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## The State and its Aftermath

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The State and its Aftermath:  
Apocalypse in 21st Century America

A Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

By  
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## Introduction

This project began at the mall in Kingston. In the parking lot I saw a jeep that had been repainted in an army beige and emblazoned with the words “Zombie Response Unit.” I had been interested in the apocalypse and its presence in the American imagination before, but seeing such an outward (and expensive) display of post-apocalyptic kitsch outside of the Kingston Walmart made me interested in examining the political and social effect of post-apocalyptic fiction in the everyday.

The apocalypse is everywhere in the imagination of the United States. It is in our art, our entertainment and in our politics. This project takes aim at the apocalypse, what it makes possible, and what possibilities it forecloses.

The project consists of close examinations of two fictive apocalyptic works and an analysis of the phenomena of “liberal prepping” through a reading of online forums as archives.

The first work to be examined is a video game called *Fallout: New Vegas*. Released in 2010, the game is the fourth installment in the *Fallout* series of video games. Like the rest of the series, *New Vegas* is set in the former United States, two centuries after the destruction of the planet through nuclear holocaust. Located in New Vegas and the surrounding desert, the game enables the player to wander through the post-apocalyptic Mojave Desert and side with various political entities that are offered through the game’s main story.

The second work examined is *Zone One*, a novel by Colson Whitehead. The novel is set in lower Manhattan several years after a zombie apocalypse. Its protagonist is working with the emergent government to clear the city’s buildings of



zombies. The book is important within the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction because it imagines a resurgent neoliberal state. Within fiction, the apocalypse is usually used to sweep away the state, making room for new possibilities. *Zone One* instead dives into state bureaucracy and practice in the zombie wasteland, eschewing the generic cowboy version of zombie and post-apocalyptic literature.

The third chapter is aimed at online communities of apocalyptic preparedness. Members of these communities are colloquially referred to as preppers. Preppers have historically been associated with right wing politics. The primary forum that I investigated was a Facebook group titled “Liberal Preppers.” As the name suggests it is a group for liberals who are preparing for the apocalypse.

Liberal prepping has gained currency over the past year. It has been featured in a number of articles, and was even the subject of a Daily Show segment. Quartz was, to my knowledge, the first media organization to point out its rise.<sup>1</sup> The author of the Quartz article points out that the movement’s genesis is in Trump’s election and ensuing presidency. As a term, liberal prepping takes for granted that the default political position of “preppers” is the right wing of the political spectrum.

The first two chapters were researched simply by engaging with the subject material. I played *Fallout: New Vegas* and read *Zone One*, also engaging with secondary sources to situate myself and analyze the texts. *Nuclear Borderlands* by Joseph Masco was instrumental in constructing the first chapter. There is in fact a striking similarity between the setting of the video game and Los Alamos, New Mexico, which is the target of Masco’s ethnography.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Sedacca, “The New Doomsayers Taking up Arms and Preparing for Catastrophe: American Liberals,” Quartz, 5/7/17,

The final chapter was researched through engaging with various forums and articles. The most significant of these forums was Liberal Preppers, a group hosted on Facebook. For a month I examined the various posts, looking for trends that indicated what was of value to the people in the community. I also looked at several public pages associated with the movement.

While initially imagined as an investigation of the post-apocalyptic, this project has narrowed in focus in order to examine the state in these ends of worlds. Anthropology has had a long engagement with the state and state practice. The Comaroffs examine the post-colonial state of South Africa<sup>2</sup>. James Ferguson<sup>3</sup> and Michael Scott<sup>4</sup> both take a critical look at the politics of development. In all of these examples, anthropologists are contending with real world examples. This project takes as its subject matter a series of imaginings. What will state formation and governance look like after the apocalypse? What do generated models that answer this question say about the time and place from which they were generated?

Present throughout these works is the idea that the world we are living in is already ruined. The apocalypse is a useful structural device for fiction as well as everyday conversation. On the shuttle I overheard someone ask his friend, "What will you do when shit hits the fan?" (This phrase has actually been adopted into a simple acronym, WSHTF, by the liberal prepping community I examine in the third chapter of this piece.)

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<sup>2</sup> Jean and John Comaroff "Naturing the Nation: Aliens, Apocalypse, and the Postcolonial State," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001).

<sup>3</sup> James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998).

The apocalypse and its aftermath are alluring and anaesthetizing. Through total destruction, the apocalypse makes the complex world in which we live comprehensible. By destroying the entire social fabric, the apocalypse renders that same social fabric visible. The complex present is neatly smoothed out into a pre-apocalyptic past. The apocalypse is an event that splits time in two. Hence why this project is concerned with the “post”-apocalyptic. But even in these totalizing fictions there are gestures towards the contingent, the particular, and the multiplex.

Other events in United States history have broken time in two. Perhaps not the event itself, but the way that an event can then be shaped into a narrative. For example we are living in a post 9/11 world. This terminology implies a breakage of time, a before and an after.

In the year and a half since I conceived this project, the apocalypse has worked its way even further into the mainstream of American discourse. Landmark moments include the climate change fueled hurricane season of the past year, Donald Trump’s inaugural address, the nuclear tension between the United States and North Korea, and the California wildfire season of 2017. These disasters have been complemented by a slew of articles in a diverse selection of media outlets detailing the hold that the apocalypse has on the American imagination.

The subject matter of this project is all contained within the past decade. *Fallout New Vegas* is the oldest piece examined, and was released in 2010. *Zone One* was released in 2011. The postings and forum activity monitored for the final chapter all took place in early 2018. Each chapter is about imagined possibilities. In addition to their engagement with the state, each of these three disparate pieces of subject matter is

linked by their entanglement with the 2008 economic meltdown. The meltdown provides a model of apocalypse through financial disaster. Each piece enacts a critical response to the breakdown.

*Fallout: New Vegas* uses the clean slate to enact a slew of political possibility. But ultimately this promise of possibility is shortchanged by the course of the game's story. The outcome that is most appealing is also the one that is most similar to the world before the apocalypse. Rather than creating something entirely new, the past is recreated in uncanny fashion. Alternatives are presented during a time of interregnum, and then order is restored. Both of the apocalyptic narratives explored in the first two chapters involve a resurrection of the state, and so the works are examined through that framework.

Rather than attempting to offer alternatives, *Zone One* by Colson Whitehead explores what would happen in the case of a continuation of the state after a zombie apocalypse. Whitehead does not give an alternative form. Instead he imagines a resurgent neoliberal government centered in Buffalo, New York. This government tackles the problems of the zombie apocalypse, creating a humorous novel in which the state power and bureaucracy are marshalled against the zombie hordes. It is a noticeable departure from other works of zombie and apocalyptic fiction. Rather than using zombies to create a morally simplistic cowboy paradise, Whitehead instead creates a complex narrative that raises moral and practical concerns about the state and its ability to respond to disaster.

After Trump's election and during his presidency we have seen the rise of "liberal prepping" an offshoot of the disaster preparedness community that is composed of

individuals who identify themselves as politically left of center. It is again a departure from the norm. Most preppers have been assumed to be politically right wing and focused on gun rights. This loose community offers a perfect example of the political stakes of the apocalyptic imagination. Projects that imagine or prepare for the end of the world are making statements about what can and should be preserved and what should come after. The final chapter will examine the ways that liberal preppers imagine value in a ruined planet, and the ways that these valuations impact their everyday lives.

This project, and each of its component pieces, is aimed at interrogating the stories that are told about the end of the world, and what these stories say about the time and place they are produced. In creating the post-apocalyptic world the past is appropriated and projected across a temporal divide to create a ruined and symbolically rich future.

“It would seem that mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built up from the fragments.”  
-Franz Boas<sup>5</sup>

### Chapter 1: Interactive Apocalypses

*Fallout New Vegas* was released on October 19th 2010. It is the fourth installment in the *Fallout* series of video games. The game began development in 2008, and was publicly announced in 2009. Like all games in the series *New Vegas* is set in a post-apocalyptic retro-future. The developers of *Fallout* have constructed a technologically advanced 1950s American society based on nuclear power. Robots perform domestic tasks in suburban households. Cars that appear straight out of the 1950s are powered by miniaturized nuclear engines. Computers are incredibly powerful, but take up entire rooms. The game’s pre-apocalyptic past is created out of an historically contingent version of the future. A century of advances in nuclear technology have been incorporated into the static suburban aesthetic and morality of the American 1950s.

*New Vegas* contains four different story paths, each allowing the player to support a different political and cultural formation in the post-apocalyptic world of the Mojave desert. *New Vegas* is distinct from other post apocalyptic texts because it does not present a linear narrative. Player’s choices influence the game’s narrative and its ending. Alternatively, players can choose to ignore the game’s main story altogether, instead exploring the seemingly endless amounts of locations, side quests and characters within the game.

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<sup>5</sup> Franz Boas’ Introduction to “Traditions of the Thompson River Indians of British Coloumbia,” (1898) cited in “The structural study of myth” by Claude Lévi-Strauss 1955

Even as *New Vegas* offers fabulous alternatives, and invites us to imagine what is possible besides and beyond the current American political system, it ultimately affirms the inevitability of liberal democracy as the dominant political and cultural system. It does this in two ways. Firstly, while there are four main paths through the game, the New California Republic, which is a western liberal democracy, is given preference by the developers of the game. Secondly, in its status as a video game, *New Vegas* is a safe and sterilized form through which players can act out desires for the apocalypse and for alternative forms of politics and culture. The game is therefore an example of Capitalist Realism.<sup>6</sup> Even as this game exists as a forum for articulating desires for an apocalypse as an end to liberal democracy, the game also affirms liberal democracy's inevitability.

*Fallout New Vegas* is developmentally unique. It was created by Obsidian Entertainment, which was formed by key members of Black Isle studios, the company that had produced the first two installments of the franchise. *New Vegas* was released two years after *Fallout 3* and so it is the game's fourth installment. Bethesda softworks had bought the rights after the release of the first two fallout games in the 1990s. *Fallout 3* is a sequel to the first two games but the technological advances in gaming that took place in the ten years between *Fallout 3* and *Fallout 2* make the third installment more of a reboot than a sequel. *New Vegas* is singular within the franchise because it was developed by the original creative team behind the franchise's birth. Even after Bethesda produced *Fallout 4* (which is technically the 5th major installment of the franchise.) *New Vegas* is still seen as the superior game for the strength of its writing.

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<sup>6</sup> Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist Realism, is There No Alternative*. (UK: O Books, 2009)

The reason for this superiority is often held to be that it was made by the game's originators, who felt a greater commitment to the story of the game.

Anthropologist Charles Piot advocates for ethnographic inquiry into the virtual realm in a prescient essay published in 2003. The essay, titled *Heat on the Street: Video Violence in American Teen Culture*, seeks to reroute conversation about video games away from a moral panic over their use of violence towards attention to the details of story, character, and landscape within the games themselves.

Moreover, none of these explanations of video violence pays more than scant attention to the specificity of the genre and of the texts themselves—to the specific ways in which the violence is packaged, to the plots and story-lines that accompany each game, to the particularities of character and subjectivity that appear again and again, and to the landscapes and environments the characters inhabit. It is only after paying attention to such features of the texts, I suggest, that we might then return—albeit in a different way—to the question of the relationship of these games to the world beyond the text.<sup>7</sup>

A lot has changed in anthropology and video game entertainment since Piot's wrote this piece in 2003, and the fact that the article still speaks so well to the present moment is a credit to the thoughtfulness of Piot's analysis. This chapter is in the spirit of inquiry that Piot is calling for. My aim is to interrogate how New Vegas as a text is constituted from, and then works on its cultural present, the world beyond the text.

An important shift to note in video games is their removal from the public space that Piot describes. Piot focuses on video game arcades as sites of ethnography. He points out that video games are often consumed in malls, meccas of bourgeois

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<sup>7</sup> Piot, Charles, "Heat on the street: video violence in American teen culture" *Postcolonial Studies*, Volume 6 No. 3 (2003) 355



commerce.<sup>8</sup> While home gaming systems did exist in 2003, they have become far more prevalent in the years since, and most video games are now played within the home. A second shift, which Piot anticipates, is the move towards open world games that emphasize player choice. *New Vegas* is an open world game. Players can move freely throughout the map. In most of the games Piot analyzed, rather than having freedom of movement, players must move through scripted levels of progressive difficulty. This emphasis on player choice complicates analysis of games as text. Rather than channeling its players through linear gameplay leading towards a single canonical ending, *New Vegas* offers a plurality of choice, and the main narrative of the game does not have to be interacted with at all. The game could be played as an endless act of deferral. Piot also outlines the lack of narrative in most of the video games that he examines, stating that they instead rely on graphic spectacle to fuel the player's interest.

In all of the videos I know, a minimalist narrative-almost an anti-narrative or a caricature of a narrative, albeit one that references mythic themes (like saving the earth from invading aliens)- is swallowed up by the intensities of image and color-by the graphic excess that dominates the medium.<sup>9</sup>

*Fallout: New Vegas* is a perfect inversion of the type of game Piot is describing. The excesses of color and graphics are absent from the game. Set in a post-apocalyptic desert, the game's color palette is decidedly grey. *New Vegas* also had a rocky release, full of bugs and glitches. Unlike the games Piot describes, *New Vegas* does not offer a smooth and colorful journey through escalating levels and spectacles. Rather than privilege gameplay at the expense of narrative complexity, narrative complexity is privileged at the expense of gameplay.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 352

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 359

Since Piot wrote his article there has been an emerging literature on ethnography in virtual worlds. There is even a handbook for this type of research titled *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*. This book focuses on massively multiplayer online games, or MMOs for short. These game worlds are shared by thousands of other players. Conversely, *New Vegas* is a single player game. There are no human agents to be encountered in the game. Rather than creating a vibrant world full of human interaction and dialogue, *New Vegas* is experienced alone. But this does not mean that the game has not created public space. Rather than gathering in the game world, players bond together through forums and websites devoted to the game. While most players have moved on from *New Vegas* in favor of other more recent games, there is still active participation in the online communities. Most of the conversation is centered around modding, a practice that further complicates the reading of the game as text.

Using mods, players can intervene in the fabric of the game itself. Some mods are relatively simple, aiming only to patch glitches in the game, others add content, or remake content that is already present in the game's base form.

Another topic that fuels activity on these forums even seven years after the game's release is an ongoing argument about which political path represents the best outcome for the world of the game.

### The Setting of the Game

*New Vegas*' present is the year 2281, roughly two centuries after a nuclear apocalypse. It takes place in the city of Las Vegas and the surrounding Mojave desert. The city of Las Vegas was saved from nuclear destruction by industrial magnate Robert House. House privately financed a complex system of nuclear deterrents that

intercepted the nuclear warheads targeted at Las Vegas. The result is a well preserved strip of hotels and casinos surrounded by miles of desert ruin.

Three main polities inhabit the Mojave desert and the American Southwest where the game takes place. The first of these is the New California Republic (NCR). The NCR is a reflection of pre-war United States government. It has free and open elections and portends to serve the interests of democracy and freedom. Its heartland is southern California, but this is not part of the game's playable territory. They control the Hoover dam and most of the territory west of the Colorado river. Most of the game's playable area is NCR territory.

The second polity is Caesar's legion, a military dictatorship based on the historical roman empire. The legion occupies territory in the prewar states of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah. Like the NCR, the main territory of the legion is not accessible in the game but rather alluded to in lore and dialogue.

The third main polity is the city-state of New Vegas, lead by Robert House, who has maintained himself through the nuclear holocaust and the ensuing two centuries by making himself into a cyborg. House has control over a sizeable army of "securitron" robots, and while he is nominally allied with the NCR, he seeks political autonomy for New Vegas.

The game's narrative is centered around a military stand-off over control the Hoover dam. The NCR and Caesar's legion are both vying for control of New Vegas and the Hoover dam, which supplies the city with electricity. This standoff, between reflections of the United States and Imperial Rome, is a perfect place to examine the

temporal strangeness of post-apocalyptic narratives. Both of these emergent states are re-articulations of previous states, but drawn from radically different time periods.

Besides these three main polities, there are a number of decentralized tribes living in the marginal spaces of the game. These spaces include canyons, bunkers, caves, and highlands. Most of these organizations are referred to as tribes.

The term tribe conjures other uncomfortable terms from anthropology's past: Savage, primitive, uncivilized etc. However *New Vegas* embraces the term, and imbues it with its own meaning. In *New Vegas*, almost any social group apart from the two opposing nation states of the NCR and the legion is described as a tribe. The tribes have some sort of unique characteristic that makes them stand apart. For most of the tribes, this characteristic is intimately linked to the place they live.

For example, the boomers live on an abandoned airfield, and view themselves as a continuation of the American armed forces. The Great Khans live in the canyons and highlands of the game, and are modeled after the historical mongolian empire. All of these tribal identities typify what makes *New Vegas*, and the post-apocalyptic project so appealing. Counterintuitively, narratives of the post-apocalypse are focused on renewal and social change rather than the destruction that makes this renewal possible. The destruction of the apocalypse is only the literary crutch through which new formations are made possible, and this is why so much more focus is placed on the world after the apocalypse: the post, than the apocalypse itself.

The apocalypse freezes time and place, making those who survive newly indigenous, and localizing and regionalizing what had previously been global spaces. A desire for regionality, and the end to the anthropocene, presages apocalyptic desire.

The boomers, who see themselves as heir to a part of the United States government, are nevertheless described by the game and its characters as a tribe. This is because they are inextricably linked to place. In the introduction of her book, *The Lure of The Local*, Lucy Lippard synthesizes what makes place so appealing both in and out of the world of New Vegas.

“This book is concerned not with the history of nature and the landscape but with the historical narrative as it is written in the landscape or place by the people who live or lived there. The intersections of nature, culture, history, and ideology form the ground on which we stand-our land-our place-the local. The lure of the local is the pull of place that operates on each of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies. It is the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation. The lure of the local is that prevailing undertone to modern life that connects it to the past we know so little and the future we are aimlessly concocting.”<sup>10</sup>

On the same page of the book as this quote is a picture of Hoover Dam. Lippard points out that the dam is representative of culture’s control over nature.<sup>11</sup> The Hoover Dam is also a central location in *New Vegas*, and in this world in which culture’s dominion over nature has been (mostly) shattered, the dam is a powerful symbolic object.

Once again though, the game forecloses the very possibilities that it presents. While creating an array of local groups with their own systems across the American southwest, progression through the story requires siding with one of the polities that take control over the entire area. In the space of the post-apocalypse localized and contained groups become the norm, but *New Vegas* shows these local entities in decline. They are variously subsumed by the political entities that are presented as the

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<sup>10</sup> Lippard, Lucy, *The Lure of the Local*, (New York, Ny: The New Press, 1997) p. 7

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7

player's choice. Some players have expressed disappointment with the limitations of choice in a game that is premised on providing alternatives.

*New Vegas* is an aimless concoction. It has no definitive ending. It does, however have a definitive place for its ending. All of the possible paths through the game's story culminate in a battle fought at the Hoover dam. The winner of this battle is the one supported by the player, and that polity will then have control over the dam, the city of New Vegas, and the whole of the Mojave desert.

### History of Caesar's Legion

Caesar was born Edward Sallow, a citizen of the NCR, the same state with which he is now at war. He was raised and educated by the followers of the apocalypse, a humanitarian group that took in him and his mother after his father was killed. In his early twenties he was sent with a group of other members of the followers to study tribal languages in what was formerly Arizona. During these travels the group finds a collection of books of Roman history that include *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon, and *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (Commentaries on the Gallic War written by the historical Julius Caesar. These books were the inspiration for the military state he would later create.

Later in the same expedition Sallow and his fellows were captured by the Blackfoot tribe. This tribe was fighting a losing war against seven neighboring tribes. Against the wishes of his fellows, Sallow intervened, using his knowledge of firearms and military strategy to advise and eventually assume leadership of the Blackfoot tribe. Under Caesar's leadership the Blackfoot tribe turned the tide of the war by targeting the weakest of their neighbors first. Once this tribe is defeated Caesar enslaves the able

bodied men to use as soldiers, and kills the women and children of the tribe. Through technological advantage and brutality Caesar lead the Blackfoots to victory against the seven opposing tribes. Caesar then re-organized the remnants of these tribes into his grand cultural vision: Caesar's Legion. By the time the game takes place, Caesar's legion has conquered and assimilated 86 different tribes into one homogeneous unit.

Caesar's fictional resurrection of imperial Rome has historical precedent. In his essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History* Walter Benjamin writes about ancient Rome's appropriation by French jacobins.

Thus to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of the history. The French revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger's leap into the past.<sup>12</sup>

In the case of the French revolution, the inspiration was drawn from the period of the Roman Republic. For revolutions opposed to monarchy, inspiration would have been found in the senate rather than in the example of Imperial Rome. Benito Mussolini's re-articulation of Roman Empire offers a more politically adjacent usage of ancient Rome. Both Sallow and Mussolini focus on the Roman Empire to create a model for a fascist government in their present moment. To Sallow, the Roman Empire is closer to the needs of the present moment than the liberal democracy offered by the NCR.

Regardless of which era of Rome is drawn upon for inspiration, both cases illustrate the way that history can be mined as inspiration for the present moment.

### Nuclear Deserts

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. 1944

In his book, *Nuclear Borderlands*, Joseph Masco explains what a nuclear scientist thinks the world will look like after nuclear war. The scientist, far from imagining the possibility of a Roman Empire uncannily re-animated in an apocalyptic present, sees the possibility of nuclear war simply as leading only to a subtraction of technological time.

Moreover he noted that a full-scale nuclear war would not be the end of everything. Instead, he offered an image of nuclear war as a kind of time travel, stating that a full-scale nuclear exchange would return the United States to “roughly the year 1860... Consequently, after a nuclear war, techno-time would simply start over again at the 1860 level and the United States would build itself out of ashes by producing new machines.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than thinking about what may be made possible in terms of cultural production, the nuclear scientist that Masco interviews thinks about nuclear war in terms of a scientific narrative of progress. Masco notes that the scientist focuses only on scientific knowledge, not of the effects of radiation on ecosystems, or of other diverse contingencies of nuclear war. The New California Republic approximates the future pastness that Masco’s interlocutor envisions. The NCR is a recreation of the United States government that came before. The reborn state is set back both in terms of technology and also in territory. Rather than controlling the entire continental territory of America before the war, the NCR control only Southern California and parts of Nevada. Rather than creating something entirely new and strange, the NCR is simply a step backwards in time.

The game’s developers seem more sympathetic to the NCR than the other political alternatives the game offers. However, New Vegas does not glorify the pre-war

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<sup>13</sup> Masco, Joseph. *The Nuclear Borderlands “The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico.”* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) 44



United States or its apocalyptic spiritual successor. Each political entity is presented as having significant downsides. Each ending is ambiguous enough that players continue to argue about which group is “best” for New Vegas. Masco writes that the nuclear era created a profound sense distrust of the United States government, and this theme is carried through into the creation of the NCR, as well as the prewar government that the game constructs. One of the first characters encountered in the game is named Easy Pete. He is a former scavenger turned brahmin herder living in the town of Goodsprings. When asked why he dislikes the NCR he says “Don’t get me wrong, NCR’s got a lot of decent folks in it. It’s just that they make you part of them whether you like it or not. Towns like Goodsprings and Primm don’t stay independent for long, not if you’ve got something the NCR wants.” Easy Pete’s views are echoed by other characters in the Mojave desert, who prefer independence for themselves, their towns or their tribes. *Fallout New Vegas* presents an echo of manifest destiny that is cardinally reversed. The NCR expands eastward from southern California, annexing towns and tribes in their path. Characters of the game, as well as the game’s players have expressed disappointment with this ascendancy of the NCR.

One of the worst examples of this expansionism is the massacre of the Great Khans at Bitter Springs. During a war with the Khans, the NCR attacked Bitter Springs, believing it to be a military base. Bitter Springs was actually a semi-permanent refugee camp for the women, children and elderly of the tribe. The incident takes place before the events of the game. The event cannot be enacted or witnessed by the player, it can only be described as history by the game’s characters. For the makers of *New Vegas*, creation of this historical event serves to display the downsides of the NCR and their

expansionism. The event is clearly recycled. It resembles the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, and other atrocities committed against indigenous people by the United States government. This incident shows how the game's future is woven out of disparate threads of the past.

The Massacre at Bitter Springs also offers insight into another area of the game that sets it apart: historical production. Unlike the arcade games that Piot analyzed, *New Vegas* is not entirely self contained. Many of the events and places of its world are inaccessible to the player through gameplay. These events and places are conjured through dialogue with characters and with in game text. While the progress of the game's present and future is multidirectional and indeterminate,<sup>14</sup> the game creates a vivid past for the player to unravel and explore.

Not only does Masco's theoretical inquiry into nuclear aesthetics inform a critical reading of *New Vegas*'s themes, strangely enough, the setting of the game and the setting of Masco's ethnography resemble each other.

It is important to recognize that the Manhattan Project produced not only a transformation in scientific and international affairs; it initiated a conversion of northern New Mexico from a primarily rural, agrarian economy to a military industrial state. Moreover, while U.S. military planners sought out a marginal space on America's periphery in 1943 to try and build an atomic bomb, they colonized the geographical center of Pueblo and Nuevomexicano territories, engaging cosmological orders that identify the northern Rio Grande valley as quite literally the center of the universe.

Just as the United States government made northern New Mexico a center of its technological project, the NCR similarly colonizes the Mojave desert of Nevada for its

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<sup>14</sup> Tsing, Anne, *The Mushroom at the End of the World, on The possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2015) 4

own technological and state security needs. The NCR does this regardless of the tribes and people that already live there.

Masco also calls attention to how the nuclear as spectacle can be focused into an example of pleasure and banality. He does this by explaining how during an above ground nuclear test, a scientist uses the power of the nuclear bomb to light a cigarette.

“Taylor positioned himself so that with the help of a parabolic mirror the flash from the twenty kiloton nuclear detonation would light a cigarette... Here the exploding bomb is used to produce a moment of technoaesthetic reverie, where the massive destructive power of the atomic bomb is marshalled to accomplish that most mundane- and purely sensual act- of smoking.”<sup>15</sup>

New Vegas is comparable to this experiment. Its creators have focused nuclear aesthetics into a piece of popular entertainment. Its consumption is mundane. As a video game it perfectly occupies the spectre of unremitting banality proposed by Sontag. The game can be played for hours on end, and leads to no definitive conclusion.

New Vegas is what Sontag would call fantasy, and it straddles her twin spectres of banality and inconceivable terror. Its objective as a video game is to enthrall, entertain, offer pleasure and stave off boredom. In this respect it is singularly mundane. As its subject the game is concerned with the inconceivable terror of nuclear apocalypse, and what is made possible in its aftermath. Sontag's twin spectres have been mediated through fantasy and reflection.

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<sup>15</sup> Masco, Joseph. *The Nuclear Borderlands "The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico."* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006)

But *New Vegas* is more than just fantasy. Its speculations give texture to the imagination of the present. In a moment of renewed tensions with North Korea, America's nuclear infrastructure is being re-animated. So is its nuclear paranoia. They have been lying dormant. Now they are being awoken for more than just pastiche. For the first time since the cold war, Hawaii re-instituted nuclear warning sirens on December 2nd of 2017.<sup>16</sup> But even in a moment at which nuclear anxiety after the cold war is at its peak, nuclear apocalypse is still a project of speculation, and not of history. In his 1984 essay *No Apocalypse, Not Now*, Jacques Derrida articulates the apocalypse as a fictive event.

but the phenomenon is fabulously textual also in the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it... it has never occurred, itself, it is a non event... For the moment, today, one may say that a non-localizable nuclear war has not occurred; it has existence only through what is said of it, only where it is talked about. Some might call it a fable, then, a pure invention: in the sense in which it is said that a myth, an image, a fiction, a utopia, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm, are inventions. It might also be called a speculation, even a fabulous specularization. The breaking of the mirror would be, finally through an act of language, the very occurrence of nuclear war. Who can swear that our unconsciousness is not expecting this? Dreaming of it, desiring it?"<sup>17</sup>

New Vegas is a fabulous text. It is a nuclear war made real and delivered to a public. It is a speculative project. It imagines what is possible after nuclear apocalypse. The game's scope of speculation includes, societal formation, language, historical

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<sup>16</sup> Sullivan, Emily, *The Two Way, Breaking News From NPR*, Northeast Public Radio, 12/7/2017 <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/12/02/568019908/hawaii-initiates-a-new-monthly-test-of-a-nuclear-siren>, accessed 12/8/17.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida, Jacques, Catherine Porter, and Philip Lewis. "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)." *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (1984): 20-31.

production, medicine, technology, non human subjectivities and other topics. As a game, it is incomplete. Originally the game's creators had hoped for players to choose whether to play as a human, ghoul or super mutant. The game's designers also wanted to include more of the legion's territory into the game's playable area, to give a more balanced sense of the two opposing options. Given that part of the game's aim is simply to imagine and speculate, the fact that the developers fell short of what they had intended to create seems appropriate.

What was left out of the game was not left out because of chance. The decision to leave parts of the game unfinished shows what parts of the game were more important to the developers to begin with. The developers of the game privilege the NCR. They do so in part by giving it more space in the game's world. But they also give it preferential treatment in the epilogue, subtly implying that the NCR, while flawed, still represents the best possible outcome for the people of the Mojave desert and New Vegas.

Even though the NCR is privileged, the developers should still be given credit for making the game and its endings complex enough that they are still being argued over. Even in 2018, debate about the benefits and drawbacks of the game's four story paths continues on various forums, even almost a decade after the game's original release.

What are the moral implications of creating work that exists in apocalyptic otherworlds? Is it a problem that so much cultural energy is put into creating and then inhabiting these worlds beyond worlds? Anna Tsing examines the end of the world in the present moment through the lens of mushroom foraging. Tsing describes how mushroom foraging as a livelihood perfectly illustrates what she calls the modern state

of precarity.<sup>18</sup> For Tsing's interlocutors, scavenging is a vital means of support. The same is true many individuals in the Mojave wasteland, they scavenge medicine and technology to support themselves. Both are precarious livelihoods, lived in the ruins of capitalist industry.

Fallout New Vegas is a ruined otherworld, accessed through the portal of home media. It presents a ruined future. In some fundamental way this anesthetizes the reality of the present from which it is drawn. Fallout New Vegas punts nuclear radiation into an indeterminate realm of a world after, necessarily ignoring the world that is present. Fallout New Vegas belies the eerie truth that in some small way the apocalypse is already here.

Regardless of its potential status as social anesthetic, *New Vegas* still articulates progress even as it describes ruin.<sup>19</sup> By giving developmental preference to the New California Republic, the game tracks the re-emergence of liberal western democracy out of the ashes of nuclear holocaust. But even as it does this it offers fabulous alternatives to occupy our imagination and time, posing questions about what is made possible in the newness of destruction.

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<sup>18</sup> Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World, on The possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2015) p. 4

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

Do Zombies Have Rights?  
*Torture and Waste in Colson Whitehead's Zone One*

Mark Spitz is a man without qualities. As such, he is perfectly equipped for the post-apocalyptic world in which he finds himself. *Zone One* takes place in the southern part of Manhattan as Mark and a squad of civilian soldiers clear buildings of zombies after marines have retaken the streets.

This chapter will read *Zone One* through the way that it constructs the state. Unlike other works of post-apocalyptic and zombie fiction, which employ a simplistic narrative of bare survival, *Zone One* is concerned with the re-emergence of the state. In this way the novel is parallel to *New Vegas*, which also chooses to ignore the chaos of the immediately post-apocalyptic to focus on the process of a return to order and governance. The new state in *Zone One* has a capital in the city of Buffalo, New York, and in the years after the apocalypse the state has made significant inroads towards restoring order and returning society to where it was before the apocalypse.

Despite its fantastic setting *Zone One* is also a critique of the United States government at the moment of its publication. *Zone One* offers a pessimistic view of the neoliberal state and its efficacy. *Zone One* was published in 2011, three years after the 2008 economic recession, and the same year as United State's understated military withdrawal from Iraq. The novel reflects concerns about the state drawn from the war on terror. State sanctioned torture, misleading of citizens, and a sprawling bureaucratic system that obfuscates any wrongdoing are all products of the American war on terror, and they are all taken up in uncanny fashion in *Zone One*. Published in 2011, the book reflects a dark mood about the American state, the 2008 economic collapse, and the war on terror. In 2011 the

United States withdrew from Iraq and Osama Bin Laden was killed. The year prior Michael Lewis published *The Big Short*, about the market crash of 2008. The book was wildly successful. The book's subtitle "Inside the Doomsday Machine" is also significant. The state is the disaster.

Whitehead imagines the functions and possibilities of the state after an apocalypse, focusing on its civic and bureaucratic endeavors. He describes at great length the disposal of the zombie bodies, a contingency not often encountered in other works of fiction concerned with the zombie apocalypse. The second possibility that Whitehead explores is the torture of zombies.

In *Zone One's* post-apocalyptic world the goal has shifted from the survival of the individual to a restoration of the state. The state uses the language of an "American Phoenix" to exemplify its program. The resurgent state centered in Buffalo has a professional military and the ability to manufacture ammunition, weapons, and armor that is resistant to the zombie's bite. Through the organization and bureaucracy of the state, specialization of labor has been created anew. While the breakdown of labor is not seen in full in the novel, it is clear that the government has created divisions and hierarchies in its workforce. Mark Spitz is part of a unit of civilian soldiers. It resembles a militia, somewhere between common citizen and trained fighting force. The government has a more capable military, simply called the marines, a restoration of the prewar United States Marine Corps. In the details of the state's functioning and the outcome of the novel, Whitehead overturns neoliberal narratives of progress and human achievement.

The book takes place several years after a zombie plague destroyed American society and government. The book is narrated by Mark Spitz, who spends as much time



poring over his memories of both before and after the end of the world as he does in the book's present moment. Mark Spitz, like many individuals, wandered from place to place in the years after the apocalypse. Occasionally he travelled with other survivors, but mostly he preferred to travel and live alone.

In the book's present he is part of a four person sweeper unit. The sweeper crews are tasked with clearing the buildings of Manhattan of remaining zombies. It is occasionally dangerous, but usually simply banal. The majority of the zombies were killed by the initial marine incursion in Manhattan, and so Spitz and his fellows have the unenviable task of clearing endless apartment buildings of the few remaining zombies. The job is not only to kill the zombies, but also to seal them in body bags and remove them to the street, where a separate unit, 'disposal,' manages their destruction. Spitz describes how the sweeper crews often take the shortcut of bagging the bodies and then tossing them out of windows rather than carrying them all the way down the stairwell of a large apartment building. While it saves time for the sweeper crews, the resulting explosion of gore and rotting flesh makes the job of waste management more difficult, and the disposal teams complain to HQ.

"Defenestration!" Disposal shouted, louder, accustomed to this indignity. Defenestration unduly aggravated their job. It was disrespectful. It was unhygienic. Frankly, it was unpatriotic. Everything inside was bullied to lumpy slime, and the zippers oozed a trail of crimson slush on the street, in the carts, the post-pickup staging areas. And that was when the bags remained mostly intact.<sup>20</sup>

The disposal units and sweeper teams are working towards the same goal, the removal of zombies from Manhattan. Each of them specializes in a certain part of that removal, and these specializations create tension. The relationship between the two groups is entirely

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<sup>20</sup> Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York, NY, Anchor Books, 2011) p.75

professionalized. The members do not interact or socialize. Mark Spitz also observes that their Hazmat suits makes it nearly impossible to recognize a member of disposal or to converse with them. Disposal is subsumed by their labor specialty.

This episode highlights the signature and unique focus of *Zone One*, the resurgence of the state, with all its attendant needs and obligations. The state's key role is to restore order through mass violence against the zombies that now rule most of America. The state uses specialization of labor to make this possible. The reincorporated citizens of Buffalo are given jobs such as marine, sweeper, and waste disposal, each tackling a different part of the zombie problem. The state's authority is derived from its ability to organize violence. Waste disposal is an understated but important element of that examination.

Part of the sweeper teams' obligation is to collect data and report it, so that the government can create new strategies for dealing with the zombie threat. Here Whitehead outlines a key belief of the resurgent government: progress.

It was the season of encouraging dispatches. The establishment of steady communications with nations abroad, the intel travelling back and forth over the seas. Throw in the continued consolidation of the uninfected groups and clans, and the simple fact that skel attacks and sightings had diminished by all empirical measure, and one had reason to dust off the old optimism. You had only look at the faint movement in the ashes: surely this is the American Phoenix Rising. At least that's what the t-shirts said, lifted from the biodegradable cardboard boxes fresh from Buffalo. Toddler sizes available.<sup>21</sup>

Few works of Zombie fiction and television envision the mass manufacture of slogan t-shirts. Here Whitehead satirizes a neoliberal sense of progress which the emergent state of Buffalo exemplifies. Buffalo has chosen as its avatar the phoenix. The phoenix, being a

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<sup>21</sup> Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York, NY, Anchor Books, 2011)

mythological creature that is born again from the ashes, is an obvious choice for an emergent state in a post-apocalyptic world. It sells an optimistic message of recovery, rebirth, and progress. Not only does the government aim to eradicate the zombie threat, but it also wants to resume all of the functioning of a neoliberal state. Buffalo reaches out to other foreign governments, restoring the idea of a globalized and international world that is always destroyed in apocalyptic fiction. They also plan to reinstitute taxation once the zombie threat has been dealt with.

Mark Spitz and other more cynical characters in the novel refer to the individuals who buy into this progressive vision as “pheenies,” a pejorative rendering of phoenix. Spitz, and other members of the sweeper units with which he works more closely resemble adventurers and mercenaries than conscripted soldiers. They’ve joined the new state of Buffalo for the stability it offers. They receive food, supplies, and respite from the constant fear of surviving in the wastes.

German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies identifies two unique social formations: *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* is representative of close knit communities in which individuals have intimate knowledge of one another. *Gesellschaft* represents the professionalized relationships of urban society. While in the early days of the disaster survivors banded together in groups, in the novel’s present we see the return of *Gesellschaft* through the state’s division of labor and specialization of waste disposal.<sup>22</sup> But the disposal of bodies is secondary to the enactment of violence. Obviously before the zombies can be treated as waste they must be killed, either by marines or the sweeper teams.

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<sup>22</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press) 1957

Whitehead carefully constructs all of the bureaucratic facets that a massive operation to remove zombies from New York City requires. Far from the thrilling excitement offered by many zombie movies and shows, much of this detail is banal. The process of organizing violence is made possible through the existence of a state. While killing the zombies is simple enough, managing the grids of the sweeper teams and disposing the bodies of the zombies is a complex bureaucratic task. This task is facilitated by Manhattan's grid layout.

The City Bragged of an endless unravelling, a grid without limit; of course it was bound and stymied by rivers, curtailed by geographical circumstance. It could be subdued and understood. Soon sweeper teams would roam the rural areas on an identical mission to that of the metro sweepers, concocting the equations of the countryside, putting numbers to nascent theories about skel dispersal patterns, and in time these numbers would deliver end dates and progress and the return to life before.<sup>23</sup>

This novel could not be set in a city like Boston and tell the same story, or make the same argument about state power. There are several reasons why the restoration of Manhattan is an appealing project for Buffalo. Many of these reasons are not revealed until the end of the novel, and these reasons drive home Whitehead's argument against the neoliberal state. However, the key reason for Manhattan's appeal, and the reason that is discussed throughout the novel, is Manhattan's grid layout. Whitehead points out that a grid can be subdued and understood. A grid is an ideal plane on which to project state power.

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<sup>23</sup> Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York, NY, Anchor Books, 2011)

As Whitehead explains, most of the more violent “skels” on the street have been killed by the original marine operation. Given that the state has a limited number of marines, the monotonous task of clearing the buildings of New York City falls instead to civilian “sweeper” units. The word sweeper itself is more reminiscent of cleaning than of killing. The project of the sweepers is made possible through state legibility. Because Manhattan is formatted in a grid layout, the sweeper units are assigned areas of the city to clear in rectangular chunks. In his book *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott discusses how grids are beneficial for the enforcement of state power. He discusses the ways that high modernists such as Le Corbusier wanted to start from zero in order to enact a grid system.<sup>24</sup> Le Corbusier may have found the fictive possibilities of apocalypse useful in his planning.

### Bodies or Waste?

The grid makes possible the efficient killing of zombies, but the accompanying problem is the disposal of the bodies. This is another sphere where Whitehead sets this novel apart from the rest of the genre. A central question raised from a close reading of this novel is whether Zombies have rights, and what those rights may be. The state of Buffalo does not grant zombie corpses funerary procedures, but rather treats them as waste, to be disposed of with a bureaucratic system. Not only is violence enacted on the zombies, but the stragglers a distinct subset of zombie that is docile, are singled out for grisly torture. After being violently destroyed the zombies are then transformed by the state into garbage.

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998). p.94

Because of the interregnum years of nomadic survival and displacement, it is unlikely that any members of the sweeper teams would have kinship ties with the zombies that they are tasked with removing. In fact this scenario does not occur at all during the book. But it is worth noting the moral dilemma that this would create. The sweeper may recognize a zombie as a deceased loved one, and desire a burial. This desire for burial would be at odds with the state program of disposal, which emphasizes efficiency over rights.

Part of the horror inherent in zombies as an archetypal monster is that they are unburied dead. They are uncanny, a shambling transgression of burial rites. Sophocles uses the unburied dead as a source of dramatic tension in several of his plays. In *Antigone* Creon refuses to allow Polynices' body to be buried, instead demanding that it be left to decay and be fed on by birds. Creon does this in order to exert his power over Thebes by showing that he is willing to transgress societal norm and make the body into a grisly spectacle. A body that is left to rot is inherently horrifying and transgressive. Rather than treating zombies as persons needing to be buried the state converts them to waste to be disposed of. They are not killed, they are "cleaned."

If zombies are uniquely horrifying they are also uniquely appealing. Part of their appeal lies in their moral simplicity. Because they are already dead they are eminently killable. The act of killing a zombie more closely resembles a purifying act against pollution than murder. In most zombie literature a bullet to the head will kill them. This act is simple, quick, effective. But in *Zone One*, zombies are not only killed, but also tortured. Torture puts us in a murkier realm than the standard purifying act of killing a zombie. Torturing zombies serves no purpose other than sadistic pleasure. (The same could be convincingly argued about torturing humans)

Rather than writing a zombie novel that resembles a shoot-em-up cowboy western, Whitehead instead focuses his energy on imagining what a state program of waste disposal would look like. In Manhattan the zombie bodies are burned in two large industrial incinerators. A central cause in the fall of Manhattan at the end of the novel is that the government's waste disposal program is inadequate. Because the two incinerators cannot destroy the zombie corpses fast enough the bodies pile up against the wall, creating a vast strain and eventually causing the wall to collapse. Once this happens the southern part of the island is once again overrun by zombies.

The decision to dispose of the zombies as waste is made for two key reasons. Firstly zombies are excepted from being bodies, and secondly the sheer numerical quantity of the zombies make the burial of zombies in graves a logistic impossibility.

Mass death surpasses the capabilities of burial. Bodies becoming waste has precedent outside of fiction. Whitehead's system of bodily disposal is eerily reminiscent of the death camps of the Holocaust.

At the end of the novel, the state of Buffalo fails. The camps that they have established throughout the northeast are overrun by zombies. The wall that separated the retaken southern part of Manhattan from the northern zombie infested section collapses. Radio contact with the city of Buffalo and its government is lost. This fall, at least in Manhattan, is directly caused by a lack of infrastructural investment. The cranes that lift the bodies over the defensive wall and the incinerators that are then used to destroy the bodies become overtaxed. The defending forces are able to kill the zombies quickly enough, but they are not able to dispose of the resulting pile of bodies quickly enough. The bodies, rather than being incinerated, begin to pile up against the wall. Eventually this pile reaches

a weight that the wall cannot contain, and the wall is split in two, allowing the zombies to pour through into lower Manhattan. The inability to manage waste is what dooms the state.

The other side of state functioning that Whitehead examines is torture and violence. Disposal is secondary to the violence enacted on zombies, which is the entire purpose of the state. Rather than portraying the destruction of zombies as a morally simplistic act, Whitehead subverts this simplicity by examining survivors who torture zombies for sadistic pleasure.

He had a particular dislike for No Mas, who bragged around Wonton about his scrapbook of straggler humiliation. “Who’d you see this week?” a sweeper might goad during Sunday-night R&R, Whereupon No Mas dutifully chronicled his latest Shenanigans. He carried a big red marker in his utility vest and liked to draw clumsy clown grins on the slack faces of the stragglers, christening each with a name appropriate to that profession. Then he pressed the muzzle of his assault rifle to the temple of Mr. Chuckles or Her Most Exalted Highness the Lady Griselda, smiled for the birdie, and had Angela take a picture before he splattered their craniums. Sunday nights at HQ NO Mas shared a cot with a young clerk who printed out his souvenirs on glossy paper<sup>25</sup>

The he at the beginning of this passage is Mark Spitz, the novel’s central character. He dislikes the sadistic torture and degradation of stragglers that has become commonplace in the zone. Stragglers are a unique form of zombies. They have returned to a place of significance in their previous lives, and repeat an action ad infinitum. Unlike normal zombies, they are docile. They do not attack the sweepers. This docility makes them targets for torture and degradation.

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<sup>25</sup> Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York, NY, Anchor Books, 2011) p. 142.



This passage recalls the Abu Ghraib scandal. No Mas smiling and pointing his gun at his victim's head echoes the images of Lynndie England posed grinning while Iraqi prisoners are tortured and sexually degraded. The final sentence of the passage may seem insignificant, but it highlights that there is a culture of permissiveness and even encouragement for No Mas' "shenanigans." The bureaucratic power of high quality photo printing is marshalled to spread documents of grisly torture. This passage crucially represents twin poles of state duty and functioning, bureaucratic banality and violent extreme. These poles are wedded into glossy prints, a visual reproduction of violence, made possible through office technology.

Violence and banality are linked because they are both what makes the state possible. While groups of survivors were able to kill zombies in small groups, the state utilizes bureaucratization and specialization of labor to kill zombies on a mass scale. Torture is both the transgression and the affirmation of violence made banal.

If the unique qualities of the stragglers is what makes them a target for torture and extreme violence, then those same qualities are also what make stragglers a bureaucratic rather than a military target.

There were your standard issue skels, and then there were the stragglers. Most skels, they moved. They came to eat you-not all of you, but a nice chomp here or there, enough to pass on the plague. Cut off their feet, chop off their legs, and they'd gnash the air as they heaved themselves forward by their splintered fingernails, looking for some ankle action. The marines had eliminated most of this variety before the sweepers arrived. The stragglers on the other hand, did not move, and that's what made them a suitable objective for civilian units.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Colson Whitehead *Zone One* (New York, NY, Anchor Books, 2011) p.60

The passivity of the stragglers makes possible the bureaucratization of their removal, and it also makes possible acts of torture and degradation against them. Rather than being completely motionless, stragglers are usually repeating one action from their previous professional lives ad infinitum. It is one of the ways that Whitehead presents a continuity of time before and after the apocalypse.

Mark Spitz is one of the few characters in the novel to express sympathy with the stragglers. By creating a subset of zombies that repeat mundane professional tasks Whitehead is linking the time before and after the apocalypse and offering a wry commentary on white collar office labor. The stragglers are the subset of zombies that most closely resemble the survivors and their lives before the disaster.

It is precisely the banality of both the stragglers and the program of their removal that creates the possibility for torture.

So why torture a zombie? It's clear that Whitehead is replicating the moral dilemma of state-sanctioned torture in the United States's war on terror. But supposedly these two scenarios are different. The United States' use of torture in the war on terror was purportedly for the purpose of gathering information. Zombies cannot provide information. Neither can they feel pain or humiliation. So at first the case of torturing zombies might seem entirely distinct from the use of torture in the war on terror. However, when one looks more critically at the war on terror, the torture in Colson Whitehead's novel more closely resembles the torture of the war on terror.

It is true that information cannot be procured by torturing zombies; they are beyond language or any kind of human communication. But torture is never about extracting information anyway. Torture has everything to do with asserting superiority, both military

and cultural over an enemy. For an emergent state in the wake of the post-apocalypse, proving its superiority and authority is of paramount concern. No Mas uses the space and authority provided by his task to clear the grid in order to make acts of torture possible. Without the state and the specialization it provides, torture would be logistically infeasible.

Violence is the primary concern of the state. In order to create and then justify its existence it must destroy zombies. Specialization of labor and bureaucratic functioning are channeled exclusively into the production of violence. Mark Spitz himself notes early in the novel that now that the government has resumed manufacturing, there is never a shortage of bullets. However, later he complains that the sweeper units had to wait to receive their mesh body armor that protects them from zombie attack. The priority of the state is first and foremost violence (bullets). All else (body armor) is secondary.

Beyond this morally damning explication of state approved torture the book is also completely absorbed with the infrastructural projects of restoration. This analysis is the primary way in which this work supersedes more traditional works on zombie apocalypse. Most of these are concerned with a simpler kind of survival, in which any political or group organization more closely resembles a tribe than a state.

Before the mission to clear out Manhattan, Mark Spitz was working for the new government in Connecticut. His job was to clear the highways of cars to enable shipping up and down the Northeast corridor. Throughout the book's present Spitz remembers his time on this assignment and even jokingly references other "cinemas of end times."

In the cinemas of end-times, the roads feeding the evacuated city are often clear, and the routes out of town clotted with paralyzed vehicles. Whether government supercomputers have calculated beyond all doubt that the meteor will decimate downtown or the genetically engineered killer cockroaches are the taking over the city, the inbound lanes are unimpeded. It

makes for a stark visual image, the crazy hero returning to the doomed metropolis to save his kid or gal or to hunt down the encrypted computer file that might-just might!-reverse disaster... In Mark Spitz's particular apocalypse, the human beings were messy and did not obey rules, and every lane in and out, every artery and vein, was filled with outbound traffic.<sup>27</sup>

The image of outbound lanes choked with abandoned vehicles are indeed a hallmark of apocalyptic American cinema. The "Walking Dead," a popular zombie apocalypse show used just such an image as a promotional poster for its premier. In the poster, the show's protagonist, sheriff Rick Grimes, rides a horse towards downtown Atlanta on the empty inbound lanes of highway. Immediately to his left the outbound lanes are choked with abandoned vehicles. This image highlights many of the divides that apocalyptic media delivers. The horse evinces a return, a cowboy narrative, a triumph of the rural and local. As an image it serves to illustrate what kind of world the protagonist now inhabits: a world of grit, common sense, and survival. But as Mark Spitz points out, it's not really what will happen.

While the zombie apocalypse does create a severe period of interregnum, the novel's narrative present is remarkably similar to that of the period that came before. The zombie apocalypse of *Zone One* does not split time in two. Zombie invasion is simply the next thing. The apocalypse is both an end and a beginning. It solidifies what comes before as historical, contains it neatly within an era. These breakages in time cannot occur in and of themselves, they are made possible through narrative production and history making. One such example of a manufactured splitting of time is the attacks of September 11th 2001. The event itself is called by the date it took place, 9/11. It is a split in time that makes a post and a pre cohesive and nameable. Whitehead denies his reader this temporal clarity.

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<sup>27</sup> Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York, NY, Anchor Books, 2011) p.168

### The Clean Slate

*Fallout: New Vegas* envisions the apocalypse as a clean slate. Persons that survive the apocalypse form groups and these groups are made newly indigenous, fused to their place through the fission of nuclear explosion. The world becomes provincialized as opposed to global and old dynamics of the settler colonial state are, at least temporarily, swept aside. This is not the case in *Zone One*. For Whitehead the apocalypse does not split time into a before and after. Instead Whitehead creates a continuity of the world before and the word after. Societal conflicts such as gentrification, and the environmental problem of climate change are carried through into Mark Spitz's "post-apocalyptic" moment.

### Neoliberal States and Commodities

One of Whitehead's darkest and most comedic attacks on the neoliberal state is his unique imagining of the commodity chain in the post-apocalyptic waste. In the time immediately after the apocalypse, raiding of stores and warehouses was commonplace. Survivors would loot food, weapons, ammunition, clothing, anything that could help survive in the waste. However, in the book's present, the new government of Buffalo makes an effort to create a continuity of ownership over commodities.

Mark Spitz resolved to pick up some new socks. Now that the anti-looting regs were in effect everyone-soldier and civilian and sweeper alike-was prohibited from foraging goods and materials belonging to anyone other than an official sponsor... Buffalo created an entire division dedicated to pursuing official sponsors whenever a representative turned up, in exchange for tax breaks once the reaper laid down his scythe and things were up and running again.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York, NY, Anchor Books, 2011) p.48

Whitehead here is satirizing neoliberal government's characteristic deregulation and privatization of the economy. Here the government in Buffalo still honors the private ownership of goods that were present throughout the commodity chain at the time of the collapse. The continuity of ownership is tenuous. Any individual claiming to have represented a company prior to the zombie virus can speak for that company. In exchange for goods that could simply be taken freely Buffalo offers tax breaks to corporations. Even in the aftermath of near total societal breakdown, the neoliberal government still privileges private ownership and the corporate class. These deals also take for granted the removal of zombies and a general return to order. It represents the government's overconfidence, and the dealings are made comic by the fact that the new state falls at the end of the novel and any hope for the revival of society or taxes is dashed.

This satirical component is important in linking the government of the novel to the United States government at the time of Whitehead's writing. In the time after disaster, both governments, fictive and real still defer to the private sector. In the world of the novel, private enterprise is non-existent; it has been wiped out by the disaster. But the state bows to the specious claims of those who claim to own commodities based on their supposed role before the disaster. Whitehead includes this comic piece to illustrate the flawed priorities of the state he is constructing and the state he is critiquing.

### State Pessimism

Unlike *Fallout: New Vegas*, in which a re-emergent neoliberal American state triumphs, the American phoenix of *Zone One* does not succeed. The book ends with a second apocalyptic destruction of the state. The survivor camps are overrun, contact with

Buffalo is lost, and the wall that separated the reclaimed part of Manhattan from the zombie horde collapses. It is a pessimistic and grisly ending. Its pessimism is made possible by its historical present moment. Unlike *Fallout: New Vegas, Zone One* was written after the 2008 American financial recession. As such it represents a darker outlook on the future of a global neoliberal state.

Colson Whitehead's antagonist has an enduring cynicism about Buffalo's government and its projects. As discussed earlier, Whitehead deliberately outlines the neoliberal agenda of the state he creates. Doing this creates a continuity with the American state after the 2008 market crash. Both the government of Whitehead's novel and the American government privileged the private sector well beyond common sense. Buffalo hopes to create a revived capitalist society, and in order to do so they cater to an imagined private sector. Whitehead's novel can be read not only as a commentary on the state poles of banality and violence, but also as a cautious warning about state intervention in disaster. In the wake of the market crash there was a sense that an invigorated state apparatus could take steps to improve and regulate the economy.

The final twist on the failure of the state is revealed by Ms. Macy, a government bureaucrat. Ms. Macy is an analyst sent by Buffalo to scout locations in Manhattan for a summit of world leaders. The state of Buffalo wants to resume international relations in Manhattan as a symbol of a return to order. New York is prized for its cultural significance before the zombie disaster. But this vision is undone by the wall's collapse, and instead Ms. Macy is trapped in Manhattan at the moment of its downfall. In this moment of disaster she reveals that the entire project to retake Manhattan was a public relations stunt.

"He's right," Ms. Macy said. "You don't know Buffalo. They're not going to send a gunship to clean up a public relations stunt

when they got camps falling right and left.”... “This is PR it’ll be years before we’re able to resettle this island. We don’t even have food for the winter.<sup>29</sup>

This is the final failure of the state revealed. Rather than engaging in projects of substance, it has instead overcommitted its resources in order to achieve a symbolic victory, a public relations spectacle. The reason for the state’s inability to make good its promise is that they don’t have enough food. The project fails because the waste disposal teams are not able to dispose of the bodies quickly enough, and the weight destroys the wall protecting lower Manhattan. But the project was a failure from the start, because there was not enough food to sustain the population of soldiers. Post-apocalyptic fictions embody a distrust of government.

Food is largely ignored in *Zone One*, both by Whitehead as the author and by the resurgent state that he constructs. While Whitehead has a knack for imagining many of the infrastructural needs of the state in restoring order after a zombie apocalypse, he does not use much space in the text to discuss food.

Food is arguably the most important issue of post-apocalyptic survival, but it is routinely put aside in the creation of post-apocalyptic worlds. The following chapter, which examines liberal preppers, will take up the question of food in force.

Mark Spitz is overjoyed by the second failure of the state. He is a man without qualities, and as such he is an opposite to the specialization and division created by the state. He hated the drudgery of his media marketing job before the apocalypse, and he hates the drudgery of his sweeper job after it.

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<sup>29</sup> Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* ((New York, NY, Anchor Books, 2011) p.311



He was smiling because he hadn't felt this alive in months... He'd entered a state of tremulous euphoria. The sensation peaked the instant the wall collapsed and, in its ebb, he was the owner of a woeful recognition: It was not the dead that passed through the barrier but the wasteland itself, the territory he had kept at bay since the farmhouse. It embraced him; he slid inside it... They had lost contact because the black tide had rolled in everywhere, no place was spared this deluge, everyone was drowning. Of course he was smiling. This was where he belonged.<sup>30</sup>

Mark Spitz only feels satisfied during the interregnum of total apocalypse. The book's ending is ambiguous. In its final pages, Spitz is fleeing towards the river, hopeful of making it off the island. The reader does not know if he survives, but that seems to be beside the point; either way he finally feels free.

The state's collapse serves to drive home the points that Whitehead has been making throughout the book. The state cannot succeed because it does not have the vision or interest to do so. Throughout the book the state is only discussed through its administration of violence. Through specialization of labor and bureaucracy they have made a project of mass violence against zombies possible. Other aims are subsumed by this violence, becoming only secondary. Lack of food and the inability to process the bodies of the dead are more the cause of state collapse than the zombies themselves.

Unlike Mark Spitz, who is elated by the second end of the world, the reader is left in a much darker mood. *Zone One* makes a cynical argument about the efficacy of state intervention after a disaster. In tying together the temporalities traditionally broken apart by the apocalypse Whitehead is able to make specific criticisms about the American state and society. This defeatist view is a reflection of the darkening political mood at the time of Whitehead's writing.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 312.

*Zone One* undoes the notion of progress. Part of the neoliberal consensus is an idea that society is improving. The novel's reversal of this assumption anticipates the changing political climate. Ruin and despair have worked their way even further into mainstream American political rhetoric in the time since the book was published, most notably in Trump's inaugural address.

In *Zone One* Whitehead uses the apocalypse to offer a continuation rather than an alternative. This is what makes the work stand out and what makes it so rich for analysis of its political implications. The apocalypse in fiction is a device to make possible new ideas and formations. Instead Whitehead transposes the present onto his zombie infested future. He excels at making the spectacle of apocalypse into an examination of state violence and banality.

## Preppers

### *Looking for the left in the end of the world*

The world will not end. Apocalypses will always be local phenomena. Anna Tsing calls our attention to this by pointing to locales that have already been destroyed by capitalism. In these ends Tsing discovers that the Matsutake mushroom is thriving.

Just as the Matsutake mushroom partners with decaying pine in disturbed forests, Apocalyptic preparedness is also politically and geographically contingent, drawn from a diverse array of other social movements. One wing of Apocalyptic preparedness embodies a regressive apocalyptic desire. This right wing school of imagination views the end of the world as a gun-toting cowboy paradise, free from legislation and government. Tsing dismisses this impulse as capitalist survival, and chooses instead to look at the politics and science of mushrooms.<sup>31</sup> While this capitalist survival is outside the scope of Tsing's book, it bears examining the phenomena elsewhere, especially in contrast to other forms of preparedness.

This chapter will take up the political engagements of preparedness. It will look for intersections of right and left in the practice and iconography of the end of the world. One of these intersections is in fact the mushroom.

The mushroom has become a gourmet object. Mushrooms that cannot be cultivated must instead be foraged. This makes the foraged mushrooms prized beyond their cultivatable counterparts. One can find forage guides in publications such as *Field and Stream*, which is devoted mostly to hunting and fishing, but mushroom foraging has also

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<sup>31</sup> Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015)

been taken up by environmental organizations and publications. Foraging can represent both rugged individualism, and also collaboration with environment.

Apocalyptic Preparedness has become a social practice that bleeds out from realms of fiction into the everyday. As mentioned in the introduction, the genesis of this project was seeing a desert camouflage jeep emblazoned with the phrase “Zombie Response Unit.” The violent extreme of the post-apocalyptic is made visible in the banal American space of a shopping mall parking lot.

Gear for apocalyptic survival has been shrewdly commodified. Many articles have noted this commodification of apocalyptic preparedness. One can buy several decades worth of meal kits for a few thousand dollars. Apocalyptic anticipation is constituted out of other social phenomena: Gun rights, survivalism, privacy and rugged individualism seem to be the animating features of right wing preparedness. In fact the tools of post-apocalyptic disaster are often simply high-grade camping gear, which exemplifies the scavenger quality of preparedness.

The bug-out bag is the fashion centerpiece of any prepper movement. Because preparedness necessitates mobility, preppers fill a “bug-out bag” with needed supplies to make their escape. The bug-out bag is a certificate of membership in a prepping community, and it makes possible the exchange of ideas. Prepper meetups usually involve the dissection of bug-out bags to examine their contents. Preppers may post their bag and its contents on forums, looking for feedback about how to refine its contents and their chances for survival.

For the Facebook group “The Liberal Prepper” much of the conversation is centered on how to live in the present. A focus of the group is gardening and agriculture. A brief

summation of the liberal politic of preparedness can be found in a post that simply reads “Looking for non-gmo seed packets.”<sup>32</sup> GMOs have long been a flashpoint for a certain kind of liberal green activist, but the post also highlights the liberal prep groups focus on food rather than weapons as the key marker of preparedness. In a comment on a post in Apolitical prepper Mike Carmen discusses the focus on guns in some forums.

A lot of people seem to think that stocking up on guns & ammo is all they need to do. This means they plan on taking food, etc, from others by force. Yes, you need guns & ammo to protect yourself from these crooks, but you need shelter, water, food too. Also, how are these overweight non exercising people going to "bug out" w/ 20,000 rds of ammo & 50 guns?

The comment raises the point that a lot of prepping conversation is dominated with hoarding guns. This is exactly the kind of survivalism that Anna Tsing dismisses.

Rather than focus on guns, the liberal prepper forum is far more focused on methods of generating and storing food. The profile photo for liberal prepper’s facebook page is an image of a woman in a gas mask holding several containers of home canned foods. One undercurrent of the group involves advocacy for permaculture. On February 9th the page posted a chart detailing plants that grow well together, and ones that should be planted apart. The focus on food production and agriculture shows the way that preparedness can be targeted at the present, rather than a speculative apocalyptic event.

Far from being contained simply to preppers, Apocalyptic expectation and preparedness has permeated the mainstream. An example of fictive speculation governing the american imagination is the Center for Disease Control’s co-opting of zombie “preparedness.” In 2011 the CDC rolled out a social media campaign to promote disaster

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<sup>32</sup> Liberal Prepping, 4/9

preparedness. The campaign instructed people how to prepare for the zombie apocalypse. While initially started as a social media gag, zombie preparedness has become a permanent fixture on the CDC's website.

Wonder why zombies, zombie apocalypse, and zombie preparedness continue to live or walk dead on a CDC web site? As it turns out what first began as a tongue-in-cheek campaign to engage new audiences with preparedness messages has proven to be a very effective platform. We continue to reach and engage a wide variety of audiences on all hazards preparedness via "zombie preparedness".<sup>33</sup>

The CDC took advantage of the hype zombies generate to educate the public about preparedness for a wide range of possible disasters. A state apparatus has appropriated a totalizing vision of destruction in order to instill general themes of disaster preparedness. As the CDC has found out, preparing for a zombie apocalypse isn't so different from preparing for a hurricane.

A 2014 article on CNBC is titled *Practical Reasons to Prepare for a Zombie Apocalypse: Getting Ready for the Zombie Apocalypse might just save your life- in the event of a hurricane, terrorist attack, or other disaster*.<sup>34</sup> The article goes on to quote beleaguered public health officials that state that zombie enthusiasm is at least a practical way to trick people into disaster preparedness. The article, though comical, shows the divide between the fictionalized totality of apocalypse, and the contingent realities of disaster.

A darker and more dramatic example of apocalypticism entering the American mainstream can be found in Donald Trump's 2017 inaugural address.

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<sup>33</sup> "Zombie Preparedness.," Centers for Disease Control 6/13/17 "Zombie Preparedness," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified June 13, 2017, <https://www.cdc.gov/phpr/zombie/index.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> Kelli Grant, "Practical Reasons to Prepare for a Zombie Apocalypse," CNBC, 6/4/14 <https://www.cnbc.com/2014/06/04/practical-reasons-to-plan-for-a-zombie-apocalypse.html>

But for too many of our citizens, a different reality exists: Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system, flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge; and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.<sup>35</sup>

Donald Trump evokes a language of ruination to describe the American city and American industry. He ran on a campaign of industrial revanchism. This inaugural language is a fulfillment of the tone of his campaign. The language has an unfortunate resonance with Tsing's suggestion that we are already living in a ruined earth.<sup>36</sup> Certainly Tsing and Trump have drawn conclusions that move in different directions, but there is a similarity that is undeniable. The failure of industry is an apocalypse for the right. Tsing is focused instead on environmental destruction and policy.

In the wake of a year of climate change fueled natural disaster, prepping is on the rise. Climate change is an apocalypse for the left. The Republican party and the American right has long denied climate change. Donald Trump's decision to exit the Paris climate agreements signifies a continuation of that denial. Chad Huddleston, professor of Anthropology at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville points to hurricane Katrina as a starting point of left wing preparedness. Katrina has been enshrined as both a natural and governmental disaster.<sup>37</sup> The government was slow and ineffective in responding to a disaster that affected its citizens. hurricane Katrina only built upon the governmental

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<sup>35</sup> Donald Trump, "The Inaugural Address," The White House, 1/20/17  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>

<sup>36</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015),

<sup>37</sup> Matthew Sedacca, "The New Doomsayers Taking up Arms and Preparing for Catastrophe: American Liberals," Quartz, 5/7/17, <https://qz.com/973095/the-new-doomsayers-taking-up-arms-and-preparing-for-catastrophe-american-liberals/>

mistrust of the nuclear cold war era as discussed by Joseph Masco in his book *Nuclear Borderlands*.<sup>38</sup>

In response to this new era of climate change and state abdication Daisy Luther has started her own wing of liberal preparedness through a self-published website called “The Organic Prepper: *Self Reliance Strategies For Preparedness and Personal Liberty*.” On the website she has published a “self-reliance manifesto” that details the goal of their website and project. The manifesto opens in a discussion of production and consumption.

Have you happened to notice that our society is out of balance?

The consumers outnumber the producers at such a rapid clip that we can't possibly continue like this. But who has time to produce when they are indebted and working overtime to finance their current lifestyles in the hopes that they will finally be able to buy “enough” to be happy, fulfilled, and loved? We live in a society made up mostly of rabid consumers. As soon as the advertising pros on Madison Avenue point them in a given direction, people flock to it like the zombies on *The Walking Dead* lurch toward a fresh human, completely oblivious to everything else. They yearn for these things that are produced across the world and then delivered at a cheap price. They fill up on cheap food that has been government subsidized, making it unrealistically inexpensive. They are enslaved as they work to pay for it, or in some cases, accept a handout to pay for it. More people are deeply in debt than ever, living a fancy First World Lifestyle that would crumble with one missed paycheck. They are slaves and they don't even know it. The biggest insurrection in our society is to be self-sufficient. Make the way you live your life a revolutionary act by producing some of the things that you need.<sup>39</sup>

To understand parts of this self-reliance manifesto we can turn to a film from the 1930s called “*White Zombie*.” This film is considered to be the first zombie full length movie to

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph Masco, *Nuclear Borderlands* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006)

<sup>39</sup> Daisy Luther, “The Organic Prepper” Accessed 3/27/15



feature zombies. In the movie, the antagonist commands a legion of zombies, using them to work a sugar plantation. The implications are obvious. In “White Zombie,” zombies are producers. The fact that they work on a plantation is an uncanny rendering of atlantic slavery and reserve labor. For Daisy Luther, author of the self-reliance manifesto, zombies are consumers rather than producers. This sentiment reflects America’s movement into post-industrial society. The American economy has shifted from making things to providing services. Luther is not the first to draw this comparison. Nor am I the first to note the transition of zombies from forces of labor to forces of consumption. Discourse that used zombies and other nightmarish figures to explain the economy exploded after the 2008 economic meltdown. In 2010 John Quiggin released a book titled: *Zombie Economics: How Dead Ideas Still Walk Among Us*. The book is a response to the market crash of 2008. Its author excoriates neoliberal market policies, calling them “Dead Ideas.” It’s a book written in opposition to free market economy, trickle down economics, and austerity. Quiggin casts these policies and their advocates as monstrous.

On April 4th, Becki Tomlinson posted in the liberal prepper group about China jute seeds. The post is in the spirit of action that Daisy Luther is calling for on her website.

You don't have to buy the seeds (they might be hard to find in a store), but you can gather them from the edge of most planted fields to plant the next year or just gather them as a forage to keep for flour or flour extender. If you get enough you can put them through a oil expeller and get one of the best tasting seed oils I have on the shelves. This oil also burns like olive oil in lamps. And the rest of the plant has a fiber that has been used to make sacks and bags for centuries. The fiber is also one of the best fire starters.

For me, china jute is a great survival grain. Each plant can produce enough seeds to make several loaves of bread, they are easy to grow, grow in just about any kind of soil, and are delicious.

China jute seeds and bread. While it is illegal to grow in many agricultural states, it is extremely easy to grow. In fact agri-science spends a lot of time and money trying to figure out how to kill it off and it keeps coming back stronger.<sup>40</sup>

The post expresses much of the liberal prepper worldview. The phrase “agri-science” is pejorative. Many members of the group distrust the food and agricultural industry. Anna Tsing discusses the way European agriculture emphasizes having large amounts of a single crop that could be harvested all at once. Tsing refers to this as a condition of the plantation, and points out that Matsutake mushrooms derive unique status from their ability to resist this system. China Jute also resists this system. When asked why it was illegal, Tomlinson explained:

Because when we humans domesticated most of our crops to make them easier to plant and harvest in rows, they lost the ability to grow in anything but a mono-culture. China jute is one of those plants, like lambsquarters (another more healthy plant than anything we grow) that is hard to kill with herbicides.<sup>41</sup>

It's an interesting point, and one that echoes Tsing's claims about the conditions of the plantation. Tomlinson's post goes on to explain the varied uses of the jute seeds, including a recipe for sourdough bread made using the seeds. The plants fibers can be used to make bags. It can be pressed for its oil, used both for cooking and heating, and as mentioned before can itself be used as a source of food. Like the Matsutake mushroom, the jute seed

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<sup>40</sup> Liberal Prepping 4/4/18

<sup>41</sup> Liberal Prepping 4//4//18

also resists the conditions of the plantation. While it can be cultivated, it cannot be controlled.

In the comments of the post, a member asked for clarification because they were confused about the plants various names. Tomlinson replied “Like puma and mountain lion, many living things have multiple names.”<sup>42</sup> Tomlinson is infusing the seed with traits of character. To Tomlinson, the seed is representative of her prepper ethos. It is a single item that has many uses. It is multiplex. This rethinking of the seed emphasizes the qualities that the members of liberal preppers may see in themselves. It is a subaltern seed, scrappy, persistent. But to others, especially agricultural states, Jute, or Abutilon Theophrasti as it is scientifically known, is an interloper. States with agricultural economies have indeed outlawed it, because it is extremely competitive, and can choke out other plants. This codification calls attention to how the state intervenes in ecology and agriculture.

Advocating its use and value is a thumb in the eye of the agriculture businesses that receive state support through subsidies. It is a symmetrical reversal of value. The state has labelled it a pest, but Tomlinson has grasped at its value to tell a different story.

### Localizing Food

Like many imaginative projects centered around the apocalypse, liberal prepping is a project of localizing. The Apocalypse is an anti-global imaginary. As mentioned before, the primary framework for a liberal preparedness is food. This has led to the movement being captivated by alternative agricultural forms. Videos and articles detailing urban farming,

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<sup>42</sup> Liberal Prepping 4/4/18

aquaponics, and permaculture are frequently posted both on the group and the page. At times it is possible to forget that one is browsing a page dedicated to preparing for the end of the world and not something more benign, like a gardening forum.

In a conversation on a post made on April 10th by Thor Hunter the members of the group discuss the possible benefits of accumulating gold, as compared to food or other supplies.

Gold... what is your opinion? TBH, I am kind of baffled as to why anyone would think it is good to have gold, if one thinks that the country's economy is going to collapse. You can't eat it.<sup>43</sup>

Several commenters echo the poster's point about food. At least two other people agree that "you can't eat gold." From a certain standpoint accumulation of gold and silver makes sense for a prepper, and several people do point that out in the thread. In the event that the united states currency collapses, precious metals will still have their intrinsic value. Accumulation of gold and silver is a hallmark of the already established conservative and libertarian prepping mindset. Members of this group desire to distinguish themselves from the right wing form. This desire may have caused some of them to miss the mark on precious metals by being over eager to divorce themselves from their right wing counterparts. In either case the post is a forum for articulating value. By divorcing themselves from precious metals liberal preppers take the opportunity to express what they truly find valuable, and of course it is usually food.

In the *Fallout* series, bottlecaps become the dominant form of currency across the United States. While this might seem far-fetched at first, in an apocalyptic scenario

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<sup>43</sup> Liberal Prepping 4/11

bottlecaps resemble precious metals. With the breakdown of industry, there will only be a fixed amount of bottlecaps available, locking in their value, much in the way that gold's value is ensured by its fixed quantity.

If precious metals are not the currency of choice for a liberal prepper, then what is? In a post on the group someone what items members were stockpiling for barter. Responses ranged, but one of the key answers was food. At this point that shouldn't be surprising. Other common suggestions included alcohol (especially miniature nip bottles), first aid kits, sewing supplies, and seeds.

The original post about gold did not provide a consensus however. While some members railed against it, other posited its value. Those who defended gold as a vital prepping material offered historical examples of currency breakdowns. Greg David Sullivan was one of the members arguing for gold concluding his comment by saying that "Precious metals, rare gems, and land. These are the only things that truly hold value through the destruction and reconciliation of economies."<sup>44</sup>

Food is so important for members of the group because it is a way of localizing. It is a retreat from global capitalism and a way of imagining food sovereignty in a ruined future. Daisy Luther argues that society is dysfunctional because people do not produce. Rather than the Trumpian impulse to bring back massive industry at all cost, the liberal prepper impulse is centered instead on localized production of food. This is the way forward for a food conscious left, an alternative to relying on complex food commodity chains that can easily break down in the case of a disaster.

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<sup>44</sup> Liberal Prepping, 4/8/18

### Depends on What You're Prepping For

Both of the previous chapters interrogate state formations in fictive worlds of aftermath. In both of these works the Apocalypse is an event that makes the totality of what was destroyed visible and graspable. In its destruction, global capitalism becomes unified. The American obsession with post-apocalyptic fictions often involves this kind of societal rendering through destruction. Time is split in two, and temporalities reflect off of each other. This is the appeal of post-apocalyptic narrative. We should be so lucky to have such a clean cut narrative arc. The reality of Apocalypse is that it will always be contingent, contextual, local. Perhaps it is better to cast aside the word Apocalypse itself in favor of disaster or catastrophe. There is an awareness of this ambiguity on the forum. In one post asking for advice on prepping materials to buy, a commenter stipulated that "It depends on what you're prepping for." This acknowledgment of multifariousness is a key to understanding the way that the forum operates, and the way that it incites action in the present.

Natural disasters are a frequent subject of discussion in the group. This is in large part fuelled by the devastating hurricane season of 2017. These hurricanes were widely acknowledged to have been worsened by climate change. California had a devastating wildfire season, also fuelled by climate change.. This has led to a prepping that takes into account the lessons of previous natural disasters, and is geared at preparing for future one.

Much of the discussion on natural disasters assumes that order will be restored after a disaster. This caveat to discussion stresses the local qualities of disaster.

Prepping is made possible by an assumption that the state has abdicated responsibility. Hurricane Katrina offers a more distant historical example of this particular state of disaster. Katrina showed a government that was either unwilling or unable to come to the aid of its citizens. Hurricane Maria, which devastated Puerto Rico in 2017 offers the same lesson over ten years later.

These hurricanes specifically, and climate change broadly has been willfully ignored by the United States. In 2017 Trump pulled the U.S. out of the Paris climate agreement. The members of this forum feel shut out of the state process by Trump's election and do not believe that they can rely on state agencies such as FEMA in the case of a disaster.

### Three Sisters, and the Politics of Return

The community's impulse towards permaculture often takes cues from native american agricultural methods. As discussed in chapter 1, part of the possibility of Apocalypse is that of newfound indigeneity. An apocalypse as a totalizing event would necessarily destroy the settler colonial state. In creating isolated local pockets the apocalypse would make any survivors native. In this scenario survivors would be newly fused to the land on which they live, negating the alienation brought about through specialization and global capitalism.

On April 4th Evan Kay posted an article about an effort to preserve and teach Hopi agricultural technique. The Hopi live in northern Arizona, and mostly grow corn. Many native american farming methods anticipate the current aims of permaculture. One such

example is the three sisters, an agricultural grouping employed by the Iroquois and other native tribes. The technique is named the three sister for its three component plants. Maize, squash and beans are planted together on small mounds. The corn stalks provide a structure for the beans to climb. The beans enrich the soil with nitrogen, aiding the growth of the other plants. Finally, the squash grows on the ground and prevents weeds from forming and competing for sunlight and nutrients.

This technique offers a convenient opposite with which to understand what is referred to as monoculture on the liberal prepper forum. Tsing refers to same permutation as plantation conditions. Rather than a single crop over large amounts of level area, permaculture centers on growing different crops together. This has a many benefits. By growing different crops together parasites are less likely to take hold of a crop, and less pesticides and intervention are needed. This collaboration echoes the spirit of the forum itself, which is always looking for multiplicity and collaboration.

The forum's emphasis on food is closely linked to other food movements that have occupied the liberal imagination in the 21st century. This apocalyptic rendering of farm to table is perfectly summed up by one individuals request for help finding "non-gmo seed packets."

In 2006 Michael Pollan wrote the book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. The book established Pollan as a leading writer on food. In 2008 the book was followed up by the documentary film "Food Inc.", narrated by Pollan. The film attacks corporate food companies, highlighting the cruel industrial conditions that many animals are raised and slaughtered under. It also points out that through subsidy, corn has become inescapable in



almost everything we eat. These works did not invent the farm to table movement, but they certainly animated a certain liberal camp further into an environmentally conscious form of consumption. Eating organic food that is produced locally is one of the key tenets both of the Liberal preppers forum and of the slow food movement. Since food is already a political issue of the left in the present, it makes sense that it would also become an animating feature of the way that they imagine the end of the world.

Part of what this slow food movement achieved was in highlighting how closely linking large food industries are to the state and the subsidies that it provides. Liberal preppers now feel increasingly shut out of state practice through the election of Donald Trump, and so are less likely to look for solutions through engagement with state practice. Instead the solution has become to opt out of engagement with the state and global distribution.

Reverting to hyper-localized food production in case of disaster has historical precedent. In both world wars, allied powers encouraged their citizens to plant “victory gardens.” This historical example has key similarities and differences with the current prepping formation. In response to national crisis, food production and distribution became strained. National governments used the idea of a homefront to encourage the individual to participate in the national war effort through food production. In the case of the World Wars localized food production stepped up when state power was stretched thin. In the a post apocalyptic setting localized food production would be increased because the state would no longer exist.

On the liberal prepping forum, local and personalized production of food is imagined as a failsafe in the case of a collapse of the state. But could the collapse of the state be avoided. Again, it depends on what you're prepping for. climate change is the dominant (although not the only) concern of the liberal prepping group. Climate change cannot be completely halted, but it can be mitigated. individualized action is incapable of bringing about structural change that might be brought about through the lobbying of government. In April of 2018, the *New York Times* released an article titled "How to Reduce Your Carbon Footprint." The problem with this approach is that it puts the burden of action on individuals rather than the state. The Guardian pointed this out in 2017 with an article titled "Neoliberalism has conned us into fighting climate change as individuals." The case for the New York Times piece isn't helped by the fact that it can only be read by the newspaper's subscribers. Perhaps prepping, even in its liberal variant has the same problem. Maybe it's just a defeatist nihilism that distracts from meaningful action. The same could be said of all of America's apocalyptic fascination.

Writing for *The New Yorker* in January of 2017 Evan Osnos detailed some of the more odious forms of prepping. Osnos' article is titled "Doomsday Prep for the Super Rich." In it he details the preparatory measures of Silicon valley tech entrepreneurs and wall street executives.<sup>45</sup> The members of the forum I examine in this chapter are largely middle class people. Luxury condos in nuclear silos are out of reach for them. Their action is aimed at increasing self-sufficiency in their lives. Osnos' subjects are playing a completely different game. Rather than making changes in the present they are simply attempting to buy their way past disaster and into a secured and luxurious future, even as the world goes

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<sup>45</sup> Evan Osnos, "Doomsday Prep for the Super Rich," *The New Yorker*, 1/30/17  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/doomsday-prep-for-the-super-rich>

to ruin. Osnos explains that luxury condos have been built in an old missile silo. This is an eerie rendering of a central component of the fictive world of *Fallout: New Vegas*. In the *Fallout* series the government creates underground survival shelters. Those who cannot gain access to the shelters die in the nuclear holocaust of the game. It's a commentary on exclusivity in America that has been replicated, moving from fiction into reality.

But in addition to this lavish survivalism, more everyday liberal prepping is on the rise in Trump's America. Prepping is the recourse of those who feel shut out and failed by government. It is likely that there would still be people who self-identify as liberal preppers even if Trump hadn't been elected, but it's unlikely that there would be as many as there are without the outcome of the 2016 election. After Obama was re-elected in 2012 Mother Jones published an article titled "Preppers Are Getting Ready for the Barackalypse."<sup>46</sup> The headlines is worth interrogating for two reasons, firstly, its use of the word Prepper implies that they can only be right wing and opposed to Obama's presidency, and secondly, for this strain of preppers and survivalists, the apocalypse is not the failure of government, but the government itself. Both during the Obama and Trump administration, prepping has been taken up by those who feel excluded from governmental practice. The use of the term in 2012 implies that preppers are universally right wing, and even in today's language the fact that the movement is called "liberal" preppers suggests that this is a deviation from the prepping norm.

There are a handful of specialized terms employed across prepper forums. Most of them are simply acronyms. The most commonly used is WSHTF, which stands for "when

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<sup>46</sup> Tim Murphy "Preppers Are Getting Ready for the Barackalypse," Mother Jones, January/February 2013 issue, 4/19/18 <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/12/preppers-survivalist-doomsday-obama/>

shit hits the fan.” It’s a playful phrase, but one that expresses a core value of the group: indeterminacy. There is no singular event that is being prepared for. People tune their preparedness to the region they inhabit. Individuals in California prepare for earthquakes and drought. People in the American coastal south prepare for hurricanes. Indeterminate natural disaster is a huge part of what animates localized preparedness.

An examination of the Liberal Preppers forum offers a window into the ways that the apocalypse can be rendered as a plurality of possibility rather than a singular event. Prepping is drawn from a variety of other phenomena and especially since 2016 has become increasingly politically diverse. Plurality is a core value of what distinguishes liberal preppers from the rest of the movement. In the retelling of the China Jute seed we see the primacy of food and plural use. Because the plant can be used to make bread it has obvious and real value to the preppers, who place food above concerns such as the stockpiling of weapons or currency. But it also has a variety of other uses. In an indeterminate and disastrous future, it is infinitely beneficial to have items that move in many directions.

## Conclusion

The apocalypse is everywhere in the American imagination. As a fictive and political method it aims to open doors and make alternative futures imaginable. Ultimately many of these imaginative projects break down, telling us more about their present than the future they imagine.

This project has selected three pieces of subject matter for close examination. Ultimately each piece is engaged with the state. The apocalypse involves an undoing of the state, but always there is an imagining of its refiguration. The apocalypse is fertile ground for alternatives. In sweeping away what came before one does not have to negotiate the infinite complexities of the present. It is possible to start over from zero. The first two chapters examine totalizing fictions. In the failure of these texts we find gestures towards the complexity and multifariousness that cannot be wholly shut out by apocalyptic imaginings. Liberal Preppers, the forum examined in chapter three offers an example of what happens when that complexity and indeterminacy is taken up as a central model.

The apocalyptic imaginary has political stakes. Anna Tsing points out that we are already living in a ruined planet. In his inaugural address, Donald Trump used a language of post-apocalyptic ruin to describe the decline of American industry. Clearly this imagination and language has a marked effect on america's culture and political climate.

This project calls for an ethnographic inquiry into the imagination and the future. Post-apocalyptic futures take up a large amount of space in american pop-culture. Far from being mindless entertainments these creative projects are rich in political import. Ironically for a project that makes possible the destruction of the state and of capitalism,

the works usually engage with these same two phenomena. The past and present are demolished only to be reformatted. The state is inescapable even in its aftermath.

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