

²¹ Suvin, *Metamorphosis*, 63.

²² Trexler and Johns-Putra, "Climate change in literature and literary criticism," 186.

everyone knew how it worked. Phoenix was Austin, but bigger and badder and more total. (...) #BetterThemThanUs.²³

The opportunistic these journalists shows a presence of cold observation from those outside the South-West American desert. This is the negligence that Lucy once practiced before she became deeply involved in Phoenix. This world is so deeply impacted by the catastrophic drought that social nuances have changed. This is illustrated as Lucy talks to Jamie at the Hilton 6 bars, and she stares at the bartender's gold skull rings;

The skulls had stood out to Lucy, because she'd looked up from them to meet the bartender's dark brown eyes and known that if it weren't for Jamie's polished presence, the bartender would have run her out a long time ago. Even aid workers had enough grace to scrub up before they came down to the bar to drown out the memory of their day's work. Lucy just looked like another Texas refugee.²⁴

This shows some of this world's social nuances that would seem completely foreign to the present-day reader, who lives in a society with a less rigid hierarchy, and no socially defined systems between them. This is form of cognitive estrangement that is highly detailed, as the reader can see fine details of hierarchy between groups. We can see that Texans are at the bottom of the pecking order, and even looking like one can attract oppressive treatment. This also shows how detached Lucy is from her past self as an outside journalist. It is clear Lucy has developed a need to improve the conditions of Phoenix as best as she can, and that means her detachment as an outsider has been sacrificed. We can see the difference between her and her past by the motives of the other outside organisations;

Behind them the low murmured conversations of aid workers and UN intervention people mingled with the surreal strains of Finnish dirge music. USAID. Salvation Army. Red Crescent drought specialists. Doctors Without Borders. Red Cross. And then others: Chinese investment bankers from the Taiyang, down out of their arcology and slumming. Halliburton and Ibis execs, doing water prospecting, insisting that they could frack aquifers into gushers if Phoenix would just foot the bill. Private security guards off duty and on. Bureaucrat-level narcos. A few well-heeled Merry Perry refugees,

²³ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 27.

²⁴ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 30.

speaking in low tones with the coyotes who would spirit them across the final boundaries and lead them north. That odd mix of broken souls, bleeding hearts, and predators who occupied the shattered places of the world. Human spackle, filling the cracks of disaster.

Jamie seemed to read her mind. “They’re all vultures. Every one of them.”²⁵

This shows how the collapsed cities of the Southwest can bring out the worst aspects of human nature. Even the outside spectators are not immune, because they are vultures that feed on the disaster. This shows how far removed Lucy is to her past, as now even her motives for her reports have changed. This also shows how corrupt everything has become.

The working of cognitive estrangement in the novel can be seen when Maria attempts to teach herself Chinese;

Gong jin meant “liter” in Chinese. *Y* was for yuan. Everyone who lived anywhere near the Taiyang Arcology knew that number and that cash, because all the workers got paid in yuan, and the Chinese had built the pump, too. ‘Cause, friendship, right?

Maria had been learning Chinese. She could count to one thousand and write the characters, too. *Yi, er, san, si, wu, liu, chi, ba...* she’d been learning the tones. She’d been learning as fast as she could from the disposable tablets that the Chinese passed out to anyone who asked.²⁶

This shows China’s economic dominance in the drought ravaged world. Chinese building companies have taken over a large part of the South-Western desert. They have an economic dictatorship over the most vulnerable population. To adapt to this change, learning Chinese becomes essential. This brings cognitive estrangement, as the present-day reader is accustomed to American economic dominance. This dominance suggests that the American economy collapsed. This supports Moylan’s argument about language being a means of control in dystopian worlds. In a dystopia, totalitarian or authoritarian regimes manipulate, control, and repress language to maintain power. Political memory, history and culture are erased and rewritten. Moylan states that these forms of power rely on “both coercion and consensus,” and that “the material force of the economy and the disciplinary apparatuses (...) controls the new

²⁵ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 31.

²⁶ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 36.

social order and keep it running.”²⁷ Through economic power, the Chinese consequently gained control over language. They also control technology, as Maria was told by her father;

Magic, he'd said. Big science. (...) The Chinese knew how to make big things happen. Those *cabrones* knew how to build. The Chinese had money, and they made magic happen—and they'd train anyone to use their tech who was willing to sweat a 12/12 shift. (...) He described the massive construction printers that poured solids into form, the shriek of injection molds, the assembled pieces being craned up into the sky. (...) They had silicon PV sheeting that they poured over walls and windows to generate power. Dumped it on like paint, and next thing you knew, you were full electric. None of the rolling brownouts that hit the rest of Phoenix for the Taiyang. No way. Those people made their own power.²⁸

This illustrates the amazing advanced technology that the Chinese have developed, and yet it is used for power, greed and exploitation. They pillage ground water from the Phoenix residents while they suffer in poverty and slowly die of thirst. There is a water pump in the middle of the Texan refugee town made as an apparent alliance between China and the Red Cross.²⁹ The residents cannot access their own water without paying a fee. No one can obtain water unless they can read the price sign on the pump.³⁰ This is how the Chinese gained power over language. As Jameson argues, Utopianism, as well as its subgenre Dystopia, has an uneasy relationship with Capitalism. It has struggled to fight against the insidious “universal belief, not only that [Capitalism] is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socioeconomic system is conceivable, let alone practically available.”³¹ This defeatist attitude is represented in Maria, who is just getting by, and trying to get out of Phoenix. This hopeless acceptance is a subversive type of cognitive estrangement forces the reader to confront their own apathy towards their capitalist present.

When the reader is led back to Angel's perspective, they are introduced to Catherine Case. She is one of the prime movers in the political struggle over water rights. As she talks to Angel about instinctual habit, she glosses over the state of America as a nation;

²⁷ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 148.

²⁸ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 37.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 39.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

³¹ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, XII.

“Or maybe there never were any rules. Maybe all we have are habits. Things we do without even knowing why.” She laughed. “You know my daughter still says the Pledge of Allegiance? I’ve got three different militias assigned to hunting down Zoners and Texans who cross our border, and Jessie is still putting her hand on her breast and saying the Pledge. Figure that one out. Every single state has its own border patrol, and my kid still calls herself an American.”³²

This is example of cognitive estrangement where the state of America is mentioned as fact in a casual conversation. Through this, the reader can see the extent to which Catherine Case has contributed to the destruction of the nation as the head of Southern Nevada Water Authority. America is no longer a unified country, as each state has become a small separate country struggling over diminishing vital resources.

As the reader turns back to the journalist Lucy Monroe, they see that desert nightmare does not reach beyond the American West. We see Lucy having a Skype conversation with her sister Anna. Anna lives in Canada, and her living conditions are completely different to Lucy;

Anna, who still had all her East Coast manners and still sent physical Christmas cards every year—real cards and real paper, crafted with real scissors and the help of her sweetly real children. Intricate images of snowflakes and evergreens accompanying red-ribboned gift boxes containing replacement REI microfilters for Lucy’s dust mask. Anna always was there, reaching out. Maintaining contact. Caring.

“Lucy?”

There wasn’t a single bar on Anna’s windows, Lucy realized. Her window glass was beaded with rain, and her garden beyond the glass was emerald, and there wasn’t a single bar to keep Anna’s family safe. (...)

“Look, Mommy!” Stacie shrieked. “Grumpy Pete’s eating it!” Peals of laughter. (...)

It was surreal, their two realities separated by a thin wafer of computer screen, so close that Lucy imagined that if she were to take a hammer, she

³² Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 59.

could crack the distance between them and pass through to that green safe place.³³

This shows how much Lucy has become accustomed to her desert nightmare. This is because her old home seems so foreign to her now, like an impossible utopia. There is a major literary technique here that builds tension and suspense for the reader. The tension starts when Lucy notices that, on Anna's window, 'there wasn't a single bar to keep Anna's family safe.'³⁴ The tension is broken by the children's happy screams on the Skype camera. Although it shocks the reader for only a second, the screams act as a hint to the danger that is looming. After the call ends Lucy feels a small crisis of existence, and she wonders if Anna's paradise is real;

Lucy smeared muddy sweat off her brow and wondered if she even knew what true blue looked like anymore.

It was possible that she stared up at the sky, and called it blue or gray or tan, and it was none of those colors. Dust eternally hazed the air here, and if not dust, then the gray smoke of California forest fires.

Maybe she'd forgotten the color blue, and it existed only in her imagination now. Maybe she'd been down in Phoenix for so long that she now made up names for all sorts of things that no longer existed.

Blue. Gray. Clear. Cloudy. Life. Death. Safety.

She could call the sky blue, and maybe it was. She could call her life safe, and maybe she'd survive. But really, maybe none of those things existed anymore. Blue was just as much a mirage as Ray Torres and his patronizing smile. Nothing lasted in Phoenix.³⁵

In this section of close character viewpoint, we can see how experiences and memories can influence a language. This is internal monologue, and it is an illustration Suvin and Moylan's arguments on cognitive estrangement and power. Her horrific environment has made her question the existence of certain colours and concepts, because she has not seen or experienced them for so long. As such, the words attached to these things have lost all meaning. This invokes the surreal sense that everything, despite Lucy's awareness that death isn't everywhere.

³³ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 63.

³⁴ Ibid, footnote 13.

³⁵ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 69.

When the reader goes back to Maria's perspective, they see the poor conditions of those who suffer the most from this dystopia;

[Sarah, her friend] reminded Maria of a kitten that she'd found mewling inside a banged-up trash can. The kitten hadn't had a mother, probably because some needleboy had caught and cooked her, and there this little kitten was, curled up and begging for something it would never get.

Maria had petted the tiny creature, understanding its need—the wishing for milk that would never come, the desperate desire to have someone come back and take care of you—but you couldn't just lie there praying for rescue.

Sarah, though...Sarah acted hard, but the girl was soft. Even when she peddled ass, she expected someone to be taking care of her. Kept thinking the world gave a damn about her worthless life.

Sarah. That kitten. Maria's father. They were all the same.³⁶

Many now believe that it is a dog-eat-dog world, and anyone who is dependent on kindness will not survive. This is most true for those at the bottom of this dystopic hierarchy. Maria is the most powerless of the three protagonists, so through cognitive estrangement by the normalisation of pessimism, the reader can see the drought-ravaged suffering of Phoenix residents. This illustrates Moylan's argument on dystopia and its depiction of power. He states that dystopian narrative should have the "ability to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday lives of everyday people."³⁷ This technique is demonstrated through the cognitive estrangement as the normalisation of pessimism and poverty through Maria's perspective. There is also a normalisation of equipment that the present-day reader would never use unless they were in a dangerous environment. Yet such items are worn as casually as a present-day pair of sunglasses;

Smoke hung heavy over their setup. Lots of people were wearing filter masks. Rich people wore Ralph Lauren and YanYan. Poor people wore American Eagle and Walmart. Maria wondered if she should spend a little of her savings on one for herself. The generic ones weren't too expensive,

³⁶ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 75.

³⁷ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, XIII.

and maybe it would keep her lungs from burning so much. Maybe she'd get one for Sarah, too. It might help her cough.³⁸

This shows the normalisation of dust masks. They are common and essential that they have evolved into a fashion accessory. There are even separated into supermarket and designer brands, like any other present-day accessory. They are so normalised that they are included as a part of seasonal fashion;

Below the billboard a security squad escorted men in coats and ties and women in strappy dresses into a low-slung black Suburban. CK Ballistic jackets, Lily Lei dust masks, and M-16s. Phoenix chic.³⁹

This is not only a play on Cyberpunk imagery, but it is also a normalisation of guns and dust masks, to the point that it has become a part of high fashion. This cognitive estrangement shows a difference in ideas of fashion and necessity.

The reader can also see the social media trend #PhoenixDownTheTubes from Lucy's internet search seeping into face-to-face conversation;

Julio shot him a dark look. He went and started rummaging through the minibar. "Phoenix down the tubes, more like. This place is circling the goddamn drain. If this all wasn't such a clusterfuck, I'd actually thank Vos for giving Case a reason to yank me back across the river."⁴⁰

Here is a repetition of Lucy's drain metaphor. It is also a reflection of internet trends that are weaving their way into their real life. This ties back to Suvin's argument of the dystopian texts being reflections of the author and their historical context. Just as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* reflected the uneasy indecisiveness of scientific power over class structure in the Victorian era,⁴¹ this aspect of *The Water Knife* imagines a future for social media, and its influence over the collective consciousness. This is how the novel reflects the indecisive use of technology of its time.

The final example of cognitive estrangement is the subtle and casual mention of the size of one of Case's archology buildings. This mention is so subtle that it took a second reading for me to notice it. But once I found it, I could see its significance. To depict the sheer magnitude of the

³⁸ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 88.

³⁹ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 101.

⁴⁰ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 104.

⁴¹ Suvin, *Metamorphosis*, 164.

archology cities, there is a casual indication of its size through Michael Ratan's apartment number 51110; "Tower five. Floor eleven. Apartment ten." This means that there are more than five towers in the archology, with each of them being at least eleven stories tall, and highly populated with people. The technical complexity of this large building as closed eco-system is shown here;

He reached an upper park path that spiraled lazily down through the levels. Greenery and moisture, the scent of citrus...the feel was so familiar that he suspected Taiyang had contracted with the same biotectural firms that Vegas had used. (...) They were trying not to look like sentries, but they were clearly on the hunt, both of them wearing data glasses and scanning people as they passed. Angel wondered if it was his facial scan they were looking for.⁴²

This shows the believable technology that one would expect in a near-future time like this. Yet it is still astonishing that this briefly mentioned technology is capable of the saving those suffering in the dry heat, but it is controlled by the privileged few. That is the nature of cognitive estrangement. This technique is so subtle and hidden, and yet can hold so much detail to the level of suffering and change in a dystopian world.

Dystopian Tropes

Now, we shall focus on the various tropes of dystopian fiction, and how they are used in *The Water Knife*. For the first example, we will go back to the first chapter of Angel's perspective, where he obtains the Carver City legal documents from Braxton. He and Braxton have a conversation about the certainty of their living conditions, and Braxton implies that Angel's circumstances are not secure. This is Angel's response;

Angel laughed at the implied threat. "I already got my housing permits, *cabrón*. Go frighten your secretaries."

"Just because you're Case's pet doesn't mean I can't make your life miserable."⁴³

Here, the reader can see that security is not guaranteed. The middle-class hero is also feeling the nightmare. Things could get worse for Angel at any moment. Despite this instability of his

⁴² Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 202.

⁴³ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 6.

life, and its foreshadowing of his doom, Angel does not question the establishment he is in, nor does he see anything wrong with it. This unusually conciliatory behaviour continues with his conversation with Catherine Case;

“This is a milk run, boss. Braxton’s papers here got about a hundred different signatures say I can do anything I want. This is old-school cease and desist. Camel Corps could do this one on their own, I bet. Glorified FedEx is what this is.”

“No.” Case’s voice hardened. “Ten years of back-and-forth in the courts is what this is, and I want it finished. For good this time. I’m tired of giving away Cypress housing permits to some judge’s nephew just so we can keep appealing for something that’s ours by right.”⁴⁴

Any slight questioning of the system puts Angel in danger. Through Angel’s questioning remark, the reader can see the full extent of what is happening. And yet, Angel’s questioning was out of loyalty and the desire to help Case in her pursuits. This is not consistent with the usual behaviour of a dystopian protagonist in an established position which is, according to Moylan, a movement “from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation that is followed by growing awareness and then action that leads to a climatic event that does or does not challenge or change the society.”⁴⁵ This is usually something that happens early in the narrative, with the introduction of a counter-narrative of a rebellious force.⁴⁶ And yet, Angel does not do this until later in the book. He is still loyal to the machine and one of the rival powers in contest, which is subversive of the usual rebellious protagonist. Angel goes further, and shows his approval of the machine by silently admiring his contribution to it;

Maids and waiters and busboys and cooks and maintenance staff would all be hard at work, striving to keep their jobs, fighting to keep their Cypress housing permits.

You’re all here because of me, Angel thought. Without me, you’d all be little tumbleweeds. Little bone-and-paper-skin bodies. No dice to throw, no hookers to buy, no strollers to push, no drinks at your elbow, no work to do...

*Without me, you’re nothing.*⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 7.

⁴⁵ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 148.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 8.

This shows that the Cypress residents exist in a small Utopia inside of a dystopia. Angel helped to create it, and the residents owe him for it. This is a disturbing subversion, as he appears to be one of the creators of the wide scale drought. This gets worse with the following paragraph;

Around them attack helicopters were spinning up, burning synthetic fuel by the barrel – Nevada National Guard, a.k.a. Camel Corps, a.k.a. those fucking Vegas guardies, depending on who had just had a Hades missile sheaf fired up their asses – all of them gearing up to inflict the will of Catherine Case upon her enemies.⁴⁸

This depicts the repossession force of the Southern Nevada Water Authority. This is a light subversion of the dystopian trope of a more singular form of government control. What is more subversive is that the one of the narrative protagonists is an enforcer. As this point, the reader would question Angel's awareness of the horror he was committing. The answer follows shortly;

Angel knelt down beside the helpless man. "I feel like you're taking this personally, Simon. But it ain't that way. We're just cogs in a big old machine, right?" He jerked Yu upright. "This is bigger than you and me. We're both just doing our jobs."⁴⁹

As far as Angel is concerned, he and Yu are nothing more than helpless chess pieces in a large interstate conflict. Although this is a classic dystopian trope, Angel's reaction to it is not. He is completely aware of the horrors around him. He simply does not care. He does not feel any distress towards the war he is involved in until he watches the destruction of the Carver City water treatment plant;

It's the end of times, Angel thought as more missiles pummeled the water-treatment plant. *It's the goddamn end of times.*

And then on the heels of that thought, another followed, unbidden.

*Guess that makes me the Devil.*⁵⁰

In alignment with dystopian tropes, the protagonist Angel feels guilty about his role in devastating conflict. This guilt is illustrated by his inner thoughts, as he helplessly watches the destruction of the water treatment planet. He makes an emotionally exaggerated comparison

⁴⁸ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 9.

⁴⁹ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 18.

⁵⁰ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 20.

between the sight of the destruction and an apocalyptic situation, and he overstates his involvement by calling himself the Devil. Yet, at this point in the narrative, he is too scared and helpless to resist. Or his guilt is not strong enough to compel him to change his behaviour. As we turn back to Lucy, we see another dystopian trope. She is working on a news story as she is lost in her own thoughts. The trope in this following passage reveals a worship of water in this future, as well as a reference to the past, and its relation to this dystopia;

Godwater, American settlers had once called it as they invaded slowly across the prairies of the Midwest and then pressed into the arid lands beyond the Rocky Mountains.⁵¹

This evokes the history of the South-Western American desert. It is common dystopian trope to reference history to prove that human progress is not simple. “Instead,” Moylan argues, “in keeping with the “real-ciphers in the world,” history itself can move in an open-ended, not determined or predictable, manner.”⁵² This shows that the concept of progress as a parallel of linear time is not true. Rather, human progress can fluctuate or regress with each time period.

There is also a dystopic subversion in the choice of protagonists in the novel through Marie. Of the three point of view characters telling the story, Marie is the one who suffers the greatest, because she is a refugee who can barely afford to eat. She is desperate to make ends meet, as she contemplates stealing from the Taiyang water pump.

Every time Maria saw the ripped face of the pump, she thought she knew the person who had done it. *Dios mío*, she was that person. Every time she looked at the pump’s cool blue numbers, she felt rage. She’d just never been lucky enough to swing a tool that had a chance of hurting it. You needed something special to make a cut like that. Not a hammer. Not a screwdriver. Maybe one of those Yokohama cutters that construction crews used on the Taiyang, back when her father had still worked there.⁵³

Maria’s perspective is different, because she is not a participant of the interstate war, but an innocent victim of it. She does not want to change this environment for the better, she simply wants to survive. This breaks the trope of the rebellious protagonist. Through Maria, reader can also see a dictatorship on language. We have already touched on language and power when

⁵¹ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 21.

⁵² Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 49.

⁵³ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 37.

examined cognitive estrangement. but now, we will dive into more detail, focusing on the connection between language and identity. Here, we see a mix of English, Spanish and Chinese in a casual conversation between Maria and Sarah;

“You’re a Texan,” Maria said.

“Speak for yourself, girl. These *shagua pendejos* don’t even know how to take a bath.” Sarah spat something black onto the pavement as she watched the movements of the nearby refugees. “I can smell ’em from here.” (...)

In a way it was true. Sarah was schooling away her Dallas drawl, scraping away Texas talk and Texas dirt, scrubbing and scraping as hard as her pale white skin could take the burn. Maria didn’t have the heart to tell her that no matter what Sarah did, people saw her Texas coming from a mile away. The point wasn’t worth arguing.⁵⁴

This casual conversation is quite different to what most present-day readers are used to. There is the Chinese word *shagua*, which means “idiot”, and the Spanish word *pendejos*, which means “assholes”. This combined phrase means “stupid assholes”. This mix of languages shows a mix of people and cultures as large hoards of people are forced to live in small areas. This oppressive situation breaks down multiple languages to control identities and self-perceptions of the oppressed. This illustrates the dystopian trope of language as power. Moylan argues that language “is a weapon for the reigning dystopic power structure.”⁵⁵ He further argues that “[w]ith the past suppressed and the present reduced to the empirica of daily life, dystopian subjects usually lose all recollection of the way things were before the new order.”⁵⁶ This explains Sarah’s desire to distance herself from her Texan identity, as an attempt to break free from her low status. Catherine Case mentions present-day apocalypse preppers as she talks to Angel about language, and the inability to prevent the kind of future the novel depicts when there are no words to describe it;

“And mostly we don’t see it when it’s coming,” Case said. “There’s a theory that if we don’t have the right words in our vocabularies, we can’t even see the things that are right in front of our faces. If we can’t describe our reality accurately, we can’t see it. Not the other way around. So someone says a

⁵⁴ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 39.

⁵⁵ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 149.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

word like Mexico or the United States, and maybe that word keeps us from even seeing what's right in front of us. Our own words make us blind."⁵⁷

This is an example of the importance of language for naming and understanding things. It suggests that, if an approaching threat has a name, it can be seen and prevented. But if it is nameless, it is unknown, and cannot be stopped.

Now I would like to turn to the coping strategies and world-views of the characters as demonstrated by the contrast between Maria and her father;

[Maria's father was l]iving according to an ancient map of the [present-day] world that no longer existed.

In Papa's head, things looked one way, but in Maria's experience they were nothing the same. He kept saying that this was America and America was all about freedom and doing what you wanted, but the crumbling America that they drove across, where Texans were strung up on New Mexico fence lines as warnings, most definitely wasn't the America he kept inside his head.

His eyes were old. *Ojos viejos*. Her father couldn't see what was right in front of his face. People didn't get to come back to their houses like he said they would. You didn't get to stay in your hometown, the way he said you would. You didn't see your school friends ever again, the way he said you would. Your mother wasn't there for your *quinceañera*, the way he said she would. None of it worked out the way he said it would.⁵⁸

This is Maria's father's attempt to map out the new world. Papa resembles the lost and confused elderly villagers in Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower*. This is because they are naïve, rigid, and unwilling to adapt to change, and they constantly "recall "the golden age" of the mid-twentieth century and cling to the belief that things will get better," but this is irrational, because the teenage villagers know that it will not get better, or "they have already seen the best of it."⁵⁹ Hence, elderly characters like this are among the first to die in a dystopian world.

One odd feature in *The Water Knife* is its weak counter-narrative. A counter-narrative is a smaller narrative within a larger narrative and would usually start early alongside the brutal awakening of the protagonist, and it would centre around and rebellious force. At the star of

⁵⁷ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 59.

⁵⁸ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 42.

⁵⁹ Moylan, *Scraps pf the Untainted Sky*, 227.

the text, Angel and Lucy are the only individuals with their own separate forms of rebellion. There is no appearance of a rebellious group until the fourth chapter, and it is nothing more than a hint in the background;

“And then you’ve got all the lunatics farther upriver in Colorado and Wyoming and Utah who keep saying they aren’t going to send any water down to the Lower Basin States at all. They like to say it’s theirs. Their mountains. Their snowmelt.” [Michael Ratan] tapped the CAP’s slender blue line again. “That’s a lot of people fighting over too little water. And that’s a mighty vulnerable line. Someone bombed the CAP once, almost knocked Phoenix off.”

He leaned back and grinned. “And that’s why they’re hiring people like me. Phoenix needs backups. If someone comes after them again? Pfft.” He made a dismissing gesture. “They’re done for. But if I find a decent aquifer? Phoenix is golden. They can even grow again.”⁶⁰

Here, we see that is first sign of contestation in the narrative. It is not a counter-narrative, as it is only a noted subject in the dialogue. This is important information for the reader, as it informs them that a greater counter-narrative will develop, but it does not manifest until later. Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini argue that the most element of a critical dystopia is “the construction of a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of alienation and resistance”.⁶¹ This means that, for a critical dystopia, the counter-narrative is just as important as the narrative. This counter-narrative is subversive because it develops slowly in the background until the later part of the novel. And, despite his quiet doubt about his role in the machine, Angel’s loyalty to it and Catherine Case has not weakened. In fact, he sees her as necessary and justified;

People called Catherine Case a killer because her water knives cut so hard along the Colorado, but when Angel inhaled the eucalyptus and honeysuckle scents of Cypress, he knew they were wrong.

Outside, there was only desert and death. But inside, surrounded by jungle greenery and koi ponds, there was life, and Catherine Case was a saint,

⁶⁰ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 45.

⁶¹ Moylan and Baccolini, *Dark Horizons*, 7.

offering salvation to her flock as she guided them to safety inside the technological wonders of her foresight.⁶²

This shows that there may be a personal reason for Angel's loyalty. The reader finds that his reason is that she saved him from imprisonment and possible death. She gave him a better life and new purpose. This did not come without a cost, but he was willing to pay it. In his inner thoughts, we see how he become a water knife:

And in return the Queen of the Colorado knighted him. She gave him residence permits in Cypress 1. Bequeathed upon him driver's licenses and bank accounts, badges and uniforms. Camel Corps first, but later others, and not all of them hers to give. Colorado State Patrol. Arizona Criminal Investigations Division. Utah National Guard. Bureau of Reclamation. Phoenix PD. Bureau of Land Management. FBI. Identities and vehicles and uniforms and badges came and went, depending on where the Queen needed a knife. Angel took on roles as easily as a chameleon, changing colors to fit each new task, shedding identities as easily as a snake sheds skin.

Whoever he'd been in that prison cell, it was many skins ago.⁶³

This shows that Angel is indebted to Case. This explain he calculated methods of rebelling against her. It makes for a strong subversion of the dystopian protagonist.

Corruption is also a common trope in dystopian fiction. However, most of them have one hard totalitarian power that is corrupt in its very essence. The corruption in *The Water Knife* has more complex layers. There are no power blocks to protect this corruption, so Totalitarianism is not the system at work here. This alternative power is a subversion of dystopian power. We see this through Lucy, when Officer Torres warns her not to report on the history of the dead woman in the empty swimming pool:

"Hey." He grabbed her arm. "I'm serious about the bodies. You want to make your career in the blood rags, there's plenty to see. But some bodies"— he jerked his head toward the girl in the bottom of the empty pool—"they aren't worth the heat."

"What's so special about this girl?"

⁶² Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 52.

⁶³ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 55.

“Tell you what. I’ll put you in touch with the editor over at *Río de Sangre*. You can hit all the bodies for them. I can even give you exclusive ride-along if you want. After this girl, I got two *cholobis* dropped over on Maricopa in a drive-by. Plus I got five more swimmers I still got to hit, soon as my partner gets back.”

“Swimmers?” Lucy asked.

Torres had laughed, exasperated. “God damn, girl. You are wet.” He’d walked away, shaking his head, chuckling. “Wet and soft.”

Back then Lucy hadn’t known how easy it was to write the wrong thing. How easy it was to end up slumped over your steering wheel with a bullet in your head.⁶⁴

This highlights the corruption that runs deeply in all levels of government. This is the true complexity of this nightmare of a desert taking over cities and states. Those nuances of power illustrate a dystopian narrative that Moylan references; Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Gold Coast*. This text, despite its lack of traditional authoritarian power, has a “friendly terror” that is pervasive in its wide-spread systematic logic and single social movements.⁶⁵ *The Water Knife*’s under layer of “friendly terror” is the pervasive secrecy and control that protects the Southern Nevada Water Authority and the other southwestern states from questioning or exposure. This nuanced, complex power is highly subversive to dystopian tradition, which usually depicts Totalitarianism as the oppressive power.

Despite the lack of a hopeful resistance, there is hope in the world outside the American desert. Lucy’s sister, Anna, lives in Canada, where the environment is as healthy and safe as the reader’s present. Lucy wants to preserve it as best as she can, and it is one of her reasons for staying in the desert:

However much Lucy might want to slip through the looking glass and join her sister’s world, she didn’t want Anna’s world infected with all the things that were inside her now. She wanted, no, needed this glass between them, protecting Anna and Arvind and the kids. It meant that there was still some place where the world wasn’t falling to pieces.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 65.

⁶⁵ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 220.

⁶⁶ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 66.

Even though Lucy has lost hope in her own fate, she still wants to preserve the family's paradise. She has quarantined herself from her family to protect them. This is one of the few glimmers of fear in this dystopia. She considers herself contaminated because the desert nightmare has changed her. She describes the transformation the desert made to her body;

In the beginning Lucy had been religious about using her dust mask and changing its filter, religious about shielding her lungs against wildfire smoke and dust and valley fever. But after a while it was hard to care about invisible airborne *Coccidioides* fungi anymore.

She lived here. This was her life. A dry hacking cough was simply part of that.

She could remember her shiny REI dust mask dangling around her neck when she'd first arrived in Phoenix. Straight out of J-school and ready to dig up her first big scoop.

Christ, she'd been wet.⁶⁷

Here, we can see a subversion of the outsider trope. Lucy, once the outsider, has now morphed into a local person trapped in the desert nightmare. This is the outdated trope of the naïve explorer from another world. Moylan describes this protagonist trope as a “spacetime traveller [who] struggle[s] to make sense of their world and to act decisively within it.”⁶⁸ Lucy follows the modern subversion of the trope, because she an outsider who has transformed into a native desert-dweller. She, like Angel, is a subversion of a dystopian protagonist trope.

We see another example of another layer of “friendly terror” in this dystopia through the media. Media outlets are lying about peaceful negotiations on behalf of state governments. This layer of corruption serves to protect power-brokers in the highest levels of government from exposure:

Senators back east demanded that Nevada end its militia lawlessness, and Governor Andrews dutifully sent out the guardies to hunt down the bandits. He paraded theatrical arrests in front of news cameras and lined up defiant citizen defenders in court. And as soon as the cameras went dark, the cuffs

⁶⁷ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 68.

⁶⁸ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 4.

came off, and Catherine Case's militias returned to their posts along the river.⁶⁹

This shows the corruption of the media through tensions between states and what is left of federal power. The media is lying to the people and controlling the information that goes public, which is a commonly used trope in dystopian fiction.

We see another layer of power through the corrupt control of technology, and those who can use it, as Maria's father explains why he was made redundant;

"But still, you should be proud of him. He must have been pretty good for the Chinese to hire him. Building like they do is complicated. It's not just two-by-fours and Sheetrock. It's tilapia and snails and waterfalls, all linked together. Complicated, sensitive work." (...)

"Working on something like that, you're building the future. The people who do that... you've got to make all these models: software and water flows and population. Figure out how to balance all the plants and animals, how to clean up the waste and turn it into fertilizer they can use in their greenhouses, how to clean the water, too. You run black water down through filters and mushrooms and reeds and let it into lily ponds and carp farms and snail beds, and by the time it comes out the other end, that water, it's cleaner than what they pump up from underground. Nature does all the work, all the different little animals working together, like gears fitted inside an engine. Its own kind of machine. A whole big living machine." (...)

"Oh hell no, they didn't take me. They do everything different. The big parts are all prefab pieces. Manufacture off-site, assemble on-site. Damn fast, but it ain't building like we do. More like...factory work. And then there's all the complicated biological work." He shrugged. "I didn't worry much about it at the time. There was still plenty of other building work for everyone. We were still growing then."⁷⁰

This depicts the need for expert workers to build the water systems in the archology. This kind of technology can mimic nature on an industrial scale. This is where the irony is. This water filtering technology could have been utilised to improve the living conditions of the

⁶⁹ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 82.

⁷⁰ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 91.

southwestern states, which would slowly resolve the water crisis over time. The technology could be utilised in all towns and cities, for every social class and every state. But it was capitalised by greedy corporations and the rest of the desert was left to suffer. This highlights the corrupt use of futuristic life-saving technology, which is a fresh, modern take on a common trope in dystopian fiction. This shows a connection between science fiction and ecology. Brian Stableford argues that “some slight awareness of the fragility of human dependence on the natural environment is an inevitable corollary of agricultural endeavour.”⁷¹ This means that humanity becomes aware of their fragile dependence on nature once they feel the consequences of their manipulation of it. Hence, the manipulation of nature is always dangerous, as it can create “horrific violations of the natural order,” which could destroy humanity.⁷² This carries further irony when we consider that the Chinese construction firm and Catherine Case are using genetically engineered ecosystems to power their archologies. Genetic engineering, Stableford argues, is a tool of human domination, which can colonise and conquer any environment, both on Earth and other planets.⁷³ This means that human attempts to control nature could lead to humanity’s own destruction. This makes for a catastrophic consequence of corrupt government competition.

Another subversion of dystopian tropes is the novel’s balance between three different character perspectives. Most other dystopian novels only focus on the perspective of one character, but *The Water Knife* breaks from this by focusing on three. Angel, Lucy and Maria all suffer from the desert nightmare but in different ways. Angel is suffering by being a part of the interstate war that contribute to this nightmare. This subverts the rebellious middle-class protagonist trope. Lucy was an outside witness who has been dragged into the nightmare with no way of getting out. This subverts the outsider protagonist trope. Through these perspectives, the reader can see how one character may seem from the perspective of another. One example is in chapter 10, when Lucy meets Angel in the morgue where Jamie’s corpse is kept.

The scarred one was looking at her in a way that made her suddenly uncertain. Her eyes were drawn to his scar, running up his neck to his jaw, disappearing down beneath his shirt, that ragged slash in the hard mahogany of his skin. Puckered broken flesh. Violence there.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Stableford, “Science Fiction and Ecology,” 127.

⁷² Stableford, “Science Fiction and Ecology,” 134.

⁷³ Stableford, “Science Fiction and Ecology,” 135.

⁷⁴ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 118.

Building on the mention of his scar in the previous chapter, Lucy's perspective reinforces Angel's role as a part of the machine, and it gives the reader an interesting look into the ways that characters in dystopian fiction are made to fight against each other. This play on classist division, combined with greedy misuse of technology, is part of a critical examination of extreme Capitalism attempting a utopian charade. Jameson examines the 1980's Capitalist utopia, while promises "full employment and (...) non-alienated labour (...) motivated by an idealism unwilling to trust a sinful human race with the poisoned gift of free time."⁷⁵ This pessimism towards humanity is a dangerous and twisted ideology, as this leads to an obsessive materialism that leads citizens to compete with each other to such extremes that it creates chaos, division, and violence.⁷⁶ This creates an environment where the formation of a rebellious force against power is almost impossible.

This contrast of perspectives becomes clearer when we see the transition from Lucy's perspective in the end of chapter 10 to Angel's perspective in the beginning of chapter 11;

It took Lucy a second to find her voice. "Right," she whispered.

"So go on." He jerked his head toward the door. "Beat it. Go vulture somewhere else."

Lucy didn't wait for the scarred man to repeat himself. She fled.

(...)

Angel watched the blood rag journo go.

Something about her wasn't right, but he hadn't liked the way Julio zeroed in on their conversation. With Julio, there was a decent chance that anyone he questioned would end up worse for wear. So Angel had let her go. And now he regretted it.

*I'm getting soft.*⁷⁷

This shows that they both see themselves as small and normal human beings, which is how the reader feels when they read each of their points of view. To Lucy, Angel is a terrifying monster. To Angel, Lucy is a tiny young woman who is secretive and suspicious. Angel does not know that Lucy is a respectable journalist. Lucy does not know that Angel is working for Catherine

⁷⁵ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 155.

⁷⁶ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 158.

⁷⁷ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 120-121.

Case. As Lucy and Angel form a relationship, we see the true extent of Angel's involvement in this dystopic nightmare;

“Christ, you're probably the one who did the CAP, too.”

“Somebody's got to bleed if anybody's going to drink.”

(...)

“No. I don't feel guilt. If Vegas didn't push this place over the edge, California would have done it.” He jerked his head toward the copy of *Cadillac Desert* on Lucy's bookshelf. “Lot of people knew this was a stupid place to grow a city, from long way back, but Phoenix just stuck its head in the sand and pretended disaster wasn't coming.”⁷⁸

Cadillac Desert is a 1986 book by Marc Reisner. The book is about land development and water policy in the southwestern United States. It gives the history of the Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the struggle to remake the American West. The book concludes that development-driven policies are having serious long-term effects on the environment and quantity. Here, Angel has not only confessed to blowing up the C.A.P., he has explained his reasons for doing so, and points to the faults of the reader's present as the cause for their desert nightmare. He not only feels justified in blowing up the C.A.P., but he also considers a morally sound action that had to be done. We also see the deadly consequences of Lucy's exposure of the truth:

“He wasn't telling me what to write. He was just saying that maybe I should think a little bit about all the other really interesting stories that needed covering.” (...) “And there I am, sitting with a stack of money and that blood rag with a picture of some swimmer with her blood draining out in the bottom of an empty pool and wild dogs down there with her, licking up the blood. There I am.” (...) “That's how California plays the game. Catherine Case can have as many secret agents as she wants, but when it comes down to it, California sets the rules. California doesn't fuck around.”⁷⁹

This is a great plot-twist, because this shows that Catherine Case may not be the worst villain in this narrative. This is a trope that ties back to Wolfe's observation of secret histories in

⁷⁸ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 165.

⁷⁹ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 168.

science fiction. Secret history is used in science fiction and genres to speculate a world or a society is controlled by a small group or government entity, and they are manipulating and maintaining power behind the public eye. Wolfe has mentioned that this trope has been destructively used to evoke societal division and hatred by creating “false validations of paranoia and bigotry.”⁸⁰ However, Bacigalupi has managed to use this trope in a way that not only frees it from bigotry and ties it more closely to historical fact, but also writes it in a more believable context;

“China. My dad said we should go to China. I’d go to China, and I’d learn Chinese. My dad told me once that there are floating cities near Shanghai. I’d live there. I’d float on the ocean.”⁸¹

This shows that there is a hopeful future that exists outside the southwestern United States. This is one of the few sources of hope in the dystopian world of *The Water Knife*, which qualifies it as a critical dystopia, and not a static anti-utopia. Moylan argues that anti-utopia is narrative containing a hopeless future, where is no chance in a resolution, except to settle for the flawed present. Dystopia, however, is a narrative that contains hope in a nightmarish future, and that is the solution that would bring a utopia.⁸² Suvin states that science fiction is most important and significant “the more clearly it eschews final solutions,” and that cannot work for “static” anti-utopias like George Orwell’s *1984*, or Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.⁸³

Angel faces further doubt of his allegiances when he rescues Maria from Julio and the Californian authorities in the archology. We can see his true temperament for the first time;

The girl’s eyes widened with fear, and Angel felt ugly for it. He could see himself from her perspective. A scarred thug with a gun shoving her around, threatening her with torture and death if she failed to obey. It made him feel less than a man. The opposite of Tau Ox, playing the hero.

That’s ’cause you’re not the hero, pendejo. You’re the Devil.

And now the Devil needed saving.⁸⁴

Here, we see Angel showing compassion and an ethical sense for the first time. The reader can finally see what side he is on. This is a subversion of the usual rebellious system member. This

⁸⁰ Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres*, 65.

⁸¹ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 179.

⁸² Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 139

⁸³ Suvin, *Metamorphosis*, 83.

⁸⁴ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 203.

is because, unlike most of dystopian protagonists, whose rebellion is obvious from the start, Angel's loyalty is blurred and unclear. Towards the end of the narrative, in Chapter 23, we finally see Angel experiencing an internal crisis where he questions his loyalties. We are also finally seeing a clear counter-narrative in Chapter 28. Angel and Lucy are hiding in a refugee town, they can feel rising tensions from the refugees:

“Sure. Sure, I get that. But you got to know, this ain't a great time to be stuck in with Texans. They been all riled ever since all those Coyote Killer bodies started getting dug out of the desert.” She shrugged. “They're taking it all personal.”

“Personal how?”

“They're all hair trigger. I'm just saying that if stuff starts to go wrong, get out.”

“Anything I should look for?”

“You just never know what sets shit off. Argument in the line for the pump. Sometimes gangs come in and try to teach the Texans lessons. Then you got a riot. Just don't make me clean your blood out of the wood. Keep your head up.”

“I'll be fine.”⁸⁵

This is the first sure sign of a counter narrative brewing in *The Water Knife* through rising tensions among Texan refugees, which will eventually boil over into conflict. It is slightly subversive, because most other dystopian narratives have a counter narrative paralleling the main plot. However, this counter narrative of Texan refugee rebellion begins half-way into the plotline, with a slow rise of anger and tension;

“Texans, if you can believe it. Pendejos are all riled up on account of that coyote mass grave thing. All the talk in the dark zone's about fighting back. Creating Texas militias. Mutual protection posses. Shit like that. This is the fourth gunfight I been at tonight. BodyLotty's going to be way skewed for the day. Probably the week, too. Texans are all hell-bent to fight back.”

“Against what?”

⁸⁵ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 237.

“Hell if I know. Flynn says this shootout started because someone in line for the club had the wrong drawl. Spilled over. Bunch of other Texans joined in. Solidarity thing. Next thing you know—boom—bodies dropping.”

“A lot of bodies.”⁸⁶

Here, we can see the potential for a counter narrative as the Texan rebellion enters the foreground. After Lucy and Angel survive assassination attempts from the Southern Nevada Water Authority and Californian law enforcement, Angel discovers that Catherine Case exiles him after Charles Braxton lies about his betrayal. Angel falls deeper into alienation and despair. In most ordinary dystopias, Angel would join the Texan rebellion to destroy Catherine Case. Instead, he begs Case reinstate him in exchange for the Hohokam rights paper to prove his loyalty to her, which is in Chapter 31. This also shows the nature of the water crisis as a battle over rights:

“If what I’m hearing is true? Senior to God. Maybe a good chunk of the Colorado River. Maybe senior to California, even.”

Case laughed. “You don’t really believe that.”

“I don’t know what I believe anymore. Whenever anyone gets hold of them, they act like they found the Holy Grail. Right before they try to sell them off to the highest bidder.”

“Do you know how much I did for Julio?”

“Pulled him out of Hell. You did that with all of us.”

“Everyone’s hedging,” Case said. “That’s what this is about. Rats running for their lifeboats.”

“Had to be a powerful temptation. Those rights are probably worth millions.”

Case laughed. “If they’re as good as you say they are, they might be worth billions.”

That gave him pause.

What was a city’s survival worth? Or a whole state’s? How much would someone pay to keep the water flowing? How much would Phoenix pay now,

⁸⁶ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 254.

just to be able to get back on its feet? How much would another city pay to make sure it didn't end up hollowed out like Phoenix?⁸⁷

Here, we see a thickening of the whole plot. Angel must make a morally difficult decision; use the papers to save Phoenix, give them to Case and watch Phoenix burn to the ground. As Angel decides, we see development in the Texan rebellion;

The photo on the blood rag's front page was courtesy of Lucy's friend Timo. He'd captured a Texan, crucified against the gates of a community just south of Phoenix. The dead man had gotten the full Santa Muerte treatment. Little bottles of liquor and black roses all around him, a warning to others who tried to storm the community's walls.⁸⁸

These are the corrupt strategies of the state governments combating the Texan rebellion as it intensifies. The minority group of oppressed Texan refugees is now fighting back. It reaches its climax when Lucy and Angel stop at the gas station, where Angel is exiled and nearly killed. Lucy has a car with a Texan number, so the vigilante group assumes that she and Angel are among them. This motivates them to protect Lucy and Angel;

She spied two men with pistols drawn, ducked behind the candy rack. One of them was talking on his cell phone. The other gave her a wink.

"Don't worry, sweetheart," he drawled. "We ain't going to let this pass. When they go after one of us, they go after all of us."⁸⁹

Now, we see that the counter narrative of the Texan rebellion has finally taken centre stage. The Texans know that Angel was killed, so they wage an attack on the Californian troops to avenge him;

She clutched her arm, nodding, knowing she should walk away but feeling her journalist's brain engaging instead.

"What are you all doing?" she asked as the Texans streamed past.

"Payback," a woman said, not stopping. "They took one of ours."

They mean Angel.

⁸⁷ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 262.

⁸⁸ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 264.

⁸⁹ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 303.

Despite herself, Lucy followed. They reached the back of the convenience mart. It was on fire, blazing merrily, but its concrete blocks still provided cover. Heat and ash boiled over them.

Lucy peered around the corner with the others. One of the pickup trucks was engulfed in flames. The assassins were pinned down. She could see Texans on their cell phones, calling back and forth.

“What is this?”

“First Texas Patriots,” the woman said. A couple men tipped their hats.

“Giving back to the community.”

The Texans laughed darkly, and then they were all slipping out from their places of cover, opening fire, closing in on the embattled would-be assassins, giving back for all their humiliations.⁹⁰

Through Lucy, the reader can finally get a good look at the Texan rebellion. This is a vigilante group that intended to fight back against the people that oppressed them, but it all descended into chaos. The fire from the gas station explosion spread to almost every inch of Phoenix, and most of Texans, Merry Perrys, and other civilians were killed. In chaos and hell-fire, The Texan skirmish was defeated.⁹¹ Hence, Angel decided to not hand the papers to Phoenix, as there was no hope left for the dying city. When Maria was told about the Hohokam rights papers inside her copy of *Cadillac Desert*, she agreed to give them to him, on the condition that he gave her a home in the archology. This unwillingness to save the city sent Lucy into an insane rage where she pointed a gun at Angel, demanding him to give her the papers. This shocked Angel;

Phoenix made people crazy, he decided. Sometimes it turned people into devils so bad they weren't recognizable as human. And other times it turned them into goddamn saints.

Just my luck that I ran into the last goddamn saint in all of goddamn Phoenix.

He could almost hear the *sicario* laughing at him.

Live by the gun, die by the gun, right, mijo? You make a living cutting people's water, at some point, the scales got to balance you out.

⁹⁰ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 306.

⁹¹ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 303-339.

Symmetry. Clear symmetry.⁹²

Angel took this as Karma for all the people he's killed, and all the lives he'd destroyed. This is not the end of the dystopian system, as the story ends while the struggle over diminishing water supplies continues. Maria disarms Lucy with a gunshot, and Angel carries Lucy away as they and Maria wait for the helicopter;

Off in the distance she thought she heard a new sound, the thud-thwap of helicopters approaching, winding up the river. The echo of rotors slapping against water and canyon, drowning out the chirps and calls of the river.

A distant sound, but growing now.

Becoming real.⁹³

This is a strange ending, but it is not entirely hopeless. Moylan argues that, “[i]n some form, a utopian horizon, or at the very least a scrap of hope, appears within the militant dystopia.”⁹⁴

Angel, Lucy and Maria have survived with improved living standards, but they are under the care of Catherine Case. Angel is still loyal to her. There is hope Maria, and her chance of changing the system from the inside, as she shows similar manipulation methods to Case. There is hope in Lucy, and her knowledge of the corruption in Phoenix, as she has a chance to expose to the rest of the world. There is even hope in Angel, as he has begun questioning the system, and this may lead to a path of true rebellion.

Critical Context and the Work of the Dystopian Imagination: the Current Water Crisis in the American Southwest

The Water Knife is a dystopia that warns against the possible future of the greedy water rights legal battles currently taking place in the South-Western states of the U.S. Since the 1870's, the residents of this dry landscape, known as the Great American Desert, believed in the pseudo-meteorological theory known by the motto “Rain Follows the Plow”. This theory assumes that if human intervention made the land arable, it will become lush and rich in resources. It is the believe that human activity alone can turn a desert into a luscious green landscape.⁹⁵

⁹² Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 366.

⁹³ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 371.

⁹⁴ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, XIII.

⁹⁵ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 36.

Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water by Marc Reisner, is an exposé of the government corruption that has plagued the states of the South-Western America desert since the nation's colonisation. It is both an influence on the novel, and a main feature in it, as the Hohokam water rights papers are hidden in a copy of *Cadillac Desert* that passes from one character to another.⁹⁶ It is also about the history of the land development and water policies of southwestern United States. Some of the characters in *The Water Knife*, such as the villain Catherine Case, worship the book as a prophetic warning about the dystopian world they live in. It is mentioned in a conversation between two of the three protagonists, Angel and Lucy. Angel tells Lucy that his boss is Case and describes how she introduced him to *Cadillac Desert*: "My boss makes all her new hires read that. She likes us to see this mess isn't an accident. We were headed straight to Hell, and didn't do anything about it."⁹⁷ This theme, of government laws in the southwestern United States being the cause of the water crisis and, inevitably, their own demise, is strongly interwoven throughout the novel. To analyse the depth of information in the novel, I will practice close reading through a short demonstration. The Colorado River Basin is the most important water source in the southwestern United States, yet it is so highly strained that there is great inequality between those who can access it and those who cannot. Reisner states that this is the result of the many policy decision made by the Colorado River Water Users Association. The flow of the Colorado River "is so altered and controlled that in some ways the river functions more a like a fourteen-hundred-mile-long canal." The legal right to use every gallon is owned by someone, to the extent that there are many more theoretical rights to the river's water than the actual existence of water in the river.⁹⁸ During the 2012 conference of the Colorado River Water Users Association, Christopher Ketcham was "courted by vendors of the technology of hydraulic civilization. [He] learned about pipeline systems and canal liners and butterfly valves and mud valves and sluice gates and tilting weirs." He met Robert Johnson, a consultant for the Southern Nevada Water Authority. When Ketcham asked him whether he knew about the total capacity of the Colorado River Basin, Johnson said that the basin would never run out of water if you had the money to refill it.⁹⁹ Sedaris' historical facts and Ketcham's encounter can not only be seen in the imagined dystopian consequence of these events in *The Water Knife*, but there are also explicit references to them within the text. The narrative is set in the near-future, which I would estimate

⁹⁶ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 343.

⁹⁷ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 160.

⁹⁸ Sedaris, "Where the River Runs Dry," 4.

⁹⁹ Ketcham, "Razing Arizona," 21.

to be somewhere between the late 2020's and the early 2030's. The majority of the Southwestern United States has been transformed into a harsh desert landscape, where only the privileged few live in the water rich tower cities like Cypress 1. The Cypress tower is a self-sufficient water system, and from its top floor: "the man had a floor-to-ceiling view of Carson Creek, Cypress 1's fly-fishing river, where it cascaded through various levels of the arcology before being pumped back to the top of the system to run through a new cleaning cycle."¹⁰⁰ This is reminiscent of the water system that Ketcham was introduced to at the 2012 conference, and it makes the reader wonder about the poor conditions of living that may exist outside of the tower city. In the same scene, Angel receives a phone call from Catherine Case, and through his imagining of what she is doing on the other end of the line, we can see striking parallels between the narrative and the current events of the water crisis:

Angel could imagine her, Queen of the Colorado, leaning over her desk, with maps of the state of Nevada and the Colorado River Basin floor to ceiling on the walls around her, her domain laid out in real-time data feeds – the veins of every tributary blinking red, amber, green indicating stream flow in cubic feet per second.¹⁰¹

Here, the narrative shows that not only is the Colorado River Basin still highly controlled by the authority of the corrupt few, but in that state it is controlled by one woman in power in a manner that is more corrupt than systems that control the basin in the current day.

Connecting the Present to the Dystopian Future

Like other dystopian texts, *The Water Knife* is a warning to the present, references that present, and the current issues that the text is warning against. Suvin uses Jules Verne's 1870s book *The Mysterious Island*, to highlight the importance of dystopian fiction as reflections of the time, and the key historical context in which they are written. According to Suvin, Verne's historically-detached and politically uneasy Utopian works from Victorian middle class writers make interesting displays of denial towards severe social and political issues, in exchange for futuristic escapism.¹⁰² Moylan agrees with him, stating that highest truth of dystopian fiction "lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic."¹⁰³ This means that dystopias can help the reader to see their world by showing its worst critical lens. Dystopian texts can highlight the social and political issues of the readers time, they can

¹⁰⁰ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 5

¹⁰¹ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 6

¹⁰² Suvin, *Metamorphosis*, 164.

¹⁰³ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, xii.

imagine ways to change the world for the better. For this to be effective, according to Moylan, a dystopian text must apprehend the present as a moment in history.¹⁰⁴ *The Water Knife* is rich in present-day references retold as history. This chapter explores these references, and the way they lead the reader to re-evaluate their present.

We can see the first example of this in the chapter, when one of Case's lawyers, Charles Braxton, gives Angel the documents for his next mission;

He handed over a sheaf of laser-hologrammed documents. "These are your injunctions. You've got until the courts open tomorrow to enforce our legal rights. Once Carver City files an appeal, it's a different story. Then you're looking at civil liabilities, minimally. But until courts open tomorrow, you're just defending the private property rights of the citizens of the great state of Nevada."¹⁰⁵

This is not only a dark hint at Angel's occupation as a water knife, but it is also a reminder of the corruption of water ownership and the political and legal battles over water resources happening now. The manipulation of water rights laws and their loop holes are detailed in Mark Reisner's *Cadillac Desert*. Reisner details the infamous 1907 theft of the Owens River by Los Angeles through legal manipulation, and the decline of the Owens Valley as a result.¹⁰⁶ This is one of the many detailed examples of the many ways that corrupted government forces stole and monopolised water without legal repercussions. This form of corruption has been surreally intensified in Bacigalupi's dystopian future. As the present is told as history, it is natural to assume that there is an imagined event that connects the present to the dystopian future. The off-the-cuff mentions this first step into the desert nightmare:

... That had been Case's doing, greasing a bunch of East Coast politicians who didn't care what the hell happened on this side of the Continental Divide. She'd gorged those pork-barrel bastards on hookers and cocaine and vast sloshing oceans of Super PAC cash, so when the Joint Chiefs discovered a desperate need to defend tar sands pipelines way up north, coincidentally, the only folks who could do the job were the desert rats of the Arizona National Guard.

¹⁰⁴ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 26.

¹⁰⁵ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 52-84.

Angel remembered watching the news as they deployed, the relentless rah-rah of energy security from the feeds. He'd enjoyed watching all the journos beating the patriotism drums and getting their ratings up. Making citizens feel like badass Americans again. The journos were good for that, at least. For a second, Americans could still feel like big swinging dicks.

*Solidarity, baby.*¹⁰⁷

In the novel's imagined future world, the NAWAPA and the United States water fight with Canada escalates into war, and Catherine Case was the mastermind behind the conflict. This war starts shortly after the end of Cadillac Desert. Reisner mentions that this NAWAPA plan would cause damage to both nations. All remaining wild rivers would be drained dry, and wildlife habitats in the United States and Canada would be severely flooded.¹⁰⁸ However, in this future world's imagined past, the NAWAPA proponents ignored these dangers, arguing that this was the only hope for averting worldwide famine.¹⁰⁹ This middle-point event in the novel was Case's plan to shut down NAWAPA through a rise of nationalism. In his quiet musings, Angel states that he was there when Case changed the game water ownership forever;

He trailed off, remembering early days, when he'd stood bodyguard behind Catherine Case as she went into meetings: bald bureaucrat guys, city water managers, Bureau of Reclamation, Department of the Interior. All of them talking acre-feet and reclamation guidelines and cooperation, wastewater efficiency, recycling, water banking, evaporation reduction and river covers, tamarisk and cottonwood and willow elimination. All of them trying to rearrange deck chairs on a big old Titanic. All of them playing the game by the rules, believing there was a way for everyone to get by, pretending they could cooperate and share their way out of the situation if they just got real clever about the problem.

And then California tore up the rulebook and chose a new game.¹¹⁰

The Bureau of Reclamation and the Department of the Interior attempt to discuss eco-friendly options as solutions to the water crisis. However, these discussions and the two government agencies are wiped out by Catherine Case, just as Cronus destroyed his son Hades. She was the

¹⁰⁷ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 13.

¹⁰⁸ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 492.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 14.

catalyst for the desert nightmare. The belief that the “Rain Follows the Plow” has not only carried into the dystopic future, but it has evolved into a militant cult;

“This should have been about testing and confirmation, and we turned it into a question of faith. Fucking Merry Perrys praying for rain.” He snorted. “No wonder the Chinese are kicking our ass.”¹¹¹

Merry Perrys are descendants of present-day residents of the American West, who believed that humans could “green the desert” by occupation alone. Hence, they are stigmatised and oppressed in this dystopian society. There is an element of cognitive mapping used to make comparisons between the American West of the present and what it might become:

At one time, long before Angel’s tenure, Lake Mead had held waters that nearly topped the Hoover Dam. It had been full. Now marinas lay like toy ruins on the mud flats of the lake, and guardies and drones buzzed above the dam, keeping watch over Vegas’s shrunken reservoir.¹¹²

A future transformation of a present-day environment. Gary K. Wolfe argues that science fiction narratives communicate the devastation of an apocalypse by “defamiliarizing familiar environments through the transformations wrought by the disaster.”¹¹³ Bacigalupi has utilised this to depict the devastation that water politics has inflicted on the American West. At one point in the narrative, Angel is in a car, listening to a radio talk show. Two guests on the shows are arguing about a topic that is all-too-familiar in the present;

“I say we send our troops up to Colorado. I mean, that’s our water they’re holding. We should go up there and open the dams and get our damn water down here.” (...)

“If we weren’t wasting so much water on farming, we’d all be fine. Cut the rest of the farms off. I don’t care how senior their rights are. They’re the ones wasting it.” (...)

“About what that last idiot said. If you cut off farms, you got dust storms. Simple as that. Where the hell does he think all this dust is coming from—” (...)

¹¹¹ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 32.

¹¹² Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 82.

¹¹³ Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres*, 103.

“The Hohokam are right underneath us. We’re walking on their graves. They ran out of water, too! Look at them now. Gone. You know what Hohokam means? ‘All used up.’ In another hundred years people won’t even remember us. Won’t even remember what Phoenix was.”¹¹⁴

This shows the same debates over water that are seen in the present. The dystopian future that Bacigalupi depicts is one that has learned from its past – our present. It is the same fight over who deserved water more. The Central Valley Project struggled to supply to farmers, who also struggled to yield crops from unsustainably large crops.¹¹⁵ Descendants of the Hohokam people argued that their right to water was more legitimate than the white man cavalry, which was supported by the Supreme Court.¹¹⁶ Some even argue that the Colorado Water Conservation board is holding more water than it is entitled to.¹¹⁷ These tired arguments have not been resolved in the present, so it is no surprise they’re still unresolved in the dystopic future. In the same scene referred to above, another radio repeats the myth of the green desert, but tries to word it in a way that makes it sound more scientific;

“This is just a natural cycle. It’ll get wet again. Ten thousand years ago it was a jungle here.”

“Newsflash for that last asshole. It was never wet. Even when we had swimming pools, it was never wet.”¹¹⁸

This repetition of the “greening the desert” myth is a parallel of the present-day dialogue, which is a belief of denial that justified the construction of excessive amounts of dams, which in turn, led to the water crisis.¹¹⁹ There is also dystopian parallels to present-day legal arguments over water. A brief summary of those events are told through Lucy;

Wells had been pumped dry, and Phoenix had refused to run water lines out to support them. And then the CAP had been blown, and water got cut off to the whole city for a while, throwing everyone into a panic, and Lucy Monroe had been there to document. (...)

¹¹⁴ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 100.

¹¹⁵ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 337.

¹¹⁶ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 262.

¹¹⁷ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 263.

¹¹⁸ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 101.

¹¹⁹ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 473.

The only difference between Phoenix and a dozen dying cities in Texas and Alabama and every coastal city around the world was that Phoenix had taken hits not just from climate change and dust storms and fires and droughts but also from a competing city. (...)

Lots of people profiled Case. Queen of the Western Desert, Queen of the Colorado River, all that. And lots of people noticed that when the CAP blew up, Las Vegas immediately stopped spilling water out of Lake Mead, keeping the reservoir's water level just above Intake No. 3.¹²⁰

This shows some of the fictional events that link the present to the dystopian future. This is a fictional parallel to the legal battle between the Bureau of Reclamation and the Corps of Engineers in the 1960's and 1970's. In Bacigalupi's extrapolation, competition between the two federal agencies led to the overproduction of dams, and a demand rate that did not match water supplies, which subsequently led to water contamination from high concentrations of salt.¹²¹ As the farmers owned by the two agencies suffered with the salt water, Phoenix is decimated by climate change, Texan migration and competition from California. In such as greedy and merciless climate, only most self-interested and viscous people survive;

“California. Those people know how to play the game. Los Angeles. San Diego. The Imperial Valley companies. Those people know how to fight for water. It's in their veins. Their blood. They've been killing places for water for five generations. They're good at it.”¹²²

This is a prediction of how current power struggles play out and who among the rich and powerful might come out on top in this dystopian future, the likes of Catherine Case and the Chinese construction firm known as The Broad Group. These powerful figures are fictional parallels of the real past leaders of southwestern water companies such as Floyd Dominy¹²³ and William Mulholland, after whom one of Los Angeles' most famous sketches of road – part desert, part suburban wild – was named.¹²⁴ This level of ruthlessness is essential to survival in a dog-eat-dog world. Through a major plot-twist in the narrative, we see the weaponization of legal documents in water-corrupted politics. Lucy explains to Angel how Jamie obtained the Hohokam water rights documents;

¹²⁰ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 140.

¹²¹ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 201-213.

¹²² Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 165.

¹²³ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 214-254.

¹²⁴ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 57-103.

“What is it about these rights? What makes them such a big deal?” (...)

“Yeah, the Pima. They’re descended from the Hohokam.” (...)

“Years ago they made a deal with Phoenix to shift all their tribal water rights over to the city. The Pima had water rights to Central Arizona Project water because of old reparations; Phoenix needed that water when the rivers around here started drying up, so it was a win-win. Phoenix got the water it wanted to keep growing, and the Pima got a massive cash settlement that they used to buy land up north.” (...)

“Jamie was up to his neck in all these file boxes.” (...)

“Jamie thinks—thought—the Bureau of Indian Affairs deliberately buried it. It was an inconvenient agreement that the bureau regretted.” (...)

“But now there’s the Central Arizona Project. A big old straw to carry water straight across the desert.” (...)

“Which means Phoenix and Arizona trump California. Cali’s got senior rights on four million acre-feet of water, but if that gets taken away from them—they’ve got the Imperial Valley and fifty million people depending on that water.”

“They need these rights to die quick and quiet.”

“(…) If Phoenix shows up in court, waving these senior Pima water rights, everything changes. (...) Phoenix could have the Bureau of Reclamation drain Lake Mead. Send all the water down to Lake Havasu for Phoenix’s personal use. They could make Los Angeles and San Diego stop pumping. Or they could sell the water off to the highest bidder. They could build a coalition against California, keep all the water in the Upper Basin States.”

“And then California would blow up the CAP, just like they took out that dam up in Colorado.”

The Pima water rights was a real legal settlement that Bacigalupi added to the novel’s fictional world and positioned it as a central element to the narrative plot. There is a direct mention of this in *Cadillac Desert*. The Hohokam descendants lived in reservations that were built on poor quality land. The quality of the land was so atrocious that it required a lot of irrigation to maintain its crops. The government had implicitly attached large water rights to this reservation

land, which was confirmed in 1908 by the Supreme Court.¹²⁵ This meant that the Navajo Reservation in Arizona carried rights to 600,000 acre-feet of water, and they could use every drop of it at any time, including drought periods where everyone else had limitations.¹²⁶ It is this that provides Bacigalupi the basis of his plot-twist, given the hiding place of the Hohokam water rights documents in the narrative. The documents were hidden between the pages of the Maria's copy of *Cadillac Desert*.¹²⁷

Suvin argues that dystopian texts are reflections of the times in which they're written.¹²⁸ With these references to the historical present, Bacigalupi has taken factual events in the water crisis, and extrapolated from them to depict economic, political critiques and ecological crisis in *The Water Knife*. This parallel help the reader to understand the political and social issue that the novel is criticising; the Californian water crisis. History repeats itself because humanity does not learn for their mistakes. In order to prevent this dystopia from becoming a reality, we need to from present mistakes, and find sustainable solutions to the water crisis, with profit as a low priority.

¹²⁵ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 261.

¹²⁶ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 262.

¹²⁷ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 243.

¹²⁸ Suvin, *Metamorphosis*, 164.

Conclusion

The *Water Knife* is an environmental science fiction novel that bends and break various tropes of dystopian fiction. It is told through the perspectives of three different heroes, two of which subvert the two classic tropes for dystopian heroes; The outside explorer and the middle-class worker who awareness and begins to rebel. The third hero is the most unusual, as they are a character type that is rarely seen more closely than a supporting role; a helpless victim of the system. The nature of the counter-narrative in this novel is the most unusual, as the hope it gives is so subtle that it makes the novel appear more anti-utopian at first glance. The rebellious Texan refugees were brutally defeated, the dystopia was made worse instead of better, and its water-cutting Angel of Death remained loyal to his Southern Nevada queen. There is only hope in the knowledge of an obsessively-involved journalist, the untapped potential of a tenacious young refugee. There is also hope in our present-day opportunity to prevent this dystopia from coming true. I think these jarring subversions are what make this dystopia so compelling and difficult to ignore. This illustrates Moylan's comment on genre subversion;

By self-reflexively borrowing "specific conventions from other genres," critical dystopias more often "blur" the received boundaries of the dystopian form and thereby expand rather than diminish its creative potential for critical expression. Thus (...) dystopian narrative is further rendered as an "impure" text that can renovate the ""resisting nature" of dystopian sf by making it more properly ""multi-oppositional".¹²⁹

This means that subverting blurring genre tropes could be an effective means of creating more room for political and social criticism in a dystopian text. This minimalization of hope helps to emphasis the urgency that is required to resolve the Californian water crisis, so this future is avoided. This novel also invites a feminist reading, but I could not explore this research direction due to time constraints. I have left it open for future research.

There are many covert references to the political present that that are commonly seen in other dystopian texts. One example is the clear mentions of present Southwestern United States water crisis as fictional history: "...Lake Mead had held waters that nearly topped the Hoover Dam. (...) Now marinas lay like toy ruins on the mud flats of the lake and guardies and drones buzzed above the dam, keeping watch over Vegas's shrunken reservoir."¹³⁰ Another example is the

¹²⁹ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 189.

¹³⁰ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 82.

use of the Hohokam water laws in the plot: “If Phoenix shows up in court, waving these senior Pima water rights, everything changes. (...) Phoenix could have the Bureau of Reclamation drain Lake Mead.”¹³¹ More examples are quotes from the characters themselves spelling it out in their dialogue, such as Angel saying;

“That guy Reisner, now. That man saw things. He looked. All these people now, though? The ones who put that book up like a trophy? They’re the ones who stood by and let it all happen. They call him one of their prophets now. But they weren’t listening back then. Back then no one gave a shit about what that man said.”¹³²

One can assume that obvious hints like this, Bacigalupi is crying to be heard about this environmental issue. These kinds of political messages hint towards urgency in action, but society and political systems that exist the dystopia’s historical to react to it. For example, *The Handmaid’s Tale* was a warning against a relaxation of feminism in politics, which could endanger the basic rights of American women, such as reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. The recent HULU TV series adaption of the novel has brought this fear has reignited this fear. This feminist fear was heightened by the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh as the new Supreme Court judge, despite his previous decisions on abortion and health care that disadvantaged women as a U.S. Court of Appeals judge. During Kavanaugh’s confirmation hearing, left-wing advocacy group Demand Justice organised a protest of 15 women who stood in the balconies overlooking the entrance to Senate office building. They wore the red cloaks worn the Handmaids of Gilead, a class of women who only served to produce children for their assigned families.¹³³ This is just one example. That is why I conclude that *The Water Knife* is a vital literary resource that represents the political and environmental fears of its time. It portrays the horrible environmental and political consequences that the Western states of American will face if they do not sustainable and ethical solutions to the Californian water crisis. This shows that dystopian fiction is the most medium in which the public is informed on pressing political and environmental issues, and they cannot be ignored.

¹³¹ Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 233.

¹³² Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, 343.

¹³³ Haslett, “‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Protesters Target Kavanaugh.”

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