New American Civil Wars: Aspects of the Post-Apocalyptic Novel
in the U.S. from 2006-2019

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Abstract

Since the new millennium, major Anglophone authors, including Colson Whitehead, Max Brooks, Sandra Newman, Lionel Shriver, Margaret Atwood, Paolo Bacigalupi, Chris Beckett, Omar El Akkad and Christopher Brown have popularised post-apocalyptic genre fiction. This popularity appears to be a formal response to new challenges in the twenty-first century, triggered by global trends which range from anthropocentric global warming to globalisation.

This thesis addresses how a range of American literary and genre authors adapt a compelling set of post-apocalyptic motifs to imagine new challenges to U.S. politics in the twenty-first century. The most notable of these tropes, dating from the late 2000s to the early 2010s, is the motif of future civil war or secession in America. These texts are concerned with three additional themes or scenarios which are apparent across this canon: censorship (after states separate and information cannot be shared across closed borders); state nationalism (as states compete for resources); and partisan rhetoric (which translates into civil violence). With these three recurrent themes, this thesis proposes that the American post-apocalypse is concerned with first, a new era of partisanship in America and, second, the centrality of media to these profound trends.

Despite the global scale of these post-apocalyptic representations, their recurring landscapes are specific to America. These fictions repeatedly engage with key features of America’s identity and government in the twenty-first century – from the globalised economy after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis to diplomatic tensions with nations including the Russian Federation. What does this genre revival say about the contemporary moment, especially as populism has come to define American democracy and the international order has become strained? This thesis reassesses this revival within the long history of American apocalypticism, exploring how core texts are responding to the rapidly changing dynamics of twenty-first-century politics and international relations.

As Frank Kermode observes in *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), history continually returns to the apocalypse as the symbolic motif for unfolding significant events. This thesis argues that a new phase in the post-apocalyptic imagination has emerged from American politics. This phase is marked by a long-term disillusionment with political and government institutions. This backlash is evident from the 2016 election of President Trump. However, this disillusionment had gradually emerged over the two previous decades. The 2008 Global Financial Crisis played a crucial part in changing American perceptions of its global power. This event was concurrent with the rise of the Internet as a platform for public debate. The Internet has also changed how misinformation has been deployed both within the U.S. (to stoke political disillusionment) and against U.S. international relations.

This thesis argues that the relationship between the U.S.’s uncertain global standing and the post-apocalyptic novel, shadowed by changes in mass and new media, tells an important story. It analyses a diverse range of post-apocalyptic fiction to contend that the genre is central to critiquing the relationship between media, news and American politics. Early twenty-first-century authors re-imagine the post-apocalypse in ways which anticipate and critique key features of American populism. In this canon, the post-apocalypse is driven by misinformation, the cult of personality and mainstream media engagement in partisan rhetoric. With America entering an unprecedented political era, genre fiction is potently articulating the emergence of new political trends, including ‘post-truth’ politics, which will become vital to rethinking the value basis of future American politics and international relations.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.
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Chapter One

Introduction to New American Civil Wars: Aspects of the Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the U.S. from 2006-2019

1. American Civil War: A Future Conflict

Closed borders, warring states within the United States, a barricaded New York, and civil war between Nevada, California and Arizona. These are distinctive plot elements of a set of contemporary post-apocalyptic novels by prominent North American authors. Between 2006 and 2019, the literary prospect of future civil war in America emerged from apocalyptic representations of zombie quarantine (in Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*), currency war (Lionel Shriver’s *The Mandibles*), environmental crisis (Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife*) and guerrilla warfare (Omar El Akkad’s debut novel, *American War: A Novel*).¹ This thesis identifies these features as iconic plot elements of a contemporary genre of post-apocalyptic novel which it recognises and defines as the new American civil war novel. This new genre imagines an apocalypse which unfolds through the break-up or the secession of the United States. The novels examined in this thesis are especially prescient for the current decade which, according to scholarly commentary published after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, has redefined the national consensus on American politics and the international order since the end of the Cold War.²

However, these novels are not predominantly concerned with the national, political or cultural legacy of the original American Civil War (1861-65). Indeed,


alternative histories of the Civil War have been a prominent American mass-market genre since the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, a shared and consistent preoccupation with a future U.S.-facing civil war, often occurring within a hyper-mediatised and digitised era, unifies the selected novelists examined in this thesis. This new literary genre imagines a future civil war generated by specific political and cultural crises of the late 2000s and early 2010s. It this thesis’s argument that this literary prospect has a uniquely sensitive relationship with specific points of political and cultural tension during the first two formative decades of the twenty-first century. Its diverse and compelling texts, adapting a wide range of post-apocalyptic conventions, are concerned with a set of historical and contemporary trends in North America: from the immediate consequences of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 (in The Mandibles: A Family, 2029-47, 2016) to the ubiquity of ‘fake news’ (in Zone One, 2011) and the rise of rhetoric favouring protectionism (in The Water Knife, 2015, and American War, 2017).

One of the most notable trends in twenty-first-century literature in America, as elsewhere, has been the clear embrace of ‘genre’ fiction conventions (in speculative, horror, fantasy and science-fiction) by ‘literary’ fiction (formally associated with literary realism). Furthermore, the popularity of the post-apocalyptic novel, as a critical and commercial literary subject, is certainly not restricted to North America. This thesis explores the new American civil war novel as a contemporary sub-genre in this ongoing and national literary tradition which responds to the profound turmoil

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The original American Civil War (1861-1865) was a vast political and national crisis which had a profound impact on American literary culture. Literary scholars, such as James Dawes, recognise how the civil war influenced cultural representations of key events over subsequent centuries, including the First and Second World Wars along with the Cold War. For critical discussions of the cultural and literary legacy of the American Civil War see James Dawes, The Language of War: Literature and Culture in the U.S. from the Civil War to World War II (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002) and Randall Fuller, From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

4 Pivotal work by literary critics, including Theodore Martin, has recognised the cultural and political significance of this Anglophone embrace of genre fiction and the questions which it poses for formal categories of literature. Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
of the political era in America after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. Indeed, with this focus, this thesis identifies a new decisive phase in the long story of the American apocalyptic imagination. It also identifies a compelling, and still critically neglected, national trend within this body of post-apocalyptic fiction which focuses on the specific prospect of U.S. secession and civil war. Evoking dark visions of patriotism and protectionism, these novels envision a future nightmare which is specific to America – a fractured U.S. nation which, angered by internal hostilities, is on the verge of secession and a danger to its own democracy and future. The symbolic features of these novels interrogate the polarised character of American national politics as well as conflicts ensuing from volatile international relations after the Global War on Terror. The prospect of the end of the War on Terror is significant for these novels. They make direct references and allusions to events including the Arab Spring (2010-2011), as well as hostile diplomatic tensions with other major powers including China and the Russian Federation.

Ultimately, new American civil war novels expand their focus on the 2008 financial crisis to interrogate the political ramifications of the crisis as they intersect with cultural transformations in professional, mass and new media. From economic crisis to climate change denial and from ‘fake news’ to the prospect of a ‘New Cold War’ – these are the formidable subjects for this new post-apocalyptic canon. Presented with these interrelated literary and political futures, the new American civil war novel invites readers to question profound transformations in contemporary American politics and international relations. With this focus, this thesis seeks to offer the first extended exploration of the post-apocalyptic genre through the perspective of anxieties and conflicts in the decade before the Trump presidency. As this thesis argues and concludes, the new American civil war novel’s most innovative feature is its recognition of the critical role of traditional and new media in American democracy. With closed borders reflecting polarised relations between truth and democracy, and between politics and global communication, it argues that the new American civil war novel has become a compelling literary form for America’s democracy as, in the decade before President Trump’s inauguration, it has leant towards populism and protectionism.
2. The Apocalypse and the American Century

Addressing the new American civil war novel, as a designated and recognisable contemporary genre of the novel, it is necessary for this introduction to review the political and national symbolism of the apocalypse to the U.S. cultural imagination. This introduction will then discuss the relationship between this symbolism of the apocalypse and post-apocalypse and the key themes which this thesis recognises as pivotal to the new American civil war novel. It will then link the genre of the new American civil war novel with the political period in the U.S. between the years 2006 and 2019. Identifying a formative relationship between conspiracy culture and Internet culture, the introduction will also identify three key themes which are pivotal to the new American civil war novel: censorship across closed borders, state nationalism and partisan rhetoric. As observed by Douglas Robinson, the apocalypse is a potent biblical concept which has evolved to reflect America’s cultural and generational perceptions of its own place and expansion within world history. For authors writing in the Early National (1776-1840) and Antebellum (1812-1861) periods, the annihilation of civilization was a fictional prospect which could be used to interrogate the ideologies of different historical moments. However, the most formative period for the new American civil war novel, aside from the immediate events of the early twenty-first century, is the twentieth century or, as it became known after the close of the Second World War, the ‘American Century’. This American Century, characterised by America’s economic, military and hegemonic dominance on the world stage, was heralded by Henry Luce, in his landmark essay for Life Magazine (1941), as the century with the most ‘promise for human progress and happiness’. This optimism seemed valid, especially during the promise engendered by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1930s ‘New Deal’. However, as American economic and military


7 For a detailed discussion of the significance of FDR’s New Deal in the context of the American Century see Walter LaFeber, Richard Polenberg and Nancy Woloch, The American...
prowess became an international reality, U.S. national politics became susceptible to rhetoric which warned against the loss of this new dominance. This influential argument is most clearly articulated by Matthew Avery Sutton who, with reference to Luce’s essay, concludes that U.S. status, especially during the Cold War, fuelled a revival in apocalyptic prediction:

[Luce] and evangelicals both blended faith with country and demanded that the United States take a new, bold, and preeminent place on the world stage. Atomic weapons, the birth of Israel, the rise of the UN, the developing Cold War all helped make the American Century the century of apocalyptic politics as well. ¹⁸

By this logic, U.S. global dominance, contested by the Soviet Union, fuelled apocalyptic fearmongering that American prestige could be irrevocably lost.

Political and economic commentaries, represented by Giovanni Arrighi’s ambitious study, have documented how post-war U.S. dominance relied upon institutions in global finance (i.e., the World Bank), America’s oil industry (as a key factor in U.S. conflicts in Latin America and the Middle East) and U.S. military power. ⁹ Whilst U.S. dominance continues to be debated after the millennium, international relations scholars, including G. John Ikenberry, agree that ‘Pax

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Americana’ – as ‘the period in which the United States wielded the most power on the world stage’ – is being forced to adapt to new economic, diplomatic and environmental crises, including ‘the global financial crisis of 2008, which [has] widened economic inequality and fuelled grievances across the advanced industrial democracies’.  

This thesis will not seek to rehearse interdisciplinary arguments about the scale and timeframe of this American Century. As Walter LaFeber observes, the “American Century” has been a term used by many, in various contexts, and with varying definitions’ to address social, economic and geopolitical questions. Instead, in light of the key events highlighted above, this thesis follows American literary and cultural criticism which analyses how apocalyptic visions have been re-framed to suit the terms of this American Century. This relationship preoccupied scholars writing before the new millennium. As Mary Manjikian argues, U.S. dominance was the ironic impetus behind a substantial canon of late-twentieth-century American popular novels, films and texts which voiced anticipatory fears about the end of U.S. dominance. This comprehensive canon includes Cold War fiction depicting a post-nuclear-war U.S., Western themed titles from the 1980s and ‘present-day apocalyptic’, including such novels as *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy, *The Pesthouse* (2007) by Jim Crace and *The Passage* (2010) by Justin Cronin. Manjikian’s study points to the ways in which ‘imagining the demise of one’s [the U.S.’s] empire serves both psychological and political ends and is a useful way for moving beyond the situatedness of one’s own experience and coming to a broader understanding of the hegemon’s significance […] in the international system’.

This apocalyptic tradition in America is not specific to the latter decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, Manjikian is indebted to substantial work in Gothic studies which, drawing comparisons between the early 1900s and early 2000s, explores the ways in which an array of fin-de-siècle Victorian and Edwardian literature imagined

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10 G. John Ikenberry, ‘The Plot Against American Foreign Policy Can the Liberal Order Survive?’, *Foreign Policy Magazine*, May/June 2017, 1-7 (pp. 1-2).


the prospect of British imperial decline. Scholars in American Studies, including Manjikian, have built upon this crucial work by identifying the apocalypse and post-apocalypse as the dark *doppelgänger* of the American Century. As this thesis addresses literary works from the perspective of the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is especially important to recognise literary precedents which are preoccupied with the material and political legacy of U.S. dominance. This focus is especially true of the Cold War fictions which depict post-nuclear-war America vulnerable to invasion by other nations. David Seed argues as post-nuclear-war U.S. fictions are part of a ‘long tradition in American writing’ which explores the ‘underside of manifest destiny’ as the belief that U.S. expansion across the North American continent was part of the nation’s divine fate. This tradition of ‘American invasion narratives’, as Seed calls them, dating from the early nineteenth century, anticipates a larger body of work which has endured until after the new millennium.

Dating the first ‘American invasion narrative’ to Pierton W. Dooner's *Last Days of the Republic* (1880), which imagines U.S. invasion by a Chinese Empire, Seed argues that such narratives arise ‘during periods of anxiety about immigrant labour or nuclear supremacy’ and ‘give imaginative form to a testing out of national ideology, speculating about possible weaknesses not just in civil defence but also in presumptions about social cohesion’. This focus on Asian powers has a timeframe which Isiah Lavender traces across twentieth-century U.S. culture. As Levander expands, ‘M.P. Shiel’s *The Yellow Danger* (1898) and Edward Pendray’s *The Earth-Tube* (1929) are the best examples of earlier stories while [Ridley] Scott’s *Blade Runner* and William Gibson’s ground-breaking *Neuromancer* (1984) reinvent the supremacy of the Orient’. However, alongside fears of ‘Yellow Peril’ invasion, post-

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15 David Seed, ‘Constructing America’s Enemies: The Invasions of the USA’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 37 (2007), 64-84 (p. 64).

16 Ibid, p. 65.

apocalyptic worlds have offered a desirable entry-point into fantasises of American adventures and settlement. With reference to commercial titles, including Leigh Brackett’s *The Long Tomorrow* (1955), Pat Frank’s *Alas Babylon* (1959) and Walter J. Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), M. Keith Booker notably argues that the post-apocalypse became ‘a new version of [the] American frontier’ with ‘renewed possibilities for adventure […] no longer available in the routinized world of contemporary America’.  

This late-twentieth cultural and political context is significant for the contemporary period in which the novels examined in this thesis have been published. This thesis recognises the new American civil war novel as a profound development in this national literary tradition. Whilst inheriting iconic tropes from earlier literary periods, its canon is concerned with three key themes which, as this thesis argues, reflect a set of transformations in contemporary American politics and foreign policy in the decade after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. More particularly, these novels are often concerned with the cultural and political, rather than the financial, legacy of the crisis. Indeed, the following thesis chapters, engage with pivotal work by Anglophone literary scholars, including Heather J. Hicks, Andrew Tate, Diletta De Cristofaro, among others, who interrogate the relationship between the contemporary post-apocalypse and the transnational history of apocalyptic discourse.

However, whereas Anglophone post-apocalyptic narratives, in De Cristofaro’s description, ‘target the nexus between apocalypticism, (neo-)colonialism, global capital and neoliberalism, and the Anthropocene’, this sub-genre of American post-apocalyptic fiction depicts extreme conditions of U.S secession and civil war – conditions which reverse U.S. prestige and force characters to confront the future after the end of the ‘American Century’. One central premise of this thesis is that the

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20 De Cristofaro, “‘Time, no arrow, no boomerang, but a concertina’”, p. 245.
apocalypse, as a story of biblical redemption which was essential to the founding of colonial and Early National America, has experienced major secular transformations over subsequent American generations. Consequently, the literary and cultural symbolism of the apocalypse, as reflected in a national tradition inherited from early nineteenth-century authors including Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, has evolved over time to reflect American perceptions of its own national unity and international prestige. As Heather J. Hicks further recognises in her study of the post-apocalyptic novel in the twenty-first-century, this development became especially pertinent after the millennium, as the genre evolved to ‘reflect a set of historical and epistemological transformations – the globalized economy intensified by the end of the Cold War; the international recognition of the menace of anthropogenic global warming; [and] the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror’.21

Writing in the year 2019, with the prevalence of neologisms including ‘post-truth’, ‘alternative facts’ and ‘fake news’, it is clear that public and academic commentators agree that America is witnessing the early phase of a new political epoch which is undermining and questioning categories of professional and new media.22 Alongside the ascendancy of Donald Trump, there has been a reactionary shift in political iconography and spectacle which, as Matthew d’Ancona describes, follows the depletion of public trust after the 2008 financial crisis.23 With rising economic nationalism, captured by the banner of ‘America First’, the resurgence of far-right movements and increased competition from Russia and China have contributed to a new political era in the U.S. which Alex Ross describes as fostering an ominous epoch of ‘American authoritarianism’.24 This thesis argues that the new American civil war novel developed its three key and identifiable themes in the

21 Hicks, Post-Apocalyptic Novel, p. 2.

22 In addition to studies cited in the first footnote of this introduction, see Michiko Kakutani, The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018); and Matthew d’Ancona, Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back (New York: Ebury Press, 2017), p. 23.

23 d’Ancona, Post-Truth, p. 23.

24 Alex Ross, ‘The Frankfurt School Knew Trump was Coming’, New Yorker, 5th December 2016 < https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-frankfurt-school-knew-trump-was-coming > [accessed 17th May 2019].
formative decade before these events. As the decade progressed, the more violent imagery of the genre, including civil war, became more acute with titles published in the late 2010s, including El Akkad’s *American War* and Brown’s *Tropic of Kansas*.

3. The New American Civil War Novel: Three Key Themes

This section will address how these three key themes historicize this profound moment in American political history. Centering on U.S. secession into separate states, this thesis identifies three key themes in the future American civil war novel: censorship (after states separate and information cannot be shared across closed borders); state nationalism (which encourages states to compete for limited resources); and inflammatory or partisan rhetoric (which often translates into civil violence). Censorship is the first key theme for these future American civil war texts. Within these texts, as captured by El Akkad’s *American War*, censorship leads to the suppression of oral testimonies and official documents which reveal the scale of internal hostilities. Set in the early-twenty-second century, the novel’s protagonist, journalist Benjamin Chestnut, reconstructs an authoritative narrative of the Second American Civil War:

> I’ve spent my professional career studying this country’s bloody war with itself. I’ve written academic papers and magazine articles, headlined myriad symposiums and workshops. I’ve studied all the surviving source documents: congressional reports, oral histories, harrowing testimony of the plague’s survivors. I’ve reconstructed the infamous events of Reunification Day.25

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Inaccurate information about fossil fuels is the key obstacle to U.S. reunification; and ‘lying’ or ‘fancy Northern journalists’, as they are perceived in the South, are designated as traitors to America’s national confidence. Distrust of formal media or journalistic platforms is a recurrent feature of the new American civil war novel. The novels in this thesis make tangible a nascent distrust of news sources which, between the late 2000s and early 2010s, has arisen through the national and global beneficiaries of what Shoshana Zuboff, as the most prominent critic of this trend, has called ‘surveillance capitalism’. The presence of closed borders, as barriers which disrupt the transmission of accurate news, adapts motifs from earlier invasion and post-apocalyptic genres.

The presence of closed borders means that news and intelligence are not shared between separate U.S. states. Closed borders also lead to censorship and new forms of legal sabotage and blackmail across state borders. These borders highlight the two final generic themes: state nationalism (in which state populations are encouraged to identify with their state rather than the U.S. Union) and inflammatory rhetoric under the guise of patriotism. In text after text, the iconic feature of a civil-war torn U.S. anticipates political twenty-first-century sympathy in the U.S. for isolationist rhetoric and tendencies. These fictions crucially address a key political trend which promises to define a new generation of culture wars: namely, the collapse of the democratic promise of the ‘digital revolution’ (first promised by the dot-com bubble of the 1990s) into insular brands of populism which, according to Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, are sowing the seeds of ‘authoritarian values’ in twenty-first-century America.

The new American civil war novel foreshadows current issues which are bringing about a radical shift within the U.S.-led world order. These texts depict events which lead to the irreversible dissolution of the Union: corporations attempt to

26 El Akkad, American War, p. 75.


privatise state authorities; politicians use inflammatory rhetoric against rival states and the U.S. loses its status as the world’s leading power.

With this focus on new American civil wars, this thesis argues that these texts provide a rigorous vantage point from which to study the revival of the U.S. post-apocalyptic novel and that they will also serve as a fruitful springboard for addressing generational questions, including the future of American democracy in the globalised and digital age.

4. Neoliberalism and the New Age of Surveillance Capitalism

The new American civil war is a genre concerned with the legacy of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. This section will outline the immediate political and economic context which is formative for the development of the new American civil war novel. This crisis, beginning with the emergency liquidation of Lehman Brothers financial services on 15th September 2008, was an event which engendered long reaching and destructive consequences both in the U.S. and on the global stage. In the ensuing decade, the crisis has become central to influential scholarly accounts of U.S. literature and culture. Criticism in this field of study includes Arne’s de Boever’s analysis of ‘finance fiction’ (with titles including Adam Haslett’s Union Atlantic [2010] and Cristina Algers’ The Darlings [2012]) as well as Annie McClanahan’s study of how U.S. culture – across American fiction, photojournalism and horror cinema – interrogates the precarious character of financial transactions.29 Echoing McClanahan’s observation that U.S. culture is shadowed by a ‘potentially terminal crisis in capitalism’, the category of the new American civil war novel imagines grave and austere national conditions which have been compromised by national debt.30

Yet the new American civil war novel is not primarily concerned with American debt culture or the intensification of finance capitalism. Instead, it reflects a decisive, reactionary shift in America’s political culture which, as detailed in the


30 McClanahan, Dead Pledges, p. 103.
section of this introduction titled ‘Conspiracy and Far-Right Nationalism in the New American Civil War Novel’, originally developed from the depletion of public trust in U.S. government after the 2008 crisis. The U.S. government bailout of Wall Street, or the ‘Emergency Economic Stabilization Act (2008)’ which paid $700 billion in taxpayers’ money, was a focal point for this loss of public trust. The 2008 financial crisis could, in theory, have led to and proved the need for a higher level of accountability in global finance capitalism. However, inversely, the crisis only made visible capital’s ability to generate profit out of crisis. According to Andrew Hoberek, ‘what has collapsed (or rather failed to collapse) […] is capitalism: not only in the sense suggested by the 2008 banking crisis and the recession it engendered, but also in the sense that the[y] […] embody the breakdown of capitalism’s fundamental premise of eternal growth’.31 It is this decreased accountability of capital, and its ease of movement under a phase of what commentators are calling ‘digital capitalism’, which receives the most profound attention in the new American civil war novel.

Consequently, an examination of this ‘digital capitalism’, as a condition encompassing the expansion of anonymised capital under neoliberal economics, provides a useful starting point for examining the genre of the new American civil war novel. This condition anticipates the anti-establishment sensibility which has become prominent in politics under Trump. This sensibility cannot solely be attributed to economic dissatisfaction. Definitions of neoliberalism vary but David Harvey’s offers an influential perspective about the legacy of neoliberal economics on the state:

Neoliberalism is […] a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence, police and legal structures and functions required to secure private property

rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets.\textsuperscript{32}

In America, as the founding country for the neoliberal Chicago School of Economics, explanations of why the U.S. made the neoliberal turn have focused on the crisis of capital which weakened the Keynesian model of welfare states, the 1973 oil embargo and the ‘stagflation’ of the economy (with high unemployment and high inflation) in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{33} And yet, as critical theorist Wendy Brown shows, neoliberal rationality has not just killed off aspirations like social mobility but has also undermined the sovereignty of the nation-state itself.\textsuperscript{34} As she explains, as the ‘transnational flows of capital, people, ideas, goods’ have undermined the nation-state, ‘neoliberal rationality’ recognises no authority or jurisdiction apart from ‘entrepreneurial decision-makers (large and small)’ which, disregarding liberal commitments, only recognise ‘market criteria’ and demote ‘the political sovereign to managerial status’.\textsuperscript{35}

It is this legacy of neoliberalism which is the key focal theme for the new American civil war novel. The genre, as this thesis argues, is concerned with the relationship between this neoliberal economics and the Internet as facilitated by the digital expansion of Information and Communication Technologies.\textsuperscript{36} As Daniel

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} Wendy Brown, \textit{Walled States, Waning Sovereignty} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009).
\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid. pp. 34-5.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Schiller, \textit{Digital Capitalism}, p. xiii.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Schiller argues, the invisible coercion of neoliberal economics is nowhere more apparent than within the ‘political and social underpinnings of the Internet’. Schiller’s claim that ‘the Internet comprises nothing less than the central production […] of an increasingly supranational market system’ is now more pertinent since it has become a platform beyond democratic accountability.\(^\text{37}\) Reflecting on technologized capital, Judy Wajcman further asserts that this mode of digital capitalism requires ‘us to leave behind the old dichotomies about technologies being either inherently liberating or enslaving. By now we should have learnt to be sceptical about both extreme positions: the messianic promise of a technologically-wrought new epoch on the one hand and a blanket rejection of dominance by machines on the other’.\(^\text{38}\) These observations represent the modern phase of digital capitalism as antithetical to formal or external accountability and democracy.

It is now useful to address the concept of digital capitalism. Briefly, under this form of capitalism, data and information become products and services. As Shoshana Zuboff argues, a new economic logic, driven by the ‘competitive dynamics’ of new social media markets, aims to extract commercial value from users’ data and computer usage. Zuboff traces surveillance capitalism’s inception to a ‘moment of emergency’ in Silicon Valley after the burst of the dot-com bubble in 2000. In response to this emergency, Google decided to ‘suspend its principles’.\(^\text{39}\) It combined the company’s user-search data with their data-extraction capabilities to predict human behaviour online. Silicon Valley generated a vast ‘asymmetry of knowledge’. As Zuboff claims:

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\text{This unprecedented concentration of knowledge produces an equally unprecedented concentration of power: asymmetries that must be understood as the unauthorized privatization of the division of learning in society. This means that powerful private interests are in control of the definitive principle of social ordering […]}. \text{We have an institutional disfiguring of these huge asymmetries of knowledge and power which are antithetical to democracy.}\(^\text{40}\)
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\(^{37}\) Ibid.


\(^{39}\) Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, p. 27.

\(^{40}\) Ibid. p. 67.
This power struggle, based on competition for data and information, signals that democracy itself is in crisis. For Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts, writing in their study *Networked Propaganda* (2018), ‘technological processes [move] beyond the control of any person or country – the convergence of social media, algorithm news curation, bots, artificial intelligence – were creating echo chambers’ to reinforce biases and overwhelm capacities, especially in the U.S. and Europe, to ‘govern […] as reasonable democracies’. Networked Propaganda is one study in a growing field which recognises that Trump’s victory was only a single event which contributed to the long-term anti-democratic tendency in the interconnected world to reduce human behaviour to data and neoliberal profit. When Zuboff declares that ‘data is the new oil’, she is provocatively arguing that a new period has begun after the American ‘petro-culture’ of the late-twentieth-century – the period in which the politics of oil, and of its extraction, were essential to understanding late capitalism in America. It is data and information which will direct twenty-first-century capitalism; and it is this phenomenon which demands narrative response as a decisive phase of this ‘third modernity capitalism’ reshaping U.S. and Western society.

This thesis argues that this phase of capitalism is significant to the development of the new American civil war novel. Conceptions of the apocalypse and post-apocalypse have consistently addressed the relationship between capital and technology. Cultural critics have identified an inventory of terms which reflect the abstraction and destructive potential of global capital. These include, most notably, the ‘technological apocalypse’, the ‘ironic apocalypse’ and the ‘capitalist apocalypse’. Of these terms, Lee Quinby’s understanding of the ‘technological


44 Lee Quinby identifies the ‘ironic apocalypse’ as ‘the dystopian view that history has exhausted itself’, and ‘[t]he irony is that we live on beyond morality or meaning’. Anti-
apocalypse’ is the most useful for this thesis. By Quinby’s account, ‘both divine and technological expressions of apocalypse have been used in this century to revitalize a sense of “America” as a moral exemplar: a savior nation and a beacon of global democracy’.45

By contrast, whilst similarly tied to U.S. nationhood, the new American civil war novel depicts technology and global communication as an antithesis to this democracy. The new American civil war novel is a distinctly twenty-first-century contribution which interrogates this anti-democratic expansion of surveillance and data extraction, as empowered by digital capitalism. The challenge of addressing new features of twenty-first-century modernity is the key impetus behind the U.S. post-apocalyptic novel which, as Heather J. Hicks suggests, has become the ‘sine qua non of modern fiction’.46 Boundaries are comparably fragile in these post-apocalyptic texts which imagine secession, with violent and policed borders breached repeatedly by rumour and conspiracy. Equally, the efforts of survivors – most notably journalists, including Benjamin Chestnut in American War – seek meticulously, and perilously, to retrace the causes of secession and conflict. Together, this narrative enables a distinct critique which asks how (and whether) it is possible to oppose online networks of anti-democratic persuasion.

The central paradox which the new American civil war novel addresses is that as global communication becomes more integrated, and access to global news and intelligence increases, the U.S. becomes more susceptible to insular conflict. This new American civil war novel, therefore, traces and critiques key themes which promise to define twenty-first century political life: how technology is exceeding accountability and how communication is becoming a weapon of subversion and sabotage. The following section positions the new American civil war novel within an established

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46 Hicks, Post-Apocalyptic Novel, p. 4.
literary tradition of American science-fiction which negotiates the overlapping, but still not synonymous genres of post-apocalyptic and dystopian literature.

5. The Post-Apocalypse in American Science Fiction

In the *Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction* (2015), Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link argue that ‘the science fictional imagination’ has been ‘fundamental to the arc of history across the so-called American Century’. This was a century ‘born in Edison’s laboratories and Ford’s factories’ and it was their expanding visions of possibility which fuelled American science fiction.47 This is not to forget, however, the more enduring place of the apocalypse – and the prospect of apocalyptic redemption – in the American national imagination. David Ketterer argues that the Christian tradition of apocalypse gave birth to key aspects of the American Frontier.48 According to Ketterer, the spiritual vision of New Jerusalem laid out in the Book of Revelation inspired the idea of the Manifest Destiny (or the ‘Redeemer Nation’) which is destined to spread freedom across the North American continent in the name of Puritan Christianity.

American apocalypticism is one form of the perceived change and crisis which generates Western narratives of apocalyptic end-times. As Frank Kermode writes in *A Sense of An Ending* (1964):

> What is interesting, though, is the way in which this knowledge is related to apocalypse […] and] establishes the language of an elect; and the way in which writers […] are willing to go along, arguing that the rate of change implies revolution or schism, and that this is a perpetual requirement; that the stage of transition, like the whole of time in an earlier revolution, has become *endless*.49


For Kermode’s field-defining study, the apocalypse is one of the primary concepts for understanding the crises and trajectory of Western civilization. The contradiction which Kermode identifies in the apocalypse – the rebirth which follows destruction – has provided a central vantage point for formative narratives of American nationhood.

However, with the beginning of the twentieth century, American ruralism became secondary to urbanisation as the predominant theme of American apocalyptic fiction. Indeed, whilst British science-fiction anticipated its own ‘Golden Age’ of science fiction with novels including H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895), the U.S. produced correspondent texts which included Ignatius Donnelly’s *Caesar’s Column* (1890) and, eventually, Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague* (1912).\(^{50}\) As Brent Ryan Bellamy observes, Donnelly’s novel depicts an oligarchic dictatorship of the United States. Its suppression of a working-class revolt led by a resistance movement called the ‘Brotherhood of Destruction’, sheds light upon social, political and historical anxieties regarding urbanisation and migration – the potentially threatening movements perceived to be undermining America’s rural innocence and destiny.\(^{51}\)

Yet it was the Cold War, and the threat of the nuclear bomb, which introduced a new set of apocalyptic visions. These fictions, as they are listed below, return to speculative themes from the formative period of Nuclear Age apocalyptic fiction during the 1950s and 1960s. Such novels of the early nuclear age include Wilson Tucker’s *The Long Loud Silence* (1952), Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend* (1954) Brackett’s *The Long Tomorrow* (1955), Frank’s *Alas Babylon* (1959) and Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), as well as iterations of the post-apocalyptic novel which tailed literary modernism in the late 1950s, most notably Harry Harrison’s *Make Room! Make Room!* (1955). As David Seed observes, these Cold War speculative fictions were not ‘futuristic fantasies’ but were texts especially sensitive to germane themes of nuclear technology and Cold War American militarism. These texts performed, as Seed concludes, a ‘role of negative prophecy where the dreaded

\(^{50}\) Ignatius Donnelly, *Caesar’s Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: F.J. Shulte and Company, 1890).

outcomes are envisaged […] in such a way that the reader is induced to ponder the present signs of disaster’. 52

During the latter Cold War, it became a commonplace observation that the ‘postmodern condition’ encouraged a post-apocalyptic sensibility, heralding ‘the end of the grand narratives of modernity’, assumptions of scientific progress and the death knell for religious and secular humanism. 53 During this period of cultural postmodernism, critical and generic distinctions between the apocalypse and post-apocalypse became most prominent. As Bellamy notes, the term ‘post-apocalypse’, unlike the tradition of biblical apocalyptic rupture, has profound secular symbolism: ‘on the one hand, the apocalypse denotes the destruction of current forms and a revelation, even a transcending of limits; on the other, the post- indicates that something remains after the term it modifies’. 54

It is necessary, in this introduction, to clarify that this thesis examines a set of post-apocalyptic texts which are distinct from the Christian tradition of apocalyptic revelation. As the theologian Catherine Keller recognises, the biblical Book of Revelation has offered a multi-generational and ‘multi-dimensional, culture-pervading spectrum of ideological assumptions’ which have permeated secular Western culture. 55 However, this thesis focuses on a set of novels with primarily secular concerns. 56 Indeed, it contributes to a still-expanding body of commentary on the post-apocalypse after postmodernism. Cultural criticism of the post-apocalypse steadily developed over the two decades before the new millennium. Most notably, James Berger’s After the End (1999) and Teresa Heffernan’s Post-Apocalyptic


54 Bellamy, p. 1.


Culture (2008) and Heather J. Hicks’ The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First-Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage (2014) highlight important questions about the future of the genre after the new millennium. Berger argues that apocalyptic representations tend to echo the legacy of historical events, and particularly historical crises, in the late-twentieth century. Berger writes that the Holocaust and Hiroshima terminated confident assumptions about the future of Western civilisation. He concludes that ‘in the late twentieth-century the unimaginable, the unspeakable, has already happened and continues to happen’, thereby rendering many cultural forms, in some sense, post-apocalyptic.57

Broadening Berger’s argument, Heffernan identifies the post-apocalypse – as a motif and concept – with events beyond the immediate horrors of the mid- and late-twentieth century and, instead, interprets it within a history of Western modernity which dates to the Enlightenment.58 Heffernan observes a clear shift over the twentieth-century from the apocalyptic promise to post-apocalyptic exhaustion. As she recognises, ‘faith that the end will offer up revelation has been challenged in many twentieth-century narratives’.59 She departs from Berger’s conclusion that ‘loss cannot always be translated into language’ and, instead, turns to a modernist tradition, featuring T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence and Jean Baudrillard, to argue an ‘unveiled’ world after the hope of biblical revelation is characterised by an ‘openness of […] narrative’ which ‘keeps alive infinite directions and possibilities’.60 She concludes that the post-apocalypse has a radical and subversive impulse: ‘what can possibly come after the modern or “after” its after?’61

This thesis’s perspective is closer to Heffernan’s rather than Berger’s stance. Whilst its novels address the catalytic destruction of the post-apocalypse within a variety of contexts, which include zombie apocalypse, financial crisis and eco-


58 Heffernan, pp. 4-5.

59 Ibid, p. 5.


catastrophe, they are not framed as ‘unrepresentable’ incidents. Instead, they explore these futures with Heffernan’s pivotal question in mind. This thesis, therefore, follows the more recent work of Heather J. Hicks which distinguishes post-apocalyptic fiction published after the new millennium from the narratives written from the nineteen-fifties to the nineteen-eighties which Heffernan and Berger recognise in their studies. As Hicks suggests, these works ‘portray catastrophe of at least a national level and, by nature of our globalized political economy, assume dramatic effects elsewhere as well’.  

Here, Hicks joins recent commentary, including Tim Lanzendörfer’s collection on The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel (2016), which observes that this ‘“turn” to genre in the contemporary novel has remained under-theorized, both with regard to understanding how and what genre is and does, and to the extent of the turn to genre’. One of the most prominent trends in this genre at the turn of the twenty-first century has been its increasingly focused interest in global disaster: from the escalating likelihood of global eco-catastrophe to the return of ‘last man’ narratives of viral pandemic, as well as the collapse of the globalised economy amidst zombie outbreak. With the ‘contemporary rise of post-apocalypse as an early twenty-first century master genre’, this genre turn may be viewed as a formal response to socio-economic trends including ‘austerity, in which everyone is on their own and public institutions designed to mitigate inequality no longer work to do so’.  

Post-apocalyptic literature is marked by a generic seriousness which poses urgent questions about the future of the planet at the end of the American Century, whilst being close in formal terms to accessible popular genres. Hicks observes that ‘salvage is a crucial practical and conceptual element’ of the apocalypse, with characters ‘confronted with the remnants of the modern world – from the immaterial domain of words and ideas to the physical detritus of objects and machines – and they must “shore” “[t]hese fragments”, as T.S. Eliot puts it in his post-apocalyptic

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62 Hicks, p. 4.


65 Ibid, p. 509.
masterpiece, *The Waste Land* (430). With the scope of post-apocalyptic salvage in mind, it is useful to pursue the distinction between post-apocalyptic and dystopian conventions further and highlight the conventions which the new American civil war novel adopts from both traditions. The new American civil war novel marks a foundational moment for the American science-fiction imagination which uniquely adapts this tradition of post-apocalyptic salvage identified by Hicks. However, by reimagining U.S. civil war and secession within the contemporary post-apocalyptic context, these texts bring into focus two aspects of the seceded U.S. state, and its borders, which will be central to the following readings of twenty-first-century science fiction. Firstly, the unique geography of the seceded U.S. state or colony furnishes it with a ‘critical’ quality of dystopian possibility. The ‘critical dystopia’, as expanded upon in the section below, is defined by the science fiction scholar Tom Moylan as more hopeful than the classic dystopia. Despite their ‘sober apprehension’ of the ‘intensified deprivation’ under late capitalism, Moylan conceived of a critical dystopian model which endeavoured ‘to find traces, scraps, and sometimes horizons of utopian possibility’. And secondly, it is distinctive that the characters’ journeys in these novels to retrace the cause of disaster become a generic process which echoes and critiques the new era of surveillance capitalism, as an era in which problems of climate change and emerging new authoritarian tendencies are amplified by unequal concentrations of information and knowledge.

Blending the utopian with the catastrophic is the aim of the ‘critical dystopia’ which, first coined by Lyman Tower Sargent, is further explained by Moylan with political commentary and science fiction analysis. He interprets neoliberal capitalism as an anti-utopian project that tries to de-legitimise utopia. But utopia is subversive and so, consequently, it uses one of the literary devices of anti-utopia, namely dystopia, to re-enter public discourse and engender hope for a world beyond neoliberal and capitalist enclosure. The ‘critical dystopia’ negotiates the necessary pessimism of the classic dystopia with an overtly utopian stance which ‘refuses the anti-utopian

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66 Hicks, *Post-Apocalyptic Novel*, p. 3.
temptation that lingers like a dormant virus in every dystopian account’.

It is easy to see the link between post-apocalyptic writing and predecessors in the Western dystopian tradition, including works inspired by Soviet totalitarianism, such as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s We (1924) and George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949). If, as Gregory Claeys recognizes, dystopia is ‘supposed to be an inverted, mirror negative vision of utopia’, then the critical dystopia shows that there is a new kind of totalitarianism after Soviet Communism. The critical dystopia is a productive concept for rethinking ideas about capitalist enclosure, in the light of globalized digital communication, and the profound consequences of asymmetry of knowledge which translates into asymmetries of power. The new American civil war novel develops this perspective by focusing on its characters’ resistance to the intrusion of surveillance capitalism and, with its scepticism towards official news and propaganda, to the frenetic pace of globalized communication.

6. Conspiracy and Far-Right Nationalism in the New American Civil War Novel

With this perspective, new American civil war novels reiterate Fredric Jameson’s view that the ‘future frame’ of science fiction allows us to glimpse the ‘unmediated, unfiltered experience of the daily life of capitalism’. However, these new American civil war novels also depict the closed state as a fictional device to foreground trends in Internet and cyber-led conspiracy and to reveal how, under the drive of surveillance capitalism, these trends are becoming increasingly – and ominously – central to the


U.S.’s future. This entanglement, ultimately, shapes the narrative arc of the new American civil war novel. To understand the contemporary symbolism of the seceded U.S. state, this thesis recognizes the importance of the critically rich area of conspiracy studies, as it has developed in the wider field of American Studies. Scholars of contemporary American culture argue that, with the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, the U.S. witnessed a significant transformation in how extremist fringes infiltrate the media mainstream, and how far-right movements access institutional platforms to promote their ideologies. It is useful to consider this transformation within the context of profound techno-economic developments in 1990s American popular culture.

As the previous decade increased public access to the Internet, the 1990s is formative for considering how conspiracy and paranoia acted and circulated in popular culture before the millennium. The 1990s, as Peter Knight argues, saw conspiracy themes evolved through ‘fears and fantasies that everything is becoming connected’: alongside fears of viral contagion through open borders of globalisation, ‘[p]anic about the unstoppable viral connectedness of the Net [became] the specter stalking the inflationary promotion of the digital and new media world’.72 At their broadest, conspiracy beliefs are, like apocalyptic revelation, a form of religious belief which ‘views history as controlled by massive, demonic forces’. Michael Barkun concludes that ‘[c]onspiracist preoccupations’ in the twentieth-century, including the ‘Kennedy assassination’, attracted ‘obsessive concern with the magnitude of hidden evil powers’ and apocalyptic anxiety.73 Unravelling the genealogies of conspiracist world views, work in this area has shown how urban legends and conspiracies have spread among sub-cultures on the Internet and through mass media. However, they also recognise how this phenomenon relates to larger changes in American culture, with Barkun explaining that after the new millennium, apocalyptic fever characterised many areas of contemporary American life, and became especially visible after 9/11.

Readings of Internet conspiracy culture, and their importance to the structures and values of contemporary America, offer an incisive way of analysing narratives


within the genre of the new American civil war novel. As literary scholars have noted, a prominent selection of post-apocalyptic texts, including novels examined in this thesis, reflect an increasing desire to solve racial tension in the U.S. by imagining the end of race in a ‘post-racial’ society. This follows Lauren Berlant’s argument in that, after the 2008 election of Barack Obama who declared the ‘audacity of hope’, the contemporary U.S. became deeply invested in the idea of a progressive post-racial nation which could affirm the American values of ‘upward mobility, job security, political and social equality and lively, durable intimacy’ as well as ‘meritocracy’.  

The new American civil war novel marks a new phase in this tradition which explores new transgressive libertarian and conservative movements. In the late 2010s, a growing corpus of public and academic commentary began to attend to emergent kinds of ‘new populism’, as proposed by Marco Revelli, which by the unresolved legacy of the 2008 crisis, expressed ‘protest and grievance […] in an era where atomised masses lack voice or organisation’.  For a significant number of commentators, the focal moment for this populism can be dated to the year after Obama’s presidential election and the 12th September 2009 march led by the TEA Party Movement (Taxed Enough Already) on Washington, D.C.. Placards evoked the inflammatory buzzwords which, according to commentators including Nils C. Kumkar, would define reactionary American politics over the coming decade. These included allusions to the ‘horrors’ of socialism, with pictures of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, slogans deriding ‘big government’ and a reactionary sympathy for ‘birther’ conspiracies denying Obama’s citizenship.

Within this anonymous Internet culture, the first African American president generated more reactionary conspiracies than his predecessors. In the early 2010s, the rise of communication networks initially offered great promise of a ‘new public


sphere’ of citizen journalists, especially after the events of the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movement.77 However, these movements, rather than initiating progressive or grass-roots change, heralded a new phase of reactionary politics which would overthrow the formal gatekeeping and accountability of mainstream journalism, and inaugurate an Internet sub-culture dominated by viral content producers. Media commentators including George Hawley have identified the ‘Alt-Right’ as unifying several extremist ideologies, including white nationalism and yet, it is ‘unlike any racist movement we have ever seen. It is atomized, amorphous, predominantly online, and mostly anonymous’.78 The ‘Alt-Right’ is the neologism for the far-right (alternative right) movements which have led to this dramatic reshaping of U.S. governance which, in turn, has alarmingly drawn white supremacy and U.S. white nationalism into the ever-increasing sharing of viral and sensationalist content, as encouraged by the profit drive of surveillance capitalism.79

The Alt-Right, therefore, and its online profile and identity, poses a significant and distinctly modern challenge for political observers who are used to understanding politics in formal terms. Beyond the mainstream of Republican conservatism, white nationalist groups are perceptibly rising in influence and achieving political support at higher levels of government, with former subcultures and their mindsets threatening to infiltrate mainstream organisations.80 However, with Trump’s unexpected election, questions of white nationalism have been raised across social networks because of his slogans. The ascendance of ‘Alt-Right’ fringe nationalism and the expansion of American conspiracy culture provide a compelling context for re-reading post-

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apocalyptic novels which may be viewed as predecessors to the new American civil war novel, including Whitehead’s *Zone One* (as the most acclaimed novel studied in Chapter Two of this thesis) and Shriver’s *The Mandibles* (in Chapter Three). Each of these texts present a forceful critique of social and new media. This critique turns to the commodification of new media and yet, most presciently, also illuminates the immediate potential for rapidly changing media environments to encourage partisan loyalties. The late 2000s and early 2010s have been a formative period which has given birth to what the critical media theorist Ico Maly calls ‘algorithmic populism’. Under this phenomenon, the protocols and algorithms of social media have become an essential political force. ‘Populism in the age of digitalization has fundamentally changed’. Users are ‘engaged in an endless algorithmically shaped battle to co-construct the “voice of the people”’.

Consequently, if ‘populism can be performed by policy or rhetoric’, then the ‘widespread use of digital media by politicians invites us to look at a third category: the technological’.

This thesis reads its set of American post-apocalyptic novels as critiquing new intersections in technology and populist rhetoric. These texts register the ways in which new media is changing how reactionary ideologies are rhetorically communicated in America. Taking *Zone One* as a key example, an area of downtown Manhattan has been cleared of zombies and has become the flagship area for a new state under ‘American Phoenix’, representing America: ‘Up, out of the ash, reborn’ and a ‘new era of reconstruction’.

However, Whitehead’s African-American protagonist has ominous premonitions about America’s future: ‘Would the old bigotries be reborn […] when they cleared out this Zone, and the next, and so on, and they were packed together again, tight and suffocating on top of each other?’

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82 Ibid.


84 Whitehead, *Zone One*, pp. 61, 120.

85 Ibid, p. 231.
Readers might – to follow Leif Sorensen’s example – identify this apprehension with the immediate ‘political context, in which Zone One appeared, in 2011’. This was when ‘commentators were finding portents of doom […] in circumstances such as the collapse of the financial markets’ and ‘the global war on terrorism’. But, if this is the case, Whitehead’s novel also helps us uncover the long-term repercussions of these events for U.S. politics. The barricaded Zone One, as a zone in which news and intelligence are shared through government filters, offers a suggestive approach to reading twenty-first century post-apocalyptic fictions: one that is attuned to the changing relationship between government and journalism, and how both can become complicit with reactionary politics.

Therefore, the ‘genre turn’, as identified by scholars including Hicks, amongst American literary writers of post-apocalyptic fiction, is more than a formal development. To return to where this introduction began, with Manjikian’s *Apocalypse and Post-Politics: Romance of the End* (2012), she argues that the post-apocalyptic novel reveals itself as a cultural form which is attuned to historical change. The genre, she observes, provides a useful path for moving beyond ‘the situatedness of one’s own experience and coming to a broader understanding of the hegemon’s experience (or lack thereof) in the international system’. Citing the work of Susan Bowers, who saw the Civil War as an apocalyptic moment in U.S. history, Manjikain affirms that the contemporary cultural imagination in the U.S.:

> [u]ses fears to create an apocalyptic moment in which the old America – the superpower and the hegemon in the international system – has been erased entirely, leaving the physical geography of America untouched whilst its inhabitants float through the landscape, leaderless and lost. [...] In this new world, America's infrastructure has crumbled, globalization has failed, and there is no reliable communications system linking the fractured country together.

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Such intriguing arguments resonate with the literary emergence of contemporary U.S. texts which more overtly embrace the material prospect of secession, or U.S. civil war, than those by their most immediate predecessors. A literal reading of the closed states and civil wars in these texts might indicate that the aggressive patriotism of the 2000s and 2010s, which has culminated in Trump’s insistence on preserving domestic industries and climate denial, is threatening to lead the U.S. to its own stasis of potential in an ever-changing, multinational world. In some sense, this is the fear articulated by Barbara Brodman and James E. Doan, in their collection on *Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump* (2019), when they argue that the ‘Trumpian era’ foreshadows ‘a regressive dystopia where fascism desiccates the seeds of female empowerment, technological advancement, and international civility’.  

However, this thesis identifies an adherence to apocalyptic traditions here as an illuminating indicator of the generational realities of a particular era. It illustrates an evolving world which is not associated with a particular presidency but rather with epochal questions about the ways in which the U.S. will occupy a pivotal role in influencing global relationships, between technology, democracy and twenty-first-century ideas of nationhood. These texts exert an anticipatory power to draw readers into tackling the difficult topics of democracy and populism, thereby helping to develop a profound affinity with these pressing issues in a way that nonfiction cannot. As the title of El Akkad’s novel reminds us, American civil war is a literary prospect which compels readers to critique and interrogate their relations to U.S. democracy and government in the digital age. Ultimately, the new American civil war novel offers a unique and incisive literary form to explore defining generational, as well as national, questions for twenty-first-century America.

7. Thesis Structure and Summaries of Chapters Two to Six

This thesis identifies the new American civil war novel as a compelling literary form which inherits this national tradition to interrogate new and evolving relations between truth and democracy, and between politics and media communication, in America’s  

twenty-first century. With this diversity in mind, the order of the chapters is based upon the thematic focus of the novels: Chapter Two focuses on secession after zombie contagion; Chapter Three focuses on the prospect of a new Cold War between the U.S. and Russia after viral pandemic; Chapter Four focuses on the debt crisis; Chapter Five depicts U.S. secession after water wars in America’s Southwest; and Chapter Six addresses the literary phenomenon of contemporary ‘Second American Civil war’ novels. There is an additional element to the organisation of this thesis. Chapters Two and Three adapt the conventions of generic apocalyptic scenarios which are familiar within American literary and cultural traditions. Both the zombie apocalypse and the viral pandemic have an established cultural and literary heritage in the U.S. in the late-twentieth century. By contrast, Chapters Four, Five and Six focus on three sub-genres which have been less prominent in American culture. The texts in Chapter Four use the conventions of ‘dystopian finance fiction’ to address the national legacy of the 2008 financial crisis. The novels in Chapter Five use post-apocalyptic conventions of the American ‘eco-thriller’ to attend to the legacy of anthropogenic climate change. The novels in Chapter Six, with their focus on future civil war, depict national violence ensuing from political rhetoric and denial of environmental and political expertise.

Chapter Two offers a reading of Colson Whitehead’s acclaimed novel *Zone One* which sets out several key issues of crucial importance to the new American civil war novel. In *Zone One*, as a key novel of the ‘zombie renaissance’ which Mark McGurl identifies in Anglo-American popular culture, news is implicated in worsening conditions of the zombie apocalypse.89 The thesis opens with Whitehead’s novel since it focalises the three key themes which evolve and become more prominent in later texts which this thesis categorises as new American civil war novels. The novel depicts not only a post-zombie America under a patriotic government called ‘American Phoenix’, but also the secession of New York City from the rest of the U.S. nation – a motif which is recurrent across the set of novels examined in this thesis. As analyses from critical race theory have demonstrated, *Zone One* critiques key tenants of Obama’s vision for a post-racial America, as articulated in his memoir *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). Yet the novel’s African American protagonist, Mark Spitz, is also

implicated in a relationship with the new government’s use of media and propaganda after the zombie apocalypse of the ‘Last Night’. As a former social media manager for a U.S. coffee multinational, Spitz recognises parallels between the use of click-bait marketing before the Last Night and the new era of propaganda after the Last Night. Framing Whitehead’s novel against the backdrop of the early right-wing backlash to Obama’s presidency, especially by the TEA Party, this chapter argues that *Zone One* is an influential post-apocalyptic novel which critiques the reactionary values emerging from post-2008 socio-economic immobility.

Chapter Three argues that Sandra Newman’s sleeper novel *The Country of Ice-Cream Star* self-consciously uses the post-apocalyptic premise of a viral pandemic to produce an ambivalent treatment of predictions of a ‘New Cold War’ which posits the U.S. against Russia or China. This thesis argues that the novel offers a compelling thematic focus for the new American civil war novel which contrasts with the imagery and concerns of Whitehead’s *Zone One*. Newman’s novel has been critically prominent for its narration in the dialect of a tribal society in the U.S. which has been forged over an eighty-year period. This society has re-emerged after the arrival of a fatal flu virus called ‘the Posies’ in America – a virus which shortens life-expectancy to the age of eighteen. Newman’s novel is indebted to the conventions of Nuclear Age fiction. However, the novel also plays with conventions to envision the prospect of a stand-off between the U.S. and Russia – one in which Russia has a monopoly over an antidote which will be essential to the survival of the U.S.’s future. It critiques the emergence of a new world order, exacerbated by hostilities between the U.S., China and Russia, in which espionage and sabotage through technology will become more untraceable – and even more subversive.

Chapter Four elaborates on this influence of knowledge and information in the American post-apocalyptic canon. Specifically, it focuses on works published after the 2008 Financial Crisis and demonstrates how Lionel Shriver’s *The Mandibles* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Heart Goes Last* adapt the motif of the seceded state to comment on the legacy of the 2008 financial crisis, and the momentum it gave to populist antagonism. In both novels, the subprime mortgage crisis is recast as a tragedy for white, middle-class America which distracts from its especially deleterious legacy for African American and minority subprime homeowners. These texts investigate the close alliance between free-market endorsement and anti-multiculturalism in contemporary America. These fictions offer an innovative post-apocalyptic
predecessor to the new American civil war novel in which to explore the relationship between culture war and economic backlash after the 2008 financial crisis.

Chapter Five considers the ways in which Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* envisages the prospect of American civil war within the socio-political context of water shortages in the American Southwest. Placing the novel in dialogue with modern climate change fiction (or ‘cli-fi’), this chapter argues that *The Water Knife* illuminates the relationship between changing technological contexts and public disinformation about climate change in America. Comparing *The Water Knife* to Chris Beckett’s *America City* (2017), the chapter argues that the ‘eco-thriller’ depicts and addresses how climate sceptics gain media exposure and undermine technical expertise and science. Adopting key themes identified in this thesis, *The Water Knife* and *America City* interrogate how climate change is as much an issue of public opinion and education as environmental decline.

Chapter Six, the final thesis chapter, analyses the overlap between the new and emergent sub-genre of the ‘Second American Civil War’ novel and post-apocalyptic conventions in texts written by Omar El Akkad and Christopher Brown. This chapter identifies these texts as examples of the ‘alternative history’ genre which, according to Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, grew from a marginal genre to a mainstream category during the early 1990s, after the end of the Cold War. However, as Schneider-Mayerson observes, the Cold War is notably absent as subject matter from American alternative histories. This chapter extends Schneider-Mayerson’s claims, exploring the ways in which twenty-first-century American civil war is depicted in these novels which deploy post-apocalyptic conventions. As this chapter demonstrates, this sub-genre of post-apocalyptic American Civil War novels has become a key genre for modern U.S. fiction which illuminates the evolving dynamics of twenty-first-century nationalism and right-wing movements.

This chapter takes the thesis back to where it begins, in Chapter Two with *Zone One* imagining the ascent of triumphant U.S. nationalism. Across epistolary testimonies of civil war, with their allusions to corruption and censorship by industry lobbies, we may see in shorthand all the legacies of decisive shifts in U.S. national and


91 Ibid, p. 77.
international politics which promise to become more acute. The conclusion of this thesis reviews the range of answers which these texts offer. Given the marked patterns which the analysis in this thesis reveals, it concludes with a provisional set of the literary archetypes which promise to define the new American civil war novel during the first two decades of the twenty-first century.
Chapter Two

‘Can You Hear The Eagle Roar?’: Populism and American Zombies in Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011) and Zombie Survival Guides

1. Populism in American Politics

In his critical study *Books of the Dead: Reading the Zombie in Contemporary Literature* (2018), Tim Lanzendörfer argues that an illuminating selection of twenty-first-century zombie texts interrogate how political and cultural imagery of mass protest has changed in the wake of the rise of the Occupy protest movement (2011-12), and particularly in the wake of the Occupy Wall Street protests (2011) which denounced the U.S. banking sector after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. With reference to Colson Whitehead’s novel *Zone One* (2011), Lanzendörfer observes that, within the literary sub-genre of the zombie novel, ‘[w]e may certainly read the zombie figures in post-Great Depression *Zone One* as pre-figurations of such a specifically right-wing opposition to resurgent globalized capitalism.¹

Readings such as Lanzendörfer’s reference an illustrious history of ‘undead narratives’ in American popular culture. These narratives are categorised by Annalee Newitz, across ‘the 1980s, [to] the 1990s, to the 2000s’ as being ‘preoccupied with the anachronistic race relations which exist alongside those of the present-day’.² However, this chapter adopts Lanzendörfer’s claim to argue that the scope of *Zone One*’s political commentary becomes radically broader and more significant for events

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² Annalee Newitz, *Pretend We’re Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 91. The zombie is a metaphor which is already common, indeed pervasive, in critical accounts of today’s media economy. Media scholars have widely argued that the zombie has evolved to reflect the changing character of global media. As Allan Cameron writes, ‘[b]eginning with George A. Romero's 1968 classic *Night of the Living Dead*, zombie films have drawn attention with insistent frequency to the role of recording and broadcast media. Most conspicuously, they have focused on the inability of news media to communicate the nature, scale, and imminence of the zombie threat’. Allan Cameron, ‘Zombie Media: Transmission, Reproduction, and the Digital Dead’, *Cinema Journal*, 52 (2012), 66-89 (p. 66).
after the 2016 election. This chapter argues that *Zone One* is a key and formative novel for the genre of the new American civil war novel. *Zone One* opens in a barricaded New York City after global zombie apocalypse. Within this closed city, a new government leads with one national ambition. America can become great again; it can realise the ambition of New York being rebuilt and rising ‘up out of the ash, reborn’.\(^3\) This is the slogan of the official government of the ‘American Phoenix’. After a zombie outbreak called the ‘Last Night’, a new government oversees a period of national ‘Reconstruction’.

Following the thesis introductory chapter, this second chapter argues that Whitehead uses early versions of conventions which are adapted in later new American civil war novels. *Zone One* uses the image of a plagued New York City, separated from the rest of the U.S., as a focal point to explore key themes which become important to later texts in the American civil war genre, including Omar El Akkad’s *American War* (2017) and Christopher Brown’s *Tropic of Kansas* (2017). As its name demonstrates, American Phoenix encourages patriotic loyalty and sanitises a disavowed American history of military intervention (249). The ‘Phoenix Program’ was the name of the controversial CIA operation, based in South Vietnam, which organised the surveillance and capture of Viet Cong operatives during the Vietnam War (1955-75).\(^4\) However, recruits are not duped by American Phoenix’s optimism. Over the novel’s three-day time-frame, Spitz realises that New York is nowhere near ready for habitation despite rhetoric from the new government. The closing destruction of Zone One represents the ending of a nationalist movement in America.

Therefore, this chapter argues that *Zone One* is concerned with key features of American media history, especially the corporatisation of media channels during the 1980s, and it connects this history to commercial trends in new media communication. The section that follows turns to *Zone One* as a key novel of the zombie renaissance and explores in more detail the genre’s ironic treatment of global media. *Zone One* interrogates a long-term transformation in American political culture – a

\(^3\) Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), p. 120. Henceforth, page references are given in the text.

\(^4\) Mark Atwood Lawrence notes that Americans use the title ‘Vietnam War’ to refer to the conflict which took place between 1961 and 1975. However, scholars have preferred to use the ‘Second Indochina War’ to distinguish it from ‘earlier and later conflict and to emphasize that the fighting engulfed not just Vietnam but Cambodia and Laos as well’. *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 1-2.
transformation which has seen media engagement become central to political engagement. American Phoenix embodies the new injunction of American populism. This injunction is to make politics a media spectacle, and to make ideas sharply polarised as they are thrown into circulation through new and social media. This chapter turns to this injunction more thoroughly in its final section, where it is argued that American post-apocalyptic fiction registers a current political moment in America which is defying liberal notions of collective politics and democracy. With reference to Max Brooks’ Zombie Survival Guide (2003) and Sean Page’s Zombie Survival Manual (2013), it is argued that the zombie survival manual is a sub-genre which reflects the populist nature of American political communication. Ultimately, this chapter proposes that the zombie renaissance, and its new popularity across literary and popular culture, has occurred as the fields of journalism and politics were being influenced, first, by new media communication and, second, by the political use and exploitation of this same new media.

2. American Populism: From Reagan to Fox News

With this argument in mind, this chapter section briefly examines the history of U.S. populism in more detail, juxtaposing its rise with key developments in social media, and tracking the way in which American media has become a key site for right-wing populist expression. This is not a mere nostalgic exercise – this is a historically situated memory which reflects the consumerism of 1980s America: ‘The televisions were the newest, the biggest, levitating in spaces and pulsing with a host of extravagant functions diagrammed in the unopened owner’s manuals’ (4). Spitz’s adolescence unfolds in the same time frame as the neoliberal revolution attributed to President Ronald Reagan after 1981. As told through flashbacks, Mark Spitz comes of age under Reagan’s administration. He recalls childhood visits to his young professional uncle living in a luxury New York apartment. In Spitz’s memory, his visits to New York coincide with a regeneration during the 1980s: ‘Up and down the island the buildings collided, they humiliated runts through verticality and ambition, sulked in one another’s shadows’ (5). In the 1980s, New York’s growth occurred under the ‘Reagan
Revolution’ which, led by the presidency of a former Hollywood star, championed the free market as a symbol of American democracy.⁵

As highlighted in the thesis introduction, neoliberal economics has had a decisive influence on media broadcasting and communication. This history is crucial for this chapter’s reading of Zone One. In his A Brief History of Neoliberalism, David Harvey claims that this revolution was achieved through appeals to American freedom. Neoliberalism proposed that ‘human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’.⁶ From the 1970s onwards, ideological belief in the free market circulated through corporations, the media, and civil institutions including schools and universities. The ‘long march’ of neoliberal ideas through these institutions, which Austrian economist Fredrich Hayek predicted in The Road to Serfdom (1944), created a consensus which equated the free market with a free society.⁷ Beginning with federal tax breaks such as the Economic Recovery Tax Act (1981), Reagan’s administration launched the economic revolution which would convert, sometimes through military coups in the case of Chile and Argentina, world economies to the free market.⁸

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⁸ Policies associated with the Chicago School of Economic, gained traction in the early 1970s as the Reagan administration sought to address the economic crisis of that decade. A key member of the Chicago School, Milton Friedman, who became an advisor to Reagan’s administration argued that ‘economic capitalism’, as the organisation of economic activity through private enterprise, led to the economic freedom which was necessary for political freedom. Capitalism and Freedom (1962, rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Daniel Stedman Jones gives and overview of this economic period, and Friedman’s role in devising neoliberal policies in Reagan’s administration, in Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012).
It is no coincidence that Spitz’s life-story unfolds in the same time-frame as this revolution. Spitz grows up with a set of attributes which read as an ‘everyman’ protagonist. He successfully executes ‘all the hurdles of his life’s stages, from preschool to junior high to college, with unwavering competence’ (9). Before the ‘Last Night’, Spitz is working in ‘Customer Relationship Management’ for a coffee multinational, ready to enter the young professional milieu of New York when he completes ‘obstacles attendant to a law degree’ (9). With this life-span, he has known no other economic or cultural values than the individualism and consumerism which, captured by Reagan’s speeches including his address on American Freedom (1987), have been championed as guarantees of American democracy. However, Spitz knows that these milestones have not led to worth or esteem, either in himself or in his country. As he looks around post-zombie New York, he sees that these values of freedom and independence have not led to excellence but to ‘mediocrity’. As a concept which Spitz uses repeatedly, he sees zombie apocalypse as a catalyst for exposing the true conformity – rather than individualism – of commercialised America. After the Last Night, ‘no citizen was more significant or more decrepit than another. All were smeared into a common average of existence, the A’s and the C’s tumbling or rising to settle into a ruthless mediocrity’ (214). And yet, there is still room for ‘hope’ in these numbed survivors. All survivors have been recruited into the ‘Reconstruction’, a project through which American Phoenix attempts to overcome PASD (‘post-apocalyptic stress disorder’) in order to rebuild a profitable America. This perspective is resonant with Manjikian’s observation that post-apocalyptic novels are ‘peculiar cultural product[s]’ which require a ‘certain degree of mistrust or concern related to the new technology, as well as a certain degree of mistrust in the international system’. Indeed, it is a ‘product of instability’ which is ‘generally produced by a dominant power’ so as ‘to stay in power’. However, through this focus, the novel also suggests that this media history is critical to understanding the appeal of reactionary politics in the twenty-first century. Over three decades later, Spitz is living through another revolution. A new government, based in distant headquarters in Buffalo, New York, is seeking to rebuild America and restore New York to its former glory. Zone One

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opens and closes with two moments – one historical and one fictional – in which patriotism is encouraged and cultivated for American gain. This chapter argues that Zone One is about the relationship between patriotism and populism in American politics. It is about how patriotism can rapidly slip into populism, and how populism always fails to fulfil its ambitions. Zone One satirises how administrations have used patriotic rhetoric to valorise American government. The novel makes historical allusions to rhetoric used by Reagan, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. However, most importantly, American Phoenix and its campaign tactics anticipate the central trend – the rise of new media communication – which has been significant for the rise of new right-wing populism, especially under the Trump administration.

The novel’s action takes place in Zone One, the downtown Manhattan area which Phoenix recruits have been hired to clear, block by block, of the undead. Amidst daily drudgery, American Phoenix’s efforts to rally morale often fall on deaf ears. Herded into camps with names including ‘Happy Acres’ and ‘Bubbling Brooks’, recruits are immune to news about government activities, including rumours they have ‘two of the last Nobel laureates working on things’ at Buffalo headquarters (35). They are only cheered by stories of ‘against-the-odds’ survival. One major story features new-born Tromanhauser triplets, born to a dying mother ‘rescued by a Bubbling Brooks recon unit’, who are fighting for survival in Buffalo. ‘These babies [are] localised hope’. ‘Buffalo could announce a vaccine tomorrow, or a process for reversing the tortures of the plague, and they’d still be talking Tromanhauser Triplets’ (41-2). This saga captures the new rules of America’s post-zombie politics in Zone One. Public loyalty is not won by championing civic values, information and meritocracy. Instead, it can only be achieved through figures and stories which provide entertainment or wield emotional appeal.

This focus foreshadows two key themes for the new American civil war novel. As outlined in the thesis introduction, these themes include a depiction of state nationalism (which, in this case, features a direct depiction of a nationalist government under ‘American Phoenix’) and partisan rhetoric which often translates into violence. Zone One is a novel about the relationship between politics and media distraction. This is especially significant for 2011, the year in which Zone One was published. Over the novel’s course, it becomes apparent that Whitehead is satirising the optimistic blueprint for a tolerant, colour-blind America imagined in Obama’s Democratic National Convention keynote address (2004) and his autobiography Audacity of Hope.
(2006). As commentators have pointed out, Spitz is the ideal protagonist for a post-racial America. He is a ‘post-racial’ American hero – an African American who, given the name of a white American Olympian, (the gold medallist swimmer Mark Spitz), is revealed to be black only in the novel’s final pages. For Ramón Saldívar, *Zone One* understands the impossibility of Obama’s democratic vision for multicultural America:

Only here, in a country populated by the living dead who nostalgically linger among the ruins of their former lives, might we finally, unequivocally, encounter a ‘post-racial’ era. As an aesthetic mechanism of fear management, the representation of apocalypse thus becomes for Whitehead a way of containing and processing a world too close to our own for full comfort in hope. In the end, Whitehead proposes that it may well be necessary first to imagine the end of the world before we may imagine the historical end of racialization and racism.12

Beyond Obama’s administration, *Zone One* is more broadly concerned with how optimism is used across grassroots and mainstream politics. The protagonist’s cynicism is directed towards acute emotion – whether fear or optimism – in America’s new political life. With flippant irony, Spitz compares American Phoenix’s campaign to zombie outbreak, describing the ‘pandemic of pheenie optimism’ as an inescapable phenomenon, a ‘contagion in its own right’ (13).

Depicting a populist government, *Zone One* encapsulates the concerns of the new and current political epoch: first, about the frailties of journalism and political institutions and, secondly, about the political role of social and new media. *Zone One* does not just focus on post-2008 American politics. Instead, it reflects on the legacy and future of American populism which, since Reagan, has used the changing media landscape to access politicised audiences and to evade the accountability of political


parties and journalism. *Zone One*, therefore, interrogates a central question for this decade: why has the expansion of communication, the crucial tool for democracy, coincided with the collapse of democratic deliberation?

As this thesis highlights in later chapters, especially Chapter Six, this relationship between communication and democracy is a central question for the new American civil war novel. *Zone One*, however, is an exceptional novel since it reveals that certain archetypes – including the combination of closed barricades with disrupted or unreliable communication – were beginning to become prominent in contemporary imaginings of the post-apocalypse. Before discussing these generic archetypes in *Zone One*, it is necessary briefly to review this history of populist thought and activism in America.

As noted in the thesis introduction, in the section titled ‘Neoliberalism and the Age of Surveillance Capitalism’, the theme of populism is significant to the new American civil war novel. Whilst populism is a keyword of American politics under Trump, it has a highly varied history across twentieth-century American democracy. Before the twentieth-century, populism in the U.S. derived from the left-wing People’s Party that formed in 1892. Bernadette Brexel traces how this movement, also called the Populist Party, was rooted in the anger of Midwestern and Southern farmers against the perceived exploitation by eastern elites. This party sought to free America’s political system from the ‘money power […] of the Gilded Age’.

Its members hailed the ‘common interests of rural and urban labor, and blasted monopolies in industry’, including banks and railroad companies, for undermining the labour of ‘the masses’.

Whilst the Populists swiftly became a national force in politics thanks to the Panic of 1893, working-class militancy was suppressed in the early twentieth century – especially with the ‘Red Scare’ tactics of Woodrow Wilson’s administration (1913-21). However, the rhetoric of the Populist Party left a cultural and political imprint

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14 Ibid.

which was adapted by successors, of varying political persuasion, across the following century. Its imagery depicted ‘a nation of hardworking American producers’ threatened by a ‘non-producing elite’ – a ‘morbid growth on […] the body politic’ – who must be necessary challenged by a people’s movement to restore America’s national well-being.\footnote{16}

In \textit{The Populist Persuasion: An American History} (1995), historian Michael Kazin identifies two distinct phases of populism which adopted this imagery and thrived in the United States. The first type of American populist tradition is suspicious of corporate elites whom they believe to have betrayed the economic interests of American workers who carry out the nation’s essential work. This type was dominant in the aftermath of the First World War, ‘when a rising labor movement, including many socialists, articulated a narrowed version of the ethic that linked political virtue with manual work’.\footnote{17} Franklin D. Roosevelt borrowed from this rhetoric to promote his New Deal, promising to ‘equalise the distribution of wealth’\footnote{18}. However, the second and more radical transformation helped propel a major alteration in American politics. After the Second World War, populism began a migration from Left to Right. In 1970, this sentiment was captured by \textit{Time} Magazine ‘anointing Nixon “the embodiment of Middle America” in defiance of an elite liberal ‘Eastern Establishment’.\footnote{19} As Kazin recaps, rhetoric once spoken of by reformers and radicals was ‘creatively altered by conservative groups and politicians (zealous anti-Communists, George Wallace, the Christian Right, and the campaigns and presidential administrations of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan)’.\footnote{20} At the core of this

\footnote{16}Ibid, p. 13.


\footnote{19}This \textit{Time} Magazine award is cited by Michael Kazin as a formative moment for American populism which distinguished it from progressive or socialist campaigns. As he observes, ‘the Right’s conception of a “Middle America” beset by a spendthrift, immoral political elite remained vigorous. It limited what president Bill Clinton or any other progressive leader or organization could accomplish’. \textit{The Populist Persuasion: An American History} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 5 and 273.

\footnote{20}Kazin, \textit{Populist Persuasion}, p. 4.
resurgence was the creation of the ‘New Right’ coalition, which unified business interests with the cultural values of evangelical Christian America. For these disaffected groups, as described by Edward Morgan, ‘the liberalism of the 1960s was to blame for both capitalism’s crisis and the turbulence and decadence they saw in the media culture of the time’. This New Right repurposed the original dichotomy between the disenfranchised majority against the elite minority. It associated the cultural and economic degeneration of the U.S. with the ‘liberal elite’ who, misguided by state welfare, it depicted as seizing the wealth of self-reliant, personally responsible Americans.

*Zone One* opens during this formative American political period, with Spitz’s adolescence overlapping with the early Reagan administration. One of the most consequential shifts of this period centred on the media industry. This shift created new ground for the New Right and set in place conditions which shifted media content and broadcasting to the political right. Under Reagan, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) began to relax the use of the ‘Fairness Doctrine’ (1949) which required television and radio stations to offer an impartial balance of opposing perspectives during elections and political debates. As Matt Guardino and Dean Snyder recognise, ‘the marketplace, believed to be teeming with new sources of information and ideas due to the growth of cable and home video technology, was seen as the only appropriate mechanism for determining media content’. Over the next several decades, more regulations were relaxed or eliminated. Perhaps the most important deregulatory policy was the ‘Telecommunications Act’ (1996), which, as the first major rewrite of the FCC’s original statute, abolished or greatly relaxed a number of key limits on radio and TV station ownership and maximum allowable audience reach.

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Following the Telecommunications Act, conservative foundations used their organisational resources to subsidise media production. Fox News (1996-present), founded by Rupert Murdoch, emerged as a key public channel for this broader conservative network which promoted reactionary content decrying establishment politics. Conservative personalities, including Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck and Alex Jones, produced content in which controversy and sensationalism were central values of media production. For Olivier Jutel, one of the early innovations of Fox News was its early identification of ‘affective investment’ as the key to ‘media production’ and consumption within a rapidly fragmenting media environment. Fox News, he argues, did not build upon the central cultural values of journalism, with its commitment to truth-telling, but the affective experience of politics.24 Commercialisation led to an ideological shift to the right. An even more profound reorganisation of the media was dictated by social media. Social media allowed political figures to address supporters and mobilise their participation without resources from broadcast media. Journalists and politicians became dependent on online impact and virality. For many pundits, the 2008 presidential election, and particularly Obama’s campaign, was a watershed moment which heralded a ‘politics of digital engagement’. With reference to Obama’s iconic ‘Hope’ poster, designed by Shepard Fairey, these commentators recall how Obama threw his image into circulation on social media and crafted his personal life-story to elicit identification.25

However, these transformed media values did not just encourage optimism: they also licensed transgression and conspiratorial obsession. It may be argued that the cultural form of Twitter has biases that favour simplification and aggression in political debate, and, more often than not, of populist leaders in general. This became apparent with the prolific coverage of the Tea Party which licensed conspiracy through


the anti-Obama ‘Birther’ controversy. It was social media that made it possible for the new partisan news sites of the right, such as Breitbart, to challenge the influence of traditional media. It was, finally, social and new media which facilitated the spread of ‘fake news’, most of which reports were deployed in support of Donald Trump. With these changes in media infrastructure which encouraged conspiracy and sensation, a new epoch of American politics seemed predisposed to favour populist style and practice. It is here, at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first-century, that Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* enters the scene.

3. ‘Swimming with the Tide’: Zombies Under American Phoenix

Like all of Whitehead’s protagonists – from the freelance journalist in *John Henry Days* (2001), the consultant in *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006) and Benji in *Sag Harbor* (2009) – Mark Spitz looks at the world with ironic cynicism. This is nowhere more evident than in *Zone One*. The fictive present of the novel is divided into a three-day period (each chapter is labelled ‘Friday’, ‘Saturday’ and ‘Sunday’). The narrative follows Spitz and his fellow sweepers, Kaitlyn and Gary, as they work in post-zombie Manhattan. The American military has cleared the inner city of the most lethal, fast-moving zombies called ‘skels’. Spitz and his ‘Omega Unit’ are living through the lull after this purge. Their primary zombie targets are a second type of undead called ‘stragglers’. These zombies are echoes of their human hosts, doomed to stand in one place and repeat the final moments of their hosts’ lives before contagion:

> They were a succession of imponderable tableaux, the malfunctioning stragglers and the places they chose to haunt throughout the Zone and beyond [...] In the desolate consumer-electronics showroom, the up-selling floor salesman halted mid-pitch, as if psychoanalyzing a sceptical rube who was simply, ever and always, not in the room, not in the market for purchases big-ticket or otherwise. A man bent before a mirror that perched on the glass

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counter of a sunglasses store, his fingers holding on the arms of invisible shades. A woman cradled a wedding dress in the dressing room’s murk, reenacting without end a primal moment of expectation. (pp. 48-9)

Sweepers gather up the undead in government issued bags. Disposal burns these corpses in furnaces next to the Zone’s barricade. Ash churns out and swirls ‘in a radius around the incinerators’, sending ‘toxic stuff into the air’ and covering the New York skyline with a melancholy grey, ‘the ‘dust of the undead’, which recalls the aftermath of September 11th 2001 (187).

Indeed, Kyle William Bishop sees Zone One as a ‘post-9/11 cultural response’ and argues that the label “Zone One” [is] evoking the rhetoric of September 11 “Ground Zero” language. For Bishop, Zone One is a literary homage to the history of New York, a city ‘marked by periods of growth and decay, deconstruction and reconstruction’. In Whitehead’s novel, New York is representative of American ‘national trauma’ after 9/11: ‘New York City was unquestionably “wounded” by the terrorist attacks, as the collapse of the twin towers resulted in a disruption to urban processes, the creation of long-term problems, and far-reaching social, psychological, and symbolic damage’.27 But whilst the novel is set in New York, Buffalo’s concerns are for the country as whole, and for America’s reputation as a member of a recovering global community. America’s place in the post-zombie future is as the leader of a new international order. This is the view expressed by a visiting representative from Buffalo: ‘New York City is the greatest city in the world. Imagine what all those heads of state and ambassadors will feel when they see what we’ve accomplished. […] The symbolism alone. If we can do that, we can do anything’ (168). This statement broadens the novel’s focus beyond the immediate context of the 9/11 attacks. It alludes to a longer and problematic history of U.S. liberal foreign policy, commonly referred to as ‘liberal hegemony’.28


Patriotic slogans from American Phoenix, repeated throughout the novel, become an ironic reminder of America’s historical failures, over the twentieth- and early-twenty-first centuries, to foster international cooperation and community. Spitz is resigned to the failure of these aspirations. ‘There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them’, he muses, ‘[w]ould the old bigotries be reborn as well, when they cleared out this Zone, and the next?’ (231). All of this satirical material in the novel anticipates the central claim of Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart’s polemic. They propose that in an era of ‘liberal democracy’, based on the ‘laudable norms of human rights and democracy’, populist rhetoric is able easily to ‘direct tribal grievances upwards towards elites, feeding mistrust of “corrupt” politicians, the “fake” media, and “out-of-touch” mainstream parties’.29 Spitz understands that the patriotism of American Phoenix has less to do with pragmatic conservatism than with polarising rhetoric and division. With its claim that ‘We Make Tomorrow!’, American Phoenix promises to regain America’s national pride from the hands of an overdetermined enemy. Spitz knows that this rhetoric could ignite a cluster of contradictory populist feelings, all appealing to polarised versions of what American civil society should look like after the Last Night. The tone of the Phoenix campaign is desperation: ‘the campaign had not swayed him [Spitz], to optimism, nor the T-shirts and buttons and the latest hope-delivery system sent down from Buffalo’ (26). Spitz anticipates a future under American Phoenix which licenses conspiratorial distrust of America’s enemies.

*Zone One* alludes to the controversies in mainstream American political culture that stem from the Tea Party movement which arose after the 2008 financial crisis. The Tea Party was the first conservative moment to be spurred on, in part, by its circulation via *YouTube* as well as by broadcast channels, including *Fox News* and *CNN*. The movement was sparked by the CNBC Business News editor Rick Santelli’s

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apparently spontaneous outburst against the Obama administration’s Foreclosure Relief Program (2010). Delivered live from Chicago’s Stock Exchange, Santelli constructed a vision of American citizens ready to revolt against the anti-market policies being undemocratically imposed by Washington elites. With excerpts from Santelli’s speech replayed over the succeeding week, the first Tea Party protests were being hosted in multiple U.S. cities by the end of the month. The Tea Party was a movement which claimed to be led by American patriots who would liberate the productive energies of the American people from government despotism. However, Anthony DiMaggio rebuffs this claim, tracing the scholarly consensus that the Tea Party was ‘more smoke and mirrors than a genuine populist revolt’. The false impression, he summarises, that the Tea Party was a ‘grassroots uprising’ was largely due to ‘clever marketing of a small number of Republican officials, Tea Party activists, and media pundits’. Closer investigation of Tea Party reveals that their ‘rallies were a public relations stunt [...] heavily attended as a result of superficial online social networking’.

*Zone One* depicts one of the most prominent themes of the new American civil war novel – the rise of partisan rhetoric and political speech within a contained and insular colony within the U.S.. Whitehead’s allusion in *Zone One* to the Tea Party is direct, with parallels between the Tea Party and American Phoenix becoming apparent as Spitz’s Omega Unit hear rumours of another zombie outbreak at ‘Bubbling Brooks’. Military unit leaders underplay fears through protocol jargon and descriptions of a ‘density problem’ and ‘gate breached’ (191). However, Spitz begins to notice that propaganda from the Buffalo government becomes more distracting and sensationalist. The government releases ‘Gina Spens pinups, for the sake of global morale, wherein the bikini-clad warrior woman posed with a machine gun on a beach, draped herself coyly on a radar panel, and the like’ (216). This campaign is no longer...

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30 Santelli challenged the administration to ‘put up a website to have people vote on the Internet as a referendum to see if we really want to subsidize the losers’ mortgages’. Rick Santelli, ‘Santelli’s Tea Party Rant’, *CNBC*, 19th February 2009 <https://www.cnbc.com/video/2015/02/06/santellis-tea-party-rant-february-19-2009.html> [accessed 14th August 2018].


32 Ibid.
about political campaigning but about media enterprise. American Phoenix distracts its recruits through pseudo-political merchandise. Spens’ gun represents victory over the undead. Under American Phoenix, this image is embellished into a commodity which can be used to generate desire and rally patriotic sentiment. For Phoenix, these commodities allow them to overcome their lack of traditional political support and the decreasing shortfall in public confidence. This is a political strategy which is doomed to fail. The novel ends with the fall of the Zone One barricades. Tension builds throughout the novel and the fall of the wall coincides with a visit from a Buffalo representative, Ms Macy.

New York, rather than rising from the ashes, is now overshadowed by the ‘dead’ who ‘streamed past the building like characters on an electronic ticker in Times Square’ (246). Having assured a Zone One contingent, consisting of Spitz and a unit lieutenant called Fabio, of Buffalo’s commitment to regeneration, the new zombie outbreak exposes the hollowness of these promises:

‘You don’t know Buffalo. They’re not going to send out a gunship to clean up a public relations stunt when they got camps falling right and left.’
‘Public relations,’ Fabio said.
‘You have no idea how far we are from normal, do you?’ She [Ms Macy] sneered at their incomprehension, exhaled. ‘I’m too good at my job.’ (249-50)

The notion that America cannot live up to its own patriotic rhetoric is a theme with which Whitehead has consistent fun throughout the novel. The unit leaders to which Spitz and his team are assigned repeat the required propaganda spiel, sent by Buffalo, which Ms Macy derides in the novel’s closing scenes. ‘If you can bring back New York City’, one lieutenant repeats, ‘you can bring back the world. Clear out Zone One, then the next, up to Fourteenth Street, Thirty-fourth, Times Square on up’ (97). The media ‘pin-ups’ conform precisely to the superficial media values which afforded, most notably, the Tea Party wall-to-wall coverage and access to the American public on their own terms, whether through protest or social media. As discussed further below, Gina Spens in Zone One is not simply a media celebrity. She embodies a new political logic in twenty-first-century politics which Whitehead satirises; namely, the crafting of a political identity as a media brand which is synonymous with patriotic
loyalty. Concurrent with this process are transformations in communication which make media platforms more conducive to populist sentiment and antagonism.

Ash-coated New York certainly has symbolic and potent resonance for the decade following 9/11. However, Whitehead’s allusions to a wider political context, after the 2008 crisis, indicate that he is less concerned with national trauma itself, than with how national trauma encourages a new generation of movement politics. For Whitehead, the labels of ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’ do not do justice to these political movements. In fact, the comic irony of Zone One turns its attention to a post-Obama multicultural discourse which Whitehead evidently sees as concealing rather than healing present-day racial inequities. The fact that the central protagonist has the moniker of a white American Olympian swimmer, Mark Spitz, seems to capture Obama’s belief, articulated during his 2008 campaign that ‘this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one’. However, the story behind how Spitz was given this name undermines this romantic rhetoric which invites outsiders to integrate into a diverse, tolerant ‘American people’. At the novel’s centre point, Spitz recalls how some time before the fictive present, in Connecticut, he and his unit were unexpectedly surrounded by zombies on the Interstate-95. Whilst his fellow sweepers jump into the river to escape, Spitz stood atop a ‘late-model neo-station wagon’ and started shooting at the approaching hoard (147). Afterwards, when ‘he told them later that he couldn’t swim, they laughed. It was perfect: from now on he was Mark Spitz’ (147). Only at Zone One’s conclusion are we told that this irony relies on racial coding: not only in the contrast between the original Mark Spitz and his non-swimming heir, but in the stereotype, as Spitz puts it, of ‘the black-people-can’t-swim thing’ (231). Spitz is originally black, before being recast as white and then being revealed as black all along.


34 It is striking that although Zone One is set in New York, Whitehead’s protagonist Spitz constantly refers to Connecticut in pejorative terms: ‘abominable Connecticut’ (55); ‘repulsive Connecticut’ (95); ‘loathsome Connecticut’ (122); ‘maddening Connecticut’ and ‘Connecticut with its postulant hordes’ (115); ‘Bad News Connecticut’ (116); ‘loathsome Connecticut’ (169); ‘goddammed Connecticut’ (184); and ‘botched Connecticut’ (232).
As observed in the thesis introduction, the new American civil war novel is especially concerned with how public opinion can be fanned and amplified into reactionary political stances. The most informative political context for Zone One is the immediate years following the 2008 presidential election. This chapter follows Leif Sorensen’s claim that Zone One forces the reader to reflect on the gap between the dream and reality of a post-racial America. However, it develops this conclusion by arguing that Zone One recognises the importance of media and technology within this political context. Notably, it imagines how media communication can encourage public opinion to divide into more extreme factions. As Sorensen notes, Zone One refuses to banish racism to a pre-apocalyptic world. This novel potently avoids the easy redemption which ‘banishes to the past the scandalous persistence of divisions among humans’ and turns the apocalypse into a ‘learning experience’. Yet, at the same time, it defies easy political rhetoric about the American dream which is being re-glorified by grassroots models of participatory democracy. With his hope for a post-racial America, Obama’s campaign encouraged optimistic predictions that the Internet and technology would productively enhance forms of direct democracy. For instance, after the 2008 election, a New York Times panel, including Democratic strategist Joe Trippi and San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, met to discuss the new opportunities for citizen democracy in the light of Obama’s landslide victory. Their predictions included speculations that future U.S. presidents could have real-time Internet contact with constituents (through websites including WhiteHouse.gov).

Such predictions show little awareness that data and technology could undermine, and even threaten, the predictability of democratic procedures. This naivety would become especially apparent eight years later during Hillary Clinton’s campaign. As detailed in Shane Goldmacher’s Politico profile, Clinton’s highest-paid campaign staffer was Elan Kreigel who developed a comprehensive algorithm called ‘Ada’. This algorithm determined ‘nearly all of the Clinton campaign’s most important strategic decisions’ and frequently overrode the local knowledge of Democratic

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activists in targeted states. With similar faith in technology, Buffalo supports a ‘freakish menagerie of specialists […] superior brains yanked from the camps, and what did these folks do all day but try and think up better ways to hone the future, tossing ideograms up on whiteboards’ (79). American Phoenix is essentially a data-driven campaign. Buffalo believes that the more data they collect, the more likely they will be able to control this new environment and prevent future zombie outbreaks.

After their patrols, Omega units fill in ‘Incident Reports’ to record the demographic data of their ‘skel’ or ‘straggler’ zombie targets: ‘the ages of the targets, the density at the specific location, structure type’ (30). Buffalo believes that data represents progress and that information will bolster New York City’s defences. With their well-funded strategists, Buffalo believes they can win recruits to their belief in professional and democratic consensus. ‘[S]ystems die hard’, Spitz ruminates, Buffalo ‘was a well-organized muck with a hierarchy, accountability and, increasingly, paperwork’ (162).

Zone One’s attention to data is not separated from Whitehead’s satirical vision of post-racial America. When Obama came into office, during the recession following the 2008 crisis, his decisions were strongly influenced, in Haroon Khan’s description, by his ‘pragmatic liberalism’. This pragmatism opposed ‘strict adherence to ideological beliefs’ in U.S. domestic and foreign policy and emphasised ‘conscious preferences for practical solution and pursuing policies based on facts, evidence, and structured rational choices’. Compromise and deliberation became the key characteristics of Obama’s presidency. These traits would displace supporters on the Left, who anticipated a more progressive transformation of American public policy, as well as detractors in the Republican Party.

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38 Leonard Zeskind documents in his authoritative study on The History of the White Nationalist Movement, how the U.S. has consistently exhibited a milieu of nationalism in which the U.S. is a Christian nation identified with the white race.


40 For a comprehensive account of Obama’s electoral fortunes during his first presidential term, and how the Republican popularity increased in these early years, see Theda Skocpol, Larry M Bartels, Mickey Edwards and Suzanne Mettler, Obama and America’s Political Future (Cambridge: Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012).
government acknowledges the downsides of this political approach. Politics retreats from being a progressive struggle to distribute access and resources. Instead, it only becomes a pre-determined process of gaining understanding through rational dialogue and stability. Under American Phoenix, pragmatism benefits the burgeoning private sector in New York. Buffalo introduces legislation under the guise of economic necessity and at the behest of ‘official sponsors’ which are brands and agencies that have survived from before the Last Night. Looting becomes a profitable venture with ‘everyone – soldier and civilian and sweeper alike – […] prohibited from foraging foods and materials belonging to anyone other than an official sponsor’ (38). In this pitch, the reader can see a vision of politics orientated towards rational debate between self-interested parties in search of economic consensus.

4. Populism and Entertainment in Zone One

*Zone One* therefore, is not solely about race and inequality in America. It is also about a polarised political era which is formative and pivotal to the development of the new American civil war novel. Under American Phoenix, media entrepreneurs are able to generate enjoyment and antagonism through media images and icons. In a decade overshadowed by the Tea Party’s rally cry to ‘Take our country back’, and later Trump’s quest to ‘Make America Great Again’, political ambitions are not necessarily built on policy, but on emotional appeals to the lost enjoyment of a reconciled America. The experience of a shared investment, of being part of a people, surpasses the importance of ideology. Anticipating this ethos, national identity in *Zone One* is open to commercial manipulation and is able to represent military or national strength or victorious humanity depending on its followers. The key instance of this is the figure of Gina Spens as the Italian adult film star who becomes a symbol of national revival and heroism. She rises to fame after a Hunger Games-style competition organised by Italy’s provisional government. Her ‘comeback’ follows her ‘own stunts in a series of action sequences throughout Italy’s contest against the dead – the Encounter at Horror Gorge and the legendary Ambush of the Wretches, among other
credulity-testing adversities’. ‘Get’em Gina!’ becomes an international popular slogan (42).

In contrast to American Phoenix, Spens attracts loyalty from recruits, especially as she becomes a ‘worldwide sensation, whispered about in the dancing glow of scavenged antimosquito candles’. It is noted of her rise to prominence:

A society manufactures the heroes it requires. Gina was that new species of celebrity emerging from the calamity, elevated by the altered definitions of valor and ingenuity. They walked among us, on every continent, in the territories of every depleted nation. (42-3)

Her image has the obvious appeal of glossy female pin-ups but her political success has added symbolism. As she becomes a celebrated figure in the Italian provisional government, she is appointed rather than elected to office. She is invited under the guise of ‘provisional governments’, being a short-term stop-gap in emergency conditions: ‘Provisional governments were really big these days, an international fad in the grand old style’ (42). Spens, a seemingly minor character, becomes a figure who clarifies political themes which are recurrent throughout the novel. Her life-story reveals how popular opinion can sabotage democracy; and how political institutions can become complicit in the erosion of democratic representation. With Zone One published before the end of Obama’s administration, and as the Tea Party was gaining traction, the historical allusions in Spens’ life-story are attuned to the specific conditions for twenty-first-century populism, which relies upon media-generated enjoyment. Anticipating the phenomenon of ‘fake news’, the novel places in ironic relief the preoccupations of American journalism, wherein cultural capital is assumed to unify a public around the values of fact and truth-telling.

Throughout the novel, figures like Spens are a lucrative spectacle, in contrast to the deadening bureaucracy of American Phoenix which, despite invoking the urgent necessity of its work, is ignored and distrusted. Instead, recruits embellish stories which reassure, with increasing levels of questionable accuracy, rather than inform:

What American had not thrilled to the inspiring story of Dave Peters, who spent six months drifting in a catamaran in a Michigan lake, living off a carton of cashews and paddling away whenever he drifted too close to the shore,
which teemed with the dead. Everyone thrilled to the story of Whilemina Godiva and her grain silo fortress, how she’d battled her way to the Maryland settlements armed with nothing but her famous rusty pitchfork, which was now enshrined over the front gate of Camp Victory’s Sword. (43)

*Zone One* is about how false rumour and sensationalism can rupture rhetorically progressive visions constructed under American government. The experts and custodians of consensus – the derided ‘egg-heads’ who reside in Buffalo – are rendered impotent by the populist’s direct appeal to a mediatised public (33).

Whitehead emphasises that this appeal is not a new phenomenon. *Zone One* alludes to the backstory of the Italian populist politician, Ilona Staller, who was able to unify populist energies of a libertarian right, mainly by defying formal government protocol. Spens’ career parallels Staller’s real-life biography (or, by her stage name, ‘Cicciolina’) as a Hungarian-Italian porn star who was elected to the 1987 Italian parliament as part of a ‘Radical Party’ (‘Partito Radicale’). Staller captured the values of intensity and personal gratification which, once again, are becoming potent political values in American and Western politics. Moving forward into the twenty-first-century, Trump’s refusal to adhere to political decorum, whether rejecting the official vote count or calling for the arrest of Hillary Clinton, mark him as a populist figure of similar vicarious subversion. His politics of chaos pursued to its own end is the opposite of political strategy and decision-making. He is able to claim the populist mantle because (rather than in spite of) his gaudy excess and claims that ‘[he] doesn’t want to boast but, [he’s] like a billionaire’. For Trump, his self-manipulated media profile allows him to circumvent political gatekeepers. Spens, and the model for her story Ilona Staller, similarly leverage celebrity for their personal ventures. With this confluence of politics and entertainment, *Zone One* forewarns of the ease in which formal journalistic values may capitulate to demagogic popular tastes.

Staller’s life-story provides an incisive case-in-point for this kind of political opportunism. In the 1987 Italian general election, Staller was welcomed as party candidate in a strategic (and misguided) effort to raise the national profile of the Italian

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Radical Party. Staller’s populist campaign has disconcerting echoes of the American political tensions under the Trump administration, where liberal centrist is routinely mocked and undermined. Staller defied official protocol, whether hosting a victory tour across Italy’s nightclubs, or offering to have sex with Saddam Hussein in order to prevent his annexation of Kuwait before the First Gulf War (1990-1991). Her willingness to defy decorum led to and enhanced her popularity. As Cas Mudde explains, this kind of sensationalism is not a ‘politics of transformation’ which aims to change ‘the people themselves, but rather their status within the political system’. Within Staller’s actions, there was a crudely vulgar but populist defiance of the political status quo which shattered traditional decorum and allowed voters to feel that they were reshaping political expectations.

It is at this point in the novel that themes of communication and censorship, as formative themes for the new American civil war novel, become pivotal to Zone One. With this turn to subversive humour, Zone One forewarns of the ominous path which this kind of dark comedy can take, especially, according to Norris and Inglehart, as it can be used to ‘channel tribal grievances “outwards” towards scapegoat groups perceived as threatening the values and norms of the in-group, dividing “Us” (the “real people”) against “Them” (“Not Us”), stoking anxiety, corroding mutual tolerance and poisoning the humour reservoir of social trust’. Whitehead’s ending – where New York is consumed by a new ‘maelstrom of skels’ – offers an ironic warning about the
de-sensitisation which can ensue from this vulgarity and humour (246). Spitz’s notable characteristic is his ‘mediocrity’. This ‘aptitude’ allows him to adapt to the escalating dangers of post-zombie New York, because his skills lay ‘in the well-executed muddle, never shining, never flunking, but gathering himself for what it took to progress past life’s next random obstacle’ (10). But the novel makes clear that this mediocrity is a generational blight, with recruits desensitised to the extreme dangers of their soundings by a new syndrome which Buffalo calls ‘PSAD, or Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder’. This syndrome has a host of symptoms, a set of ‘sundry tics, fugues, and existential fevers’ which manifest themselves through slow response times and emotional disengagement. ‘Everyone was fucked up in their own way; as before, it was a mark of one’s individuality’ (30, 54).

‘PASD’ is not a medical syndrome but a condition which polarises recruits’ emotional responses: to death and suffering they are indifferent; whilst to humour they are hyper-sensitive.

By their slogan ‘We Make Tomorrow’, American Phoenix hopes to breathe new life into empty detachment. But emotion, and emotional intensity, become unsustainable in political terms, especially since they are redirected towards unpredictable ends. Black humour runs throughout Zone One. To alleviate boredom, Spitz’s unit devises a game called ‘Solve the Straggler’ which involves guessing the last moments of the zombies doomed to repeat the final death throes of their hosts. They come up with extravagant readings which often escalate into careless derision and desecration. ‘Solve the Skel’ is considered ‘less bleak than Name That Bloodstain! In which recruits decipher shapes in the wounds and blood of long-dead hosts (‘Mount Rushmore, Texas, a space shuttle, a dream house, my mom’s grave’) and, eventually, ‘Skel mutilation was another popular amusement’:

A neutralized skel was a perfect stage for one’s sadism, whether you were a dabbler, merely taking your time in terminating the thing before you, pruning a finger here or an ear there, or a master-level practitioner, restless all night trying to think up novel variations. (81)

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Life under American Phoenix may well have seen the growth of consultants, experts and managers orientated towards formalising politics after the Last Night. However, these games, which incite obscene enjoyment, speak to a dehumanizing lack of moderation. As recruits egg each other on in these games, they are complicit in an ongoing transformation which normalises tribal group-think. With these games, recruits recall the humour they ‘shared with […] friends, family, and members of […] favoured social-media networks’ (80-1). This reference to social media is both telling and crucial since it recognises how this humour was once drawn into the production of data, online communication and the economic logic of virality. Researchers have explored the consequences of subversive online content – through images, videos and memes – of what the participatory media scholar Tim Highfield calls ‘the irreverent internet’.47 This is a notable intervention in the novel since Internet communication has been routinely associated with committed political campaigning. Before and after Zone One’s publication, the 2008 and forthcoming 2012 electoral campaigns saw vigorous grassroots participation which bought social media to the presidential race in an unprecedented way.48 The year 2011 was also the transitional year for the ‘Arab Spring’, which saw unparalleled social protest, in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, and the use of digital media to realise grievances and mobilise against dictators. These themes are explored more directly in Chapter Six, ‘American Civil War and Revolution in Omar El Akkad’s American War (2017) and Christopher Brown’s Tropic of Kansas (2017)’.

However, Zone One is an important precursor to these texts since the novel recognises the political importance of humour to Internet communication. These concerns include the viral sharing of news communication and the way humour is used to lighten ominous political events. Specifically, the recruits’ humour anticipates the importance of the Internet ‘meme’, a mode of online communication which would

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47 Tim Highfield, Social Media and Everyday Content (London: Polity Press, 2016), p. 34.

become an important unit of political communication, especially as populist organisations, including the Tea Party, became prominent political actors. Before the Last Night, Spitz specialises in this viral humour and content. At the coffee multinational, he is encouraged to ‘cultivate an individual social-media persona’ and to enter into ‘artifice easily’, faking ‘human connection and the postures of counterfeit empathy’ across global sites and individual feeds’ (149-50). After the Last Night, the legacy of this hollow communication becomes apparent. Spitz imagines his successor in skel form, sending out mindless content to absent recipients:

His social-media persona probably continued to punch the clock, gossiping with the empty air and spell-checking faux-friendly compositions, hitting Send. ‘Nothing cures the Just Got Exsanguinated Blues like a foam mustache, IMHO’. ‘Sucks that the funeral pyre is so early in the morning – why don’t you grab a large Sumatra so you can stay awake when you toss your grandma in? Wouldn’t want to sleep through that, LOL! (151)

What is most distinctive about Zone One is that its cynical humour is informed by media communication from before the Last Night. Each of the ‘games’ which are played by the Phoenix recruits are dependent on practices inherited by digital communication, including Internet memes.

The new American civil war novel is a genre concerned with the political consequences of media communication. Zone One’s focus on communication, and especially on how media and advanced communication does not necessarily lead to clarity or accuracy, marks a significant literary moment for the genre. An Internet meme is an image which is shared on the Internet but adjusted or revised by a user and shared with online peers. In order to read a meme, readers need to be aware of the same political context as the original user. They defy the status quo due to their allegoric style of expression. They reflect a news and political landscape in which officials strive to occupy and command the same spaces as ordinary citizens. In 2008, the media site Tumblr launched an account dedicated to the presidential election to cover conventions and debates. Popular memes emphasised the lack of knowledge about policy substance from the Republican candidate, John McCain, whilst also
mocking his perceived lack of charisma. The ‘Solve the Skel’ game depends upon a similar logic. Guessing the zombie hosts’ back-stories requires knowledge of the social and geographical hierarchies which existed before the Last Night:

How did the copy boy, or copy repairman, or toner fetishist end up here? Had he travelled miles, had he been here since Last Night? Had he worked in this office six incarnations ago, when it was an accountant’s or dietitian’s office?

(81)

These one-liner commentaries also reflect on the shortcomings of the Phoenix government: ‘Spoken like a true pheenie’, Spitz says of one gurgling corpse; ‘all that pheenie bullshit had clouded his mind’, Gary and Kaitlyn note of a man who committed suicide in his barricaded apartment (26, 63). ‘Pheenie’ becomes the shorthand for inept government, with its usage increasing as recruits’ despair increases and final disaster approaches. The games allow recruits to call attention to American Phoenix’s contradictory or incongruous statements, thus enabling their agency in the new political environment. Like memes, these games are participatory by nature, with recruits using them to express dissatisfaction. Like memes, these games oppose the formal politics of American Phoenix and express the necessity of antagonism towards political expression.

However, the beginnings of political apathy lie within this vicarious enjoyment. Zone One is noted for its pessimistic ending which sees the project collapse after a revived wave of zombies breach the barricade surrounding Manhattan Island. ‘It was happening again’, as Spitz realises, ‘the end of the world. The last months had been a pause, a breather before the recommitment to annihilation. This time we cannot delude ourselves that we will make it out alive’ (255). This climactic moment arrives at an interval when this humour is at its most acute and profane, and when this humour is most palpably bound up with recruits’ fear for their future. The return of the undead begins as Spitz’s Omega Unit play what will become their final game of ‘Solve the Skel’. After evacuating a New York high-rise, the unit undertakes their ‘final sweep

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49 For example, online users participated in the act of playful remix when unflattering candid photographs of McCain during a debate surfaced online, morphing the presidential candidate into zombies, aliens, and other dehumanised characters.
of the day’, looking for light relief amongst a ‘tacky’ parade of shops opened to ‘serve a clientele extinct even before the plague’s rampage, displaying objects of zero utility’. They enter a fortune teller’s shop, with ‘signs on the wall [which] provided a menu of services in a popular computer font: Astrological Charts, Numerology, Aura Manipulation, and the enigmatic “Recalibration”’ (223-5).

The fortune teller already contrasts to the gravitas of future-orientated rhetoric which has punctuated the novel – ‘We Make Tomorrow!’ – and this mysticism contrasts with expertise based in Buffalo (24, 48, 202). The fortune-teller’s shop is where the destructive logic of American Phoenix’s rhetoric becomes apparent. American Phoenix, which depicts Americans as a people threatened by their enemy, is dependent upon populist politics. It builds an affective connection to its audience which has unpredictable and indeterminate ends, allowing news to defy the discipline of facts and accuracy. The ‘Solve the Skel’ game reveals the risk which accompanies this lack of discipline: that frustration and emotion cannot be controlled when Phoenix fails to deliver on its promises. Through ‘Solve the Skel joviality’, recruits acknowledge the insincerity of American Phoenix’s rhetoric:

Gary dropped his pack and ensconced himself in the seeker’s chair, removing mesh gloves with a theatrical flourish.
[…]
Kaitlyn asked, ‘Will the Triplets make it through?’
‘What’s the matter, plague got your tongue? ... Hold on, I’m getting something….’ Gary vamped, eyes clenched. ‘Three brave souls.’
[…]
‘Sweet lord.’
Mark Spitz asked, ‘Will we make it through?’
Gary opened one eye and grinned. ‘Let me check, hold on a sec… Madame Gypsy, can you help us see the future?’ (225-8)

This cynicism defies the rhetoric of American Phoenix. The ‘Solve the Skel’ games capture a futile logic; namely, that the future is empty and this emptiness licences the vicious dehumanisation of the zombie.

It is at this moment of apathy that the zombies choose to bite back. As Gary lifts his fingers from the fortune-teller’s hand, she grabs ‘his hand and chomped deep
into the meat between the index finger and thumb. Blood sprayed, paused, sprayed again the exertions of his heart […] her smile returned to her blood-splashed lips: a broad, satisfied crescent of teeth’ (228-9). The promise of ‘We Make Tomorrow!’ immediately dissolves. New York City itself becomes a hallucination. As they flee the scene with injured Gary, they realise the scale of catastrophe coming their way due to Buffalo’s denial and rhetoric: ‘Buffalo huffed over its machinations and narratives of replenishment, and the wretched pheenies stabbed their bloody knees and elbows into the sand as they slunk towards their mirages’ (233). This return reveals the vicious deadlock at the heart of populist logic. The enemy, as the opposition which rhetoric relies upon to appeal to audiences, is needed as a permanent threat in order to license ongoing populist intervention. American Phoenix may resemble politics at a formal level, yet it is void of any critical or constructive action.

*Zone One* is a parable for a volatile future in which media production, especially online media, encourages entertainment over political action. As the Zone One project is swept away, it is telling that Spitz experiences an ironic renewal of optimism. As he recognises the scale of the zombies’ return, he realises ‘he hadn’t felt this alive in months. Ever since he left the fortune-teller’s […] he’d entered a state of tremulous euphoria’ (250). The full exposure of American’s Phoenix’s posturing is a relief. ‘It embraced him; […] [t]here would be no rescue at the terminal, no choppers dropping out the sky at dawn after the longest night in the world. […] Of course he was smiling. This was there he belonged’ (250). Whether new emancipatory modes of politics, emerging through media communication, are genuinely progressive is a central question which preoccupies *Zone One*. With the emotional appeal of American Phoenix, Whitehead critiques key media trends which, five years after its publication, would lead to a contemporary resurgence of American populism. But, in *Zone One*, the appeal of this populism is unsustainable in political terms, since its appeal to entertainment eventually leads to desensitisation and lack of interest. This is the sentiment which closes the novel in Spitz’s last line: ‘Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead’ (259).

A key argument of this thesis is that the new American civil war genre, and novels like *Zone One* which are crucial to its formation, are tracing generic concerns with the fraught relationship between communication and politics. *Zone One* offers a direct and substantive political warning which contributes to this genre: that populist
sentiment can unleash a range of polarised loyalties which will be very difficult to reconcile. Using conventions of the zombie genre novel, Whitehead has written one of the most politically prophetic novels in the mainstream American literary landscape. The enthusiastic embrace of *Zone One* by the cultural establishment, as a literary novel rather than genre novel, suggests that the fragility of political institutions under populist revival is a long-standing cultural concern – one with a more prominent and varied history than an immediate public reaction to Trumpism.

*Zone One* presents a rich and diverse range of archetypes which become important to later additions of the genre including, as discussed in Chapter Three, post-apocalyptic gothic texts which imagine the invasion of America by hostile nations. However, whilst *Zone One* is a pivotal novel for the genre, it is important to examine the earlier manifestations of its key themes within the broader revival in zombie genre fiction known as the ‘zombie renaissance’. The final section of this chapter will address a work of one of the most widely reviewed authors of this renaissance, Max Brooks, and examine how his *Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) reflects key concerns about the future of the U.S. international order. As highlighted in the introduction, the legacy and end of the ‘American Century’ is a notable influence upon the new American civil war novel. The *Zombie Survival Guide* is distinctive for its support of institutions of the U.S. international order. With this endorsement, Brooks’ novel reveals how key themes for the new American civil war novel were beginning to emerge in post-apocalyptic fiction from the early 2000s. This analysis contributes to this thesis’s overarching argument that a generic focus on political communication, and themes of censorship and disinformation, were apparent in post-apocalyptic fiction in the decade before the seismic Trump presidential victory.

5. *Zombie Survival Guide*: Survival and Government during the War on Terror

In *Zone One*, American Phoenix’s slogan of ‘We Make Tomorrow!’ appeals to the nationalist idea of lost American power. With reference to key moments of U.S. populist expression, Whitehead focuses on how emotion can shift in unanticipated – and extremist – political directions. *Zone One* focuses on this immediate context of ‘cultural backlash’ unfolding over the Obama and Trump administrations. However, earlier texts in the twenty-first-century zombie revival also focus on the legacy of the
U.S.-led War on Terror, including domestic surveillance of American citizens and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Retracing the origins of the zombie renaissance, to nearly a decade before *Zone One*, the conversation around U.S. democracy was vastly polarised. Legislation increased distrust of the U.S. government. First, the Patriot Act (2002), signed by George W. Bush, claimed to ‘deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes’. As its critics have widely documented, its passage led to indefinite detentions of terrorist suspects, the expanded use of search warrants, and authorization given to the FBI to search telephone, e-mail and other electronic records without a court order. Second, the suspension of civil liberties, including eliminating the assumption of innocence, was the legislative backdrop to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The DHS involved the wide-scale reorganisation of twenty-two government agencies, according to Bryan Mabee, for the purpose, in Bush’s words, of ‘ensuring that our efforts to defend this country are comprehensive and united’.

It is within this political context that the American zombie began to evolve in fiction to reflect more contemporary anxieties regarding the U.S.’s role as hegemonic influence. Most notably, as Mark McGurl observes, new sub-genres, including non-fiction genres like the ‘zombie survival guide’, emerged from the same ‘zombie renaissance’ which made the zombie a stock character of popular and literary fiction. This ‘zombie survival guide’ produced popular texts and comics which offered day-to-day advice, from food and shelter to use of firearms, about the intricacies of survival.

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during zombie apocalypse. The genre itself caught the critical attention of many reviewers. In the *New York Times*, Taffy Brodesser-Akner reviewed Max Brooks’ *Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) as the key text for the genre. She argued that Brooks’ novel took the genre in a new satirical direction, since it frames zombies ‘in rational, scientific terms’ and exhaustively chronicles ‘everything from the life-span of a zombie to its speed’.*54* However, whilst nominally an apolitical handbook for survivors, the guide offers a notable political message: the necessity of the U.S. remaining as an advantaged world superpower.

The *Zombie Survival Guide* offers a critical mode and text for the new American civil war novel since it is a mode of zombie fiction which focuses on and, as this chapter argues, endorses the importance of public information. If, as argued in this thesis’s analysis of *Zone One*, the new American civil war novel addresses the questions of media accuracy then the *Zombie Survival Guide* provides illuminating insight into public sentiments around these same questions during the early War on Terror. The genre of the survival guide addresses survivors who are assumed to be part of a culture in which information is only readily available through public health and other agencies of government. It aims to turn American citizens into self-sufficient survivors who follow government protocol which aims to reshape the crisis to American interests. This premise is clear from two best-selling publications within this trend, Brooks’ *Zombie Survival Guide* and Sean Page’s *Zombie Survival Manual: The Complete Guide to Surviving Zombie Attack* (2013).*55* Both manuals offer a historical overview of a zombie virus: a fictional virus which, evolving with humanity over multiple centuries, can only be fought through international cooperation. In Brooks’ guide, the text’s impartial tone often slips into a call for international collaboration. The *Zombie Survival Guide* concludes that ‘world governments will

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have to acknowledge, both privately and publicly, the existence of the living dead, creating special organizations to deal with the threat’. It emphasises the need for rapid action by policy makers in world governments as they rethink defence strategies and institutional responses:

The world’s population is growing. Its center has shifted from rural to urban zones. [...] All these factors have led to a renaissance of infectious diseases, most of which were thought to be eradicated centuries ago. Logic dictates that Solanum can flourish in such a ripe environment. Even though information is being recorded, shared, and stored as never before, it cannot hide the fact that zombie attacks are on the rise, their frequency mirroring the ‘development’ of this planet. (247)

The guide was published when many criticisms were being levelled at the U.S., not least in respect of its claim to be a nation of freedom and liberty during the War on Terror.

The zombie survival guide defends U.S. global leadership despite the outrages which characterised the War on Terror. With this premise, it forewarns against the same polarising trends later taken up by Zone One as a key text for the new American civil war novel: the rise of nationalist rhetoric which, with eye-catching popular appeal, would have negligible diplomatic influence. Published when the War on Terror was leading to deep structural shifts in international relations, it sketches a foreign policy world-view which endorses international cooperation. In its immediate political context, the guide seems to speak to the international legacy of 9/11 and the War on Terror. However, as this chapter argues, the genre is also more forward looking, using its formal tropes to argue against scepticism of American international relations and leadership.

Brooks’ Zombie Survival Guide has two aims. It is an academic history of how recurrent outbreaks of the zombie virus – or the ‘Solanum virus’, as it is called in the guide – has evolved in tandem with the emergence of the zombie as a popular and
fictional icon. It is also an instruction manual with ‘how-to’ defence guides which cover the details of zombie killing including: ‘Weapons’, ‘Equipment’ and ‘Terrain type’ (Contents, vii-x, 1-5). The guide opens by summarising medical knowledge about the Solanum virus and describes how the human body becomes a zombie host (3-4). In the guide’s following sections, it provides instructions about killing zombie hosts and in-depth advice about weapons (including ‘firearms’), close combat techniques and barricades (for both domestic homes and public buildings) (28-93). Advice is interspersed with survivor accounts followed by a history of recorded attacks, dating from ‘60,000 B.C., Kantanda, Central Africa’ to ‘2002 A.D., St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands’ (x-xii). Such records comprise historical documents, eye-witness accounts and reports from multilateral organisations including the World Health Organization (WHO) (37-8). Later case studies draw on institutional records: reports from Palos Verdes Police Department (from an attack in Santa Monica, California); a post-action report from India’s Border Security Force (Srinagar, India); and French newspapers (the only evidence of an attack in Sidi-Moussa, Morocco) (242, 245). The guide ends with brief chapter titled ‘Historical Analysis’, which highlights to its readers how they must be ready for the worst-case scenario: ‘an all-out war between the living and the dead: a war you are now ready for’ (247).

Part of the appeal of Zombie Survival Guide is that it is couched in the format of a familiar how-to manual. Structured as a guide for educated citizens, its matter-of-fact can-do tracts supply the tools needed to outwit the zombie’s speed and effects. Brooks’ guide draws upon conventions of U.S. federal government literature issued during the Cold War as the threat of nuclear attack was becoming especially acute. Its portrayal of survival does not involve people at work or as engaged members of public society. Instead, individuals, and individual families, are units of survival. Self-sufficiency is the primary means of survival, as apparent from the bullet-pointed ‘general rules’ for survival: ‘Gather Intelligence and Plan Your Journey’, ‘Get in Shape’, ‘Avoid Large Groups’ and ‘Remain Mobile’ (95, 97). Survival, according to the guide, is ultimately up to the reader’s initiative. The necessities of survival consist entirely of basic ‘disaster-survival kit’ materials which survivors can buy ahead of time: a ‘Cistern for collecting rainwater’, ‘Iodine and/or purification tablets’ and ‘Canned food’ rationed to ‘three items per day (preferable to dried goods in that they contain some water)’ (71). Such advice recalls atomic-themed pamphlets, including Survival Under Atomic Attack (1950), Fallout Protection (1961) and Nuclear Survival
Skills (1979) which were issued during the 1950s to 1970s by the U.S. government. These booklets explained how survivors could protect themselves, preserve food and water supplies and insulate homes against radiation. As scholars of the Cold War, notably Robert Jacobs, have documented, such pamphlets were implicitly propaganda exercises which equated the survival of the American individual and family as a patriotic duty to ensure the future of the American nation. Jacobs documents, with reference to guides including This is Civil Defense (1951), that survivors were frequently addressed as ‘soldiers’ who should recognise that ‘it takes training and guts to stand up under attack – and come back fighting’.

However, within the political context of the Zombie Survival Guide, we can recognise the direct implications of this lineage. The guide was published at a critical moment when Bush’s administration was morally and legally having to justify policies readily implemented during the early War on Terror. The original civil defence guides were produced during a significant international moment when the U.S. was in the crosshairs of the atomic bomb and at risk of nuclear attack. Zombie Survival Guide was published at an equally significant moment when the War on Terror was being cast as a new and decisive phrase in the great experiment of national liberty and democracy entrusted to America. Just as war is becoming more advanced – conducted through distant war-zones in the Middle East – the guide speaks to the average American citizen as an individual whose competence could be vital to the U.S. at risk.

In the year of Zombie Survival Guide’s publication, Bush pledged to fight terrorism through American values of liberty and transparent democracy. He spoke of America’s enemies as insurgent actors not easily contained. America’s security


59 These were the values which Bush promised to bring to newly occupied Iraq in his 2003 speech, claiming that the ‘American belief in liberty’ would liberate a ‘free and peaceful Iraq’. George W. Bush, ‘George Bush 2003 Speech - Democracy in Iraq’, AP Archive <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJky1J5tnVo> [accessed 13th February 2019].
The zombie guide is characterised by a long view of American influence in global politics. If the mid-twentieth century benefited from American leadership, then the decades before and after the new millennium marked a disappointing failure of U.S. potential. In its later case-studies, the guide highlights how zombie prevention is sabotaged by U.S. institutions failing to notify and share information with civilians. The most extreme case on record is ‘1984 A.D., Cabrio, Arizona’ which begins when a child patient, who receives a blood transfusion after an elementary school fire, displays ‘symptoms of a Solanum infection’. Within two hours, experts from the ‘Centers for Disease Control [arrive], escorted by local law-enforcement and “nondescript federal agents”’\(^6\). The agency’s response is secretive and officious: the child is ‘airlifted to an undisclosed location’; hospital records are ‘confiscated’ and ‘conspiracy theories’ are allowed to ‘orbit’ with no official government response to the child’s death (233-4). The guide acknowledges that there is a trade-off between coercion and legitimacy. The guide closes with an encouragement for ‘world

\(^6\) Before the Iraq War, for instance, Bush claimed ‘it would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known. We will do everything in our power to make sure that that day never comes’. George W. Bush, ‘State of the Union Address’, \textit{George W. Bush White House, 28\textsuperscript{th} January 2003} < http://whitehouse.georgewbush.org/news/2003/012803-SOTU.asp > [accessed 17\textsuperscript{th} January 2019].
governments […] to acknowledge, both privately and publicly, the existence of the living dead’. However, the request is not a retreat from multilateral co-operation but an attempt to build on existing models and ‘create special organizations to deal with the threat’ (247). With this closing request, the guide acknowledges that coercive U.S. hegemony will only get it so far, as allied states need to reconcile their partnerships with responsibilities to domestic publics. The guide offers a clear warning for the U.S. caught in the War on Terror, and the U.S. at a transitional diplomatic moment: push too hard, and it is very likely that U.S. citizens will disbelieve their own government, and that U.S allies could be punished by their respective hostile publics.

With this context in mind, the relationship between The Zombie Survival Guide and the new American civil war novel becomes more apparent. Brooks’ guide warns against overtly patriotic language and rhetoric becoming a respectable gloss for crude appeals to American values which, in the short term, only undermine American international interests. It suggests that to take humanity’s future seriously, Americans must not retreat from identifying with non-American nationals (i.e., others in the world community). In other words, it affirms that empty nationalism should be entirely abandoned and, instead, a unified response should be developed against the common threat towards humanity ‘driven to the brink of extinction’ (154). The guide, therefore, reverses its own conventions inherited from Cold War literature, wherein strong American nationalism is required to successfully fight an ominous, anti-American enemy. Instead, it is written to draw attention to, and validate, the international alliances which were established thorough U.S. leadership after the Second World War. The zombie menace is truly an international menace, the guide warns and it proposes that relying on what we know works, namely international collaboration under U.S. leadership, is the only way to victory. By this logic, since the U.S. world order ensured its allies experienced unprecedented prosperity, they must trust them in a time of unprecedented crisis.

At this point it is relevant to mention the U.S. Marshall Plan (1948) and American economic support for both Western Europe and Japan. After the war, the U.S. rejected economic nationalism, and gave priority to the revival of both regions.61

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The world which zombie survival guides want to envisage is one which is most likely to thrive if it is represented by institutions of the world order, which would allow the U.S. to lead whilst sharing strategic knowledge and information. Anticipating acute themes in Whitehead’s *Zone One* as a formative novel for the new American civil war novel, the zombie survival guide emerged as a popular sub-genre when the U.S. was experiencing a clear backlash towards its superpower status. This emphasis on the value of global collaboration is characteristic of similar texts which also draw upon the survival guide’s history of patriotic sympathy in order to reframe U.S. influence as beneficial to American citizens and world relations.

A prominent and even later example of this perspective is Sean Page’s *Zombie Survival Manual* which also replaces the zombie siege narratives with an account of proactive international collaboration. Published in 2013, Page’s guide is even more attuned to questioning isolationist or protectionist sentiment which sees American cooperation as compromising American advantage. Adopting the same global outlook as Brooks’ *Zombie Survival Guide*, Page’s guide is narrated by a specialist in the ‘fledgling science of zombiology’, which originates in the fieldwork study of scientist, Dr Khalid Ahmed, who studies ‘300 zombie outbreaks from the post-1945 era to the present day’.

The *Zombie Survival Manual* recognises that its task is formidable: a twenty-first-century, vision of international order, advanced through a global strategy which couples ambitious vision with material and political resources. Like Brooks’ guide, it addresses survivors who must live after outbreaks as either individuals or as small communities, with survival presented as an idiosyncratic and ongoing way of living.

Yet it invites survivors to be part of a global vision, one which is crafted from existing diplomatic institutions. The manual identifies its advice with global research produced by scientific and higher education institutions. It emphasises that zombie outbreak always thrives and begins with parochialism. As the introduction claims, the ‘single greatest obstacle’ to progress in zombiology is the former ‘hostility of the world’s universities and the research community in general’ (12). The zombie threat will only be overcome through the deep structures and well-trodden dependencies of powerful sectors which connect American science, business and education. The

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manual emphasises that the world is at a crossroads since the global research community has now turned to support the research needed to develop appropriate defences. ‘Since 2002’, the manual specifies, ‘Dr Ahmed’s research has been supported and developed by institutions and individuals around the world, but there are still many unanswered questions in the science of zombiology (12). The world is on the brink of a breakthrough, but only if the U.S., the United Kingdom and other nations use already existing strategic partnerships – otherwise freedom of action will be tightly constrained’.

The Zombie Survival Manual is clear that the U.S. will be the directive power in this international order.Blueprints for zombie defence are adapted from U.S. expertise which include a ‘zombie-proof body suit developed by the U.S. government during the Cold War’. Similarly, the ‘Zombie Travel Safety Code’, which educates ‘people world-wide about zombie safety and “staying hidden” from the dead’, was ‘developed by the U.S. government in the 1980s but was never used due to concerns over public opinion’ (98). U.S. leadership, therefore, helps eliminate collective problems associated with addressing outbreak – help which would have been non-existent without the Cold War which led to U.S. hegemonic status. Throughout the manual, help from the U.S. is thought of as a public good, rather than an assertion of national prestige. Like Brooks’ Survival Guide, by referring to political confidence in U.S. leadership which characterised the early post-Cold War period, the manual presents a case for why this order cannot end. Global zombie outbreak cannot be fought by fractured nation-states.

This threat of the fracturing of the U.S. international order is especially significant for the genre of the new American civil war novel. The prospect of this secession, and loss of collaboration, leads the survival guide to consider pivotal themes of public information and communication. The manual refers to protocol developed by the ‘Ministry of Zombies’, a directive organisation with comparable status to the United Nations (15). This Ministry develops containment strategies which balances global research and science with local knowledge of national zombie outbreaks. Only through intergovernmental collaboration will nations be able to share information conducive to eliminating the zombie threat. The Ministry of Zombies is central to services which focus on public health. It investigates misinformation about the zombie virus. This includes an investigation into ‘the range of products on the market which profess to either “cure” the zombie conditions or “scare” off the walking dead’ (34).
It surveys survivors, on key questions relating to survival (including the ‘safest’ refuges ‘during a zombie apocalypse’) and dispels common myths about zombie attacks. By highlighting the Ministry of Zombies, *Zombie Survival Manual* emphasises that U.S. internationalism is central to America’s future. How else would they lead and influence responses global events or crises? How can expertise be consolidated to ensure to safety and protection of American citizens?

6. Conclusion: Populism, Government and the Media

Through their portraits of U.S public and media institutions, the zombie post-apocalyptic novels in this chapter emerge as important early texts in the new American civil war genre. With their focus on the global scale of the zombie apocalypse, these novels have been examined and identified as especially important for tracing the origins of key motifs in the new American civil war novel which, as highlighted in the thesis introduction, relate to censorship and partisan rhetoric. Writing from a perspective informed by four decades of criticism of U.S. global leadership, Whitehead’s zombie novel *Zone One* displays a fascination with American patriotism, and how it can tether itself to illiberal or highly sectarian political ideas. However, Whitehead does not just refer to twenty-first-century politics. As previously discussed, he instead combines the zombie apocalypse with the speculative conceit of bringing together different historical moments into the life of a single black American survivor, Mark Spitz. This project is consistent with Whitehead’s earlier novels, but it also develops the zombie novel’s generic engagement with the current geopolitical moment. Critics have sought to contextualise the twenty-first-century zombie renaissance within understandings of economic and national status rooted in globalisation. However, it has been assumed that alternative genres within this zombie trend have sought to counteract the political antipathy which this same political moment has generated. Texts like *Zombie Survival Guide* and *Zombie Survival Manual* depict triumphant internationalism: a reaffirmation of the successes of the U.S.-led world order including durable European peace and pacifying global partnership.

Written against the backdrop of the War on Terror, these texts, with their parody of U.S. government literature, suggest that crisis is not necessarily indicative
of the need to dispose of the current world order but rather to address long overdue and pressing political contradictions and problems. Each of the three texts – *Zone One*, *Zombie Survival Guide* and *Zombie Survival Manual* – is written from different political perspectives and time periods. In *Zone One*, written five years before Trump’s election, American Phoenix demonstrates how media consumption is becoming important to political identity. Whitehead insists that reactionary populism is accompanied by reactionary forms of enjoyment which American politics must reckon with over the forthcoming decades. By comparison, the survival guides, written in the light of the Bush administration, respond to a public which is increasingly hostile to the legacy of the U.S. international order. They depict America as a keystone state which can have either a beneficial effect or a detrimental legacy. It is highly significant, midway through the first decade of the early 2000s, that they address this question as an important one, surveying American commitments across the globe and recognising that their reversal would have profound implications for world politics. Nearly a decade before Trump began to evoke an ‘America First’ nationalism, the guides reveal that patriotism and populism have been long-standing themes in American public life, with the anticipation that American capacity to renew a global consensus will become harder and harder to sustain.
Chapter Three


1. American Frontier and Cold War Borders

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, many North American post-apocalyptic narratives – especially novels and fiction which imagine the outcome of fatal viral pandemic – centre on the siege of the American frontier. They depict military invasion of American states and the conquering of U.S. landmarks by foreign nations. Rather than cultivating the American frontier, and proving mythic values of American self-reliance, survivors in these texts concentrate military efforts on evading hostile colonisers. This chapter examines two post-apocalyptic novels which make this premise their concern. At the close of the first of these novels, Sandra Newman’s pandemic novel The Country of Ice Cream Star (2014), a child protagonist leaves the U.S. after she is press-ganged into a new army. This army, led by the Russian Federation, has invaded the U.S. after it has been afflicted by a fatal pandemic called WAKS. Taking a ‘Russian boat’ across the ‘nighiten waters’ of the Atlantic Ocean, Ice Cream hopes that America will find a new start after it has been laid waste by pandemic and Russian invasion.¹

This chapter argues that the new American civil war novel is a sub-genre of the post-apocalyptic novel which adapts the settings and themes of the American frontier. The previous chapter argued that Zone One is a key novel which is concerned with how media developments in twenty-first century media, especially in new and social media, have encouraged more extreme and populist American ideas. Yet the new American civil war novel is not solely focused on national developments. The novels in this chapter, with The Country of Ice Cream Star as the central text, are

concerned with how technology and communication have become a weapon of espionage and sabotage which twenty-first century nations use against each other.

In these novels, the frontier is transformed from a patriotic American symbol to a more defensive setting of military isolation and fortification. Instead of mastering the American frontier, protagonists in these texts – including thrillers such as William Brinkley’s The Last Ship (2014) and Eric Harry’s Arc Light (1994; rpt. 2013), as well as mainstream speculative fiction such Max Brooks’ World War Z: An Oral History of Zombie War (2006) and Newman’s The Country of Ice Cream Star – spend the majority of their narratives trying to rebuild communication between isolated parts of the U.S., often relying on outdated Cold War radios to rebuild military defences which originally relied upon Information and Communication Technology (ICT). This chapter argues that this change in the symbolism of the American frontier has resulted largely from distrustful popular attitudes towards the Internet, as well as towards advances in U.S. military warfare which, during the War on Terror, expanded surveillance and espionage.

After the 11th September 2001 terrorist attacks, public concern about the scale of ICT evolved in sync with fears about global terrorism. However, after the new millennium, public concerns about computer viruses on cyber-space were added to this inventory. In light of these fears, the character of twenty-first-century American post-apocalypticism has shifted to address new forms of what Barry Sandwell calls ‘cyberphobia’ or ‘cyberfear’ in the globalised twenty-first century. This chapter proposes that, in response to distinct acts of cyber-intrusion and espionage, the

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American imperial gothic has turned the post-nuclear American frontier into a penetrable borderland which is subject to censorship from rival nations. In these American civil war novels, the U.S. is at risk of invasion. Military strategy becomes reliant on propaganda. The U.S. uses spies and covert operations to taint rivals’ reputation or mislead opponents into overestimating their military capacity. Survivors also develop covert strategies which allow them to share intelligence and rebuild national defences.

The Country of Ice Cream Star adapts conventions of the American imperial gothic, a national tradition explored by Johan Höglund. The novel addresses a theme which is important to the new American civil war novel: how the scale of technology exceeds national accountability. Such a claim might seem predictable from the perspective of the American imperial gothic. As Höglund notes, ‘[w]estern technology is central to many gothic narratives, both British and American: Western heroes combat evil with the aid of advanced weaponry’. This chapter argues that The Country of Ice Cream Star reveals shifting cultural attitudes towards technology and communication as the threat of cyber-sabotage becomes a realistic prospect. More specifically, the novel explores the risks of venturing forth into a widely speculated ‘Second Cold War’ or ‘New Cold War’ in response to cyber- and military interventions from either China or Russia, while questioning the ethics of cyber-attacks.

This chapter concludes by addressing an earlier text, published in the year 2006, which captured the seeds of these themes depicted in The Country of Ice Cream Star. With reference to Brooks’ World War Z, this chapter traces how the besieged American frontier evolved into a more elaborate global narrative during the early 2000s. In Brooks’ novel, this global narrative depicted the failure of a vast digital world and the revival of censorship across closed borders within and beyond the U.S. nation. Within this generic format, the American imperial gothic reveals repressed anxieties about U.S. military action beyond the War on Terror. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that the new American civil war novel responds to decisive changes in

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military weaponry and reflects realisations in U.S. diplomacy that the nation cannot solely rely upon military capacity in future decades.

2. The Post-apocalypse and American Imperial Gothic

The Country of Ice Cream Star is yet to receive prominent critical review as an innovative work of American post-apocalyptic fiction. To identify this novel with the category of the new American civil war novel, it is necessary to review the origins and predecessors of the American imperial gothic. In his study, Höglund identifies the key ‘rules of such fictions’, including virtuous American frontiersmen, a demonised ‘Other’ and an emphasis on the necessity of ‘cutting-edge military technology’ to defeat this invading Other. Starting with the nineteenth-century ‘frontier gothic’ of early National American authors, Höglund identifies this imperial gothic as a national tradition which, even into the present-day, interrogates U.S. military action and imperial violence. Höglund’s focus on military invasion and weapons is recognisable in twentieth-century American apocalyptic narratives, especially those produced during the Cold War. In these texts, the American frontier symbolises resistance to the ‘communist sympathies infiltrating America’, and offers insight into the changing racial and national ideologies which underpinned American morale during prolonged standoff with the Soviet Union.

Turning to fiction published between the years 1946 and 1959, Paul Williams identifies the Darwinian struggle for survival in post-nuclear war America as the ‘leitmotif’ of the larger speculative genre which he calls ‘nuclear frontier fiction’. In this genre, nuclear attack fulfils the symbolic function that the American frontier ‘performed in primal narratives of U.S. nationhood’. Forced to rely upon survival skills and intuition, ‘certain types of American reveal their natural right to survive at

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9 Höglund, American Imperial Gothic, p. 34.

the expense of others’. Whether intentional or not, the majority of invasion narratives produced in U.S. fiction and cinema during the late-twentieth-century similarly follow these protocols of Darwinian struggle. Later Cold War post-apocalyptic novels, like Robert Heinlein’s *Farnham’s Freehold* (1964) and Philip Wylie’s *Tomorrow!* (1954) and his *The Innocent Ambassadors* (1957), are congruous with these notions of U.S. triumph, providing the opportunity for white American heroes to prove their bravery by penetrating and overpowering the unknown.

In these post-nuclear fictions, as Williams argues, white protagonists struggle through post-nuclear survival to reveal America’s innate national virtues of self-reliance. Whereas American postmodern authors, most notably Thomas Pynchon in his debut novel *V.* (1963), explore the philosophical prospect of nuclear annihilation, these fictions, which Mick Broderick calls ‘post-nuclear-war survivalist fantasies’, ‘reinforc[e] the status quo by the maintenance of conservative social regimes of patriarchal law (and lore)’. Now, in the twenty-first-century, American frontier narratives are changing, and these shifts have occurred in sync with larger developments in the gothic mode, be it Höglund’s ‘imperial gothic’, Steffen Hantke’s and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet’s ‘War Gothic’, or Richard Devetak’s ‘gothic scene of international relations’.

Devetak understands the early War on Terror as a ‘gothic scene’, with post-9/11 rhetoric by the Bush administration evoking a world of ‘monstrous tyrannies and

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ghostly terrorists’ which can only be defeated by the Bush Doctrine, advocating a ‘combination of unilateralism, pre-emption, and regime change’. With this overview, Devetak echoes Höglund’s claim that the concept of a “war on terror” sanitises the concept of endless military conflict, obscuring the ‘very real political motives behind the terrorist attacks’ and encourages an ‘understanding of American foreign policy as being structured by the same binaries and tropes as those informing the imperial gothic’. Höglund argues that this ‘imperial gothic’ is now more concerned with the ‘technological innovation’ of the ‘military-industrial complex’ as a coalition of companies, agencies and weapons lobbyists, recalling President Dwight Eisenhower’s renowned warning against the acquisition of ‘unwarranted influence’ in his farewell address to the nation (17th January 1961).

As the cynicism and bitterness in [Ambrose] Bierce’s work, or the haunting and at times surreal imagery in Crane’s Red Badge of Courage, suggest, the slaughter of the Civil War exposed the gap between ideals and reality and weakened the traditional means to provide solace and meaning to the many deaths. The conditions for the demystifying and profane aesthetics of the War Gothic were in place.

Throughout the twentieth century, an array of gothic figures, tropes and themes were utilized to ‘demystify and disenchant’ conflicts, including the Vietnam War, and to ‘strip it of euphemisms and official myths, and to reveal the violence that [lies] beneath’. After 9/11, however, gothic narratives shifted even further forward, using the changing times of an imagined gothic future to offer insight into a sanitised and perpetual War on Terror. Höglund’s argues that this ‘imperial gothic’ is now more concerned with the ‘technological innovation’ of the ‘military-industrial complex’ as a coalition of companies, agencies and weapons lobbyists, recalling President Dwight Eisenhower’s renowned warning against the acquisition of ‘unwarranted influence’ in his farewell address to the nation (17th January 1961).

16 Höglund, American Imperial Gothic, p. 87.
17 War Gothic, ed., Hantke and Monnet, p. xv.
Turning to the present-day, and identifying a specific category of the ‘post-apocalyptic imperial gothic’, Höglund’s argues that a twenty-first century body of fiction, film and television, led by Justin Cronin’s vampire The Passage trilogy (2010-2016) and the AMC television series The Walking Dead (2010-2019), has the potential to be especially critical and insightful after the millennium. Höglund’s argues that this post-apocalyptic gothic ‘demands that the forces the U.S. invests in today, the military-industrial complex, medical science, government, have been unable to protect the world’. Depicting the drastic loss of U.S. empire, the post-apocalyptic imperial gothic traces post-millennial challenges to U.S. dominance as it consolidates all resources to fight ‘the enemies at the gate’. 19

Building on Höglund’s work, this chapter inquires whether the American imperial gothic, especially in its ‘post-apocalyptic mode’, reflects and displays a reaction to the prospect that the United States and Russia might be headed towards a ‘New Cold War’, at least with respect to certain aspects of their diplomatic-strategic behaviour. The key features of the American imperial gothic aspects which The Country of Ice Cream Star displays have to do with missile defences, nuclear arms control and new forms of cyber-espionage. The novel echoes a central tension resonating through twenty-first-century international relations, especially in the wake of decreased U.S. interest in the War on Terror. It reflects the downsizing of U.S. and post-Soviet Russian nuclear arsenals since the end of the Cold War. Whilst this is seen as a positive development from the perspectives of nuclear arms control, it also occurs in sync with the alarming and rising use and threat of cyber-attack capabilities. This has occurred alongside rising speculations about a future Cold War or ‘New Cold War’ in the twenty-first century. As Richard Sakwa observes, the ‘category of Cold War remains […] stubbornly entrenched in our understanding of international politics in general, and in relations with Russia in particular’. 20 As Sakwa expands, original speculation about a New Cold War was provoked by President Vladimir Putin’s aim to craft foreign policy to aid Russia’s recovery from the Russian economic depression of the 1990s. 21 However, as Russia became more militaristic on the world stage,

19 Höglund, American Imperial Gothic, pp. 69, 165.


21 Ibid, pp. 244-5.
speculation began to focus on questions of nuclear arms as well as military technology. Whilst the U.S. had begun to address the cyber-capabilities of Islamist groups in the Middle East, as part of the War on Terror, the prospect of Russian cyber-capabilities introduced an even more ominous threat.

Stephen J. Cimbala and Roger N. McDermott recognise that the Obama administration is notable for its ‘extensive and secret debate about the use of information tools for military purposes’. As discussed in the fourth section of this chapter, this included investment in the infamous ‘Stuxnet’ virus which was co-launched with Israel against Iranian nuclear facilities.\(^{22}\) When, speaking in November 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced in ‘America’s Pacific Century’ that the U.S. administration under Obama was clearly highlighting to domestic and international audiences that America was pivoting towards the Asia-Pacific, away from Europe and towards the Middle East.\(^{23}\) Of course, the cyber-threat is not specific to U.S.-Russian relations. As Rosita Dellios and R. James Ferguson recognise, U.S. perceptions of threat from China, also referred to as ‘the China threat theory’, had been attracting wide academic attention since the early 1990s.\(^{24}\)

However, Clinton’s announcement was an early instance of a diplomatic tension which, in the words of Stephen F. Cohen, saw the reintroduction of ‘former Soviet Union-style super-blocs’. As Cohen expands, this reintroduction also saw with the evolution of more precise weapons and disinformation tactics which could disrupt civilian infrastructure, business and government.\(^{25}\) Seen through the lens of U.S. dominance after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Mediel Hove, in his influential research on the impact of ICT on democracy, has come to two interlinked conclusions. The first


is that with their opposing interests in the Syrian and Ukraine conflicts, the U.S. and Russia are engaged in a struggle for dominance which, ‘to a greater degree resembles what the world once witnessed before the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991’. The second is that, despite the U.S.’s ‘unfettered power, after the fall of the Soviet Union’, it is now being checked by military and economic investment by Russia and China in a ‘Cold War fashion’. As the Russian security commentator Vladimir Batyuk concludes ‘[n]uclear weapons are a legacy of the 20th century. The challenge of the 21st century is cybersecurity’.

3. The Country of Ice Cream Star and the Post-Apocalyptic Imperial Gothic

With this political context in mind, this chapter turns to a key theme of the new American civil war novel: namely, communication being used as weapon of subversion and sabotage. Captured by The Country of Ice Cream Star, the instability faced by the U.S. amidst these ambiguous and hostile relations is negotiated by the American imperial gothic as its tropes re-imagine military invasion as a war based upon propaganda. Whilst Newman’s novel has received minimal critical attention beyond newspaper editorial reviews, including The Washington Post, Laurel Bollinger, in the most substantial academic commentary on Newman’s novel, identifies a key generic trope which categorises the novel with post-nuclear fiction: a ‘regression to traditional gender norms’ which reify dispersed post-apocalyptic communities into ‘conservative models that reaffirm [the] moral integrity’ and independence of America. Bollinger’s observations acknowledge the Cold War conventions which, as Williams highlights, represent the post-nuclear landscape as a symbolic terrain in which gender expectations are an extension of American

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27 Ibid, p. 137.

28 Quoted in Cimbala and McDermott, p. 105.

nationhood. However, as this chapter argues, Newman’s novel also expands this familiar post-nuclear conservatism to critique the geopolitical context for renewed Cold War relations, turning the U.S. into a military frontier where tactics of warfare become more about subversion rather than direct confrontation. The Country of Ice Cream Star could not bear this out more forcefully. The novel’s key conflict is between the pandemic-ridden U.S. which, as a key for the new American civil war novel, is divided into tribal communities living along the Eastern coast, and the invading Russian Federation which seeks to press-gang child soldiers into their expanding army.

The protagonist is the eponymous ‘Ice Cream’ – a name she gives herself after finding a branded ice cream advertisement left behind from pre-pandemic times – who offers a marked contrast to white frontiersmen of Cold War nuclear fiction. She is a fifth-generation member of the tribe called the ‘Sengles’ who, eighty years after the original WAKS outbreak, lives among a poor and impoverished community of dying children and adolescents.

We Sengles be a wandering sort. We never grown nothing from anything, never had no tato patch nor cornfield. Be thieves, and brave to hunt. A Sengle hungry even when he eat, even when he rich, he still want to grab and rob, he hungry for something he ain’t never seen nor thought of. We was so proud, we was ridiculous as wild animals, but we was bell and strong. (1)

As discussed in the thesis introduction, salvage is the means of survival, in both practice and thought, for these tribes who live among the remains of ‘the late capitalist ruins’, which Heather J. Hicks and Evan Calder Williams identify as a recurrent trope of the contemporary post-apocalypse of America.30 Ice Cream is the ‘sergeant’ of the Sengles who live a subsistence existence, largely by scavenging provisions left behind by ‘sleepers’, or the first victims of WAKS who have rotted into skeletons in derelict ‘sleeper houses’ (2). As the novel’s opening reveals, the WAKS disease is fatal and shortens life-expectancy to the age of twenty-one. As Ice Cream recalls, listing deceased tribe members:

[WAKS] take each person in their sort. Popsicle cough his spirit out. Jay-dee’s belly swell and hurt until she claw it to the blood. Mailman strangle in his throat. He strangle once, then he find his breath. Strangle again, and beg for help. The he cannot bear to wait, he shoot himself in desperate fear. (49-50)

With this fate awaiting them, the novel’s child protagonists are unaware of life beyond their tribes (based in ‘Massa Woods’ or former Massachusetts). Yet still, the ravaged setting fulfils its imperial gothic role as a symbolic landscape which reveals the legacy of former U.S. military prowess, and how it has been lost amidst pandemic conditions. Ice Cream and her peers live with the legacy of a nuclear bomb which was detonated during the early outbreak of WAKS: ‘First my nerves wonder if this be a nuclear weapon that they keep. Guess how its poison kill the trees around, leave only grass’ (534). This first-person, indirect dialect which Ice Cream uses to narrate her story, including her tribe’s discovery of a Russian spy in a ‘sleeper house’, serves to distance their tribal living, and tribal warfare, from the advanced society of the pre-pandemic America. Warfare is the most profound and consistent theme of Newman’s novel: from primitive ‘murder-wars’ which, at the beginning of the novel, break out between rival tribes to the climactic military battle which sees the guns and tanks of the Russian Federation finally conquer U.S. territory.

This battle reflects tensions which consistently surface across the new American civil war novel. The interplay between warfare and sabotage in Newman’s novel is crucial theme which, as subsequent thesis chapters discuss, is inherited by later texts in the genre. In the end, Ice Cream takes a journey with the Russian spy, called ‘Pasha Roo’ to the military city of ‘Quantico’, or a colony led by a descendant organisation of the U.S. marines which is made up of the former areas of Southern Maryland, Washington, D.C., and northern Virginia. It is during this fatal battle that the symbolism of the imperial gothic takes an unprecedented turn. Whilst the gothic American frontier along these borderlands is quashed by Russia’s military, the final hope for America rests, in contrast to earlier instances of the American imperial gothic, within new kinds of America’s military weapons. Instead hope lies with the illicit communication and spying between Ice Cream and Russian spies, which begins to smuggle a viral antidote into the U.S. before Ice Cream’s capture and enslavement by invading forces.
The young protagonists of *The Country of Ice Cream Star* spend most of the novel on the move. They join in the battle at Quantico, but their real goal is to ‘parley with the roos [Russians] for cure’ or negotiate with the Russian army for an antidote to WAKS (389). During their journey, however, they must convince neighbouring tribes, including inhabitants of the City of Maria, formerly New York City, of the impending threat from the ‘roos’ (425). Ice Cream and Pasha encounter denial and censorship in each community, even discovering that spreading rumours of Russian capture are a criminal offence:

‘What it is’, I say on stronger, ‘be asking that you go tonight, tell every child about the roos. You seek the barracks first – tell any soldiers you can find. Most importance be, how roos steal children for their wars’.

They all look frightening to each other. A girl say in confusing voice, ‘Get prison, what we get from that. That’s stuff I didn’t even like to know’.

‘Is prison for tell secrets,’ Julio Say.

Bean scoff nervy. ‘Military secrets, what they’re calling that. We was told what happens if we tell that story. Lots of details.’ (424-5)

This suppression of information and intelligence, combined with regional dialects which create language barriers between the scattered U.S. communities, illuminates a key theme in the American imperial gothic. As communication becomes more fraught and fractious, the novel alludes to topical anxieties, increasingly prevalent in America in the late 2010s, about political rhetoric and what Robert Kaplan, in his *Foreign Policy* article ‘A New Cold War Has Begun’, calls ‘wars of integration’ – wars in which hostile nations, through integrated communication systems, ‘can intrude into U.S. business and military networks as the United States can intrude into theirs’.  

It is the characters’ underhand subversion of military might, rather than the force of military might itself, which is the central theme of *The Country of Ice Cream Star*. As Ice Cream and Pasha travel to the city of Quantico, they are forced to find more astute and nimble ways of evading the technological power of Russia’s armies,

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with their ranks of ‘artillery trucks and tanks’ which bring more ‘sorrow [than] ever 
known’ (479). The only way Ice Cream can hope to evade the encroaching Russian 
army is by intercepting radio signals which contain military plans for press-ganging 
child recruits. These intercepted communications contrast to the official broadcasts 
which the invading Russian army issues to the dispersed populations of America:

This is an emergency broadcast from the American mission of Russian 
Federation. We are asking all people over the age of 10 to report to [word 
obody recognize, is probably a place] for registration and treatment for 
WAKS. Please give all your help to the security operations of the rescue 
mission. (86)

Led by Pasha, Ice Cream Star aims to travel to the Quantico city with the hope of 
joining U.S. Marine forces to negotiate with the Russians for the ‘cure’ (322). Once 
they finally arrive, though, they find that the military colony is on the cusp of 
launching a nuclear bomb in Washington, D.C. if the Russian army invades. As one 
Marine, known as ‘Patricia girl’, says, ‘they want to take Washington intact […] they 
know what it means to us. Thass out heart, ma’am […] Yes ma’am, the day a foreign 
army enters Washington, we hold a little rematch in hell’ (480). With American 
dignity at stake, the forces defending Quantico city adhere to iconic ways of Cold War 
conflict, meaning that Ice Cream Star is forced to defy and outwit both Russian 
invasion and U.S. self-destruction by smuggling herself out of Quantico and covertly 
meeting with Russian prisoners. She makes a deal with a prisoner, Razin. Once Russia 
wins the final battle, she agrees to return to Russia with him to be used as a tool for a 
Russian propaganda campaign. This campaign aims to focus on continents which 
Russia aims to invade in the future, including Africa and South America.

Using conventions of the post-apocalyptic imperial gothic, Newman’s novel is 
a key text for the development of the new American civil war novel. Its central focus 
is the depiction of military conquest as dependent upon the manipulation of news and 
intelligence. Instead of proving the superiority of American military prowess, 
Newman’s novel captures a new gothic trend which sees the fortified frontier become 
a penetrable and exposed American borderland. Within this borderland, misleading 
news circulates across different military factions. Alongside familiar gothic 
conventions of military conflict, victory upon contemporary visions of the American
frontier depends upon distracting rivals with planted rumours— and encouraging American uncertainty about their rivals’ military tactics and resources. Instead of focusing on sophisticated military weaponry, *The Country of Ice Cream* Star is part of a group of contemporary post-apocalyptic gothic novels which depict the act of war as an open-ended act of ongoing disruption which blurs the boundaries between sites of conflict and safety, and between truth and deception. Following Höglund’s case that ‘conventions of the American imperial gothic were revived during the Cold War’, this chapter argues that the ‘American post-apocalyptic imperial gothic’ is experiencing an equivalent revival which syncs with the prospect of a ‘New Cold War’. As the next chapter section demonstrates, the themes of sabotage and communication were crystallised in Max Brooks’ zombie novel *World War Z* (2006). Just as chapter two of this thesis focused on Brooks’ *Zombie Survival Guide* as a notable text for exploring relations between reactionary politics and new media, *World War Z* is a critical generic text for tracing the genre’s emergent focus on themes of cyber-sabotage and subversion.

4. **World War Z: Zombie Invasion and Premonitions of Cyber-War**

Brooks’ novel, as a key text of what Mark McGurl describes as the twenty-first-century ‘zombie renaissance’, reflects this generic shift, especially with the novel’s depiction of the global contamination of the earth by a zombie virus called the ‘Solonom Virus’ (5).\(^3\) On the one hand, such an approach is part of a generic turn to what Glennis Byron calls a ‘global gothic sensibility’. Its plot follows an agent of the ‘United Nations Post-War Commission’ who has been tasked with collecting survivor testimonies from a twenty-year-long ‘zombie war’ (3). The novel’s depiction of reactionary images of ‘global swarms of living dead’, engages with anxiety over a sense of growing American impotence, with ‘American economic, scientific and political power’ seen to be ‘rendered ineffectual through global movements and

\(^{32}\) Mark McGurl, ‘The Zombie Renaissance’, *n+1*, 9, 2010
phenomena’. On the other hand, despite its global reach, the heart of the novel’s criticism is not global. Its narrative primarily focuses on U.S. military and political reaction to crisis. The main battle in World War Z, which takes place in Yonkers, New York, is the U.S.’s first large-scale, official engagement of the global zombie war. The U.S. administration (a thinly disguised portrait of the Bush administration) finds itself unable to do more than order surgical strikes using commando units. As W. Scott Poole argues, the failures of the U.S. military during the Battle of Yonkers satirise the ‘shock-and-awe’ tactics of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and ‘speaks directly to the after-effects of the War on Terror’ which witnessed America’s failure to bring promised ‘democracy’ to occupied Iraq.

More significantly, however, the novel reflects high-tech changes in American military technology. Alongside these ‘shock-and-awe’ invasions, U.S. military investment focused on drone warfare and classified experiments in high-level sabotage and computer hacking. Even before the new millennium, the Internet was a part-military funded project. World War Z, therefore, resonates with a mode of the ‘cybergothic’ which, according to Bryan Alexander, addresses how ‘modern anxieties about online presence (identity theft, untrustworthy personae, cyberbullying) assume monstrous appearances in [the] most uncanny of contemporary spaces’:

From the late 1970s and into the 1980s, cybergothic texts began to appear, grow and multiply, developing, as they did, primarily within the fantastic genre of late-twentieth-century fiction. Its themes and range set the stage for

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Reinforcing the long-standing connection between war and the gothic, Alexander observes how postmodern writing and film, most notably William Gibson \textit{Neuromancer} (1984) and Ridley Scott’s \textit{Blade Runner} film adaptation (1982), drew heavily on military discourse to reiterate how Cold War militarism fuelled the speculations and electronic representations of the Internet and cyber-space.

\textit{World War Z} updates this focus by speaking directly to the aftereffects of the War on Terror, especially since zombie outbreak begins in a world drastically affected by surveillance and legislation including the Patriot Act (2001). In the novel, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) does not anticipate the Solonom virus reaching the U.S., despite early incidents across Europe and South America. Whilst overtly engaged with the language of terrorism, the director of the CIA admits that, ‘[w]hen you think about the CIA, you probably imagine two of our most popular and enduring myths. The first is that our mission is to search the globe for any conceivable threat to the United States’ (45). Even with authorised surveillance, the CIA still has ‘real limitations and extremely finite assets, so why would [they] waste those assets chasing down each and every potential threat?’ (46). \textit{World War Z}, therefore, echoes key themes of twenty-first-century zombie cinema, including George A. Romero’s \textit{Land of the Dead} (2005), which Kyle William Bishop recognises as exploring the futile ambitions of the War on Terror. Faced with zombie invasion which replicates the abstract face of global terrorism, Brooks’ novel captures how concepts of morality and legality are drastically – and even irreversibly – undermined by expansive counter-terrorism and surveillance efforts.\footnote{Kyle William Bishop, ‘The New American Zombie Gothic: Road Trips, Globalisation, and the War on Terror’, \textit{Gothic Studies}, 17 (2015), 42-56.}
Yet, more significantly for this chapter, and for the new American civil war novel, *World War Z* depicts the Internet and its communication platforms being used a subversive channel for international sabotage. In fact, the novel opens with a cyber-attack. The global outbreak, called the ‘Great Panic’, begins after intergovernmental organisations, including the United Nations (UN), fail to recognise that isolated incidents are turning into a recurrent series of multi-continental outbreaks. The People’s Republic of China, as the origin country of the outbreak’s ‘Patient Zero’ case, suppresses all public information about initial contagion in rural Greater Chongquing. The novel’s first interviewee, a doctor attending to a twelve-year-old boy displaying ‘violent’ symptoms, recalls his arrest by the Ministry of State Security. In the novel’s fifth interview, the director of the CIA describes China’s censorship as ‘one of the greatest single Maskirovkas in the history of modern espionage’ (7, 47). China use their government-authorised surveillance and advanced technology to initiate a civil war in neighbouring Taiwan and ignite unrest against the sitting government:

the whole Taiwan Strait incident: the victory of the Taiwan National Independence Party, the assassination of the PRC defense minister, the build-up, the war threats, the demonstrations and subsequent crackdowns were all engineered by the Ministry of State Security and all of it was to divert the world’s eye from the real danger growing within China. (47)

As Timothy R. Fox has documented, *World War Z* displays cultural symptoms of ‘Yellow-Peril anxiety’, which, from the late-nineteenth-century and into the present, has perceived Asian competition and growth as an essentially ‘infectious agent whose presence disrupts the West’s grand narrative of progress and civilization’. 38 Given the presence of a hostile China in *World War Z*, it is easy to identify the novel as belonging to the specific genre of ‘future war story’ which Sharp identifies as prominent within Cold War fiction.

However, with the year 2006 being the year that the Bush administration began to fund research for the infamous and highly sophisticated American-Israeli ‘Stuxnet’

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virus computer worm, the novel also captures how intrusive technology and weaponry was becoming one of the key cultural themes most often explored by the contemporary imperial gothic. The year 2006, therefore, is a key year for conventions of the new American civil war novel. ‘Stuxnet’ was first exposed in 2010 but had probably been in covert development as an American-Israeli cyber-weapon since 2006. The virus was designed to target SCADA (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition) systems and reputedly caused significant disruption to the nuclear development programme of Iran at Natanz, especially its nuclear centrifuges. Reportedly created by teams working in the U.S. and Israel, the ‘Stuxnet’ virus was what Kim Zetter describes as ‘the first digital weapon’ which, due to its covert use and secrecy, would change the rules of international engagement. As one much-noted investigative article in Vanity Fair concluded, the event foreshadowed the destructive new face of twenty-first century warfare and ‘Stuxnet is the Hiroshima of cyber-war’.

The original argument of this chapter is that World War Z reflects these renewed U.S. concerns about the economic and technological networks within modern nations. The novel opens by imagining China initiating an act of cyber-espionage: a potentially lethal, instrumental and political act of force conducted through malicious computer code. When China’s Ministry of State Security initiates a military crisis with Taiwan, these outbreaks are only brought to public attention when a former Mossad agent, Jurgen Warmbrunn, based in Tel Aviv, Israel, is approached by Taiwan to decode a set of encrypted communications from China. Unable to decipher messages, the agent discovers that ‘the Taiwan crisis put an end to any intelligence gathering’. They only recognise the impending global threat when they consult intelligence from the ‘bureaucratic masterpiece’ of the UN and they find ‘incidents all over the world, all of them dismissed with “plausible” explanations’.

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39 The Stuxnet virus was both ingenious and effective, due to its three-stage operational processes. These comprised (1) a computer ‘worm’ (introduced by an infected USB flashdrive) that instigated the attack; (2) a ‘link file’ propagating the ‘worm’ across infected systems; and a ‘rootkit’ component which was designed to hide its files from the most advanced detection systems. James P. Farwell and Rafal Rohozinski, ‘Stuxnet and the Future of Cyber War’, Survival, 53 (2011), 23-40.


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World War Z, therefore, associates its zombie invasion narrative with cyber-defences and weapons and it highlights how domestic surveillance (ominous in itself) is also implicated in growing – and often exposing – digitised networks of data and information. Brooks’ invasion narrative is a model for a mode of the new American civil war novel, adopted by later texts such as The Country of Ice Cream Star, which confronts growing fears about invasive sabotage operations, especially through computer and ICT networks. Opening with a failed data mining operation by a Mossad agent, the novel acknowledges a significant factor in the U.S.-led War on Terror which, according to Yaakov Kats and Amir Bohbot, is often missing from American accounts: the arms race between Israel and its enemies, primarily Iran and Hezbollah, which is fuelled by a ‘combination of spies, commandos, satellites and cyber-warfare’. The character of Jurgen Warmbrunn reflects the merging of private and public sector funding which Kats and Bohbot describe in their account. As a former Mossad agent, he uses his expertise in to promote cyber-security. Running a private cyber-security company, with ‘customers in Taiwan’, he is the first to be assigned the request to decode China’s coded communications:

the text itself […] had to do with a new viral outbreak that first eliminated its victim, then reanimated his corpse into some kind of homicidal berzerker. […] I suspected a second layer of encryption, a code within a code […] It had to be a new weapon system or ultra-secret war plan. (33)

With this decryption, the novel introduces more nuanced terminology than comparable zombie narratives. Contagion is only revealed due to covert political offences which, relying on intrusive cyber-technology, has the aim of extracting confidential information from government agencies in rival countries. In World War Z, the Mossad agent’s use of data mining epitomises a new imperial gothic aesthetic which addresses public fears of subversive use of cyber-tools and how their future development may exceed the capacities of U.S. cyber-security.

Part of this reinvigoration of the post-apocalyptic sub-genre of this imperial gothic, as apparent in The Country of Ice Cream Star, includes the replacement of

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high-level information technology after the collapse of indispensable infrastructure. This also entails a necessary return to Cold War technology, including short-wave radios, in order tentatively to rebuild global communication. As discussed above, the expansion of the gothic to include themes of cyber-space and trans- and multinational scale Internet communication is what Alexander calls the ‘cyber-gothic’, as a mode founded on ‘science-fiction and films ranging from The Net (1995) to Serial Experiments: Lain (1998)’ which, in the context of media panics about the scale of cyber-communication, ‘mobilised various periodic technologies including surveillance hardware, virtual reality and underlying code, developing ideas from the internet upon which the web runs’. Whilst this mode of the cyber-gothic is largely compatible with the themes of World War Z, the novel takes cyber-gothic themes in a new direction. It develops cyber-gothic suspicion of digital and high-tech devices to the extreme by envisaging their redundancy, and eventual destruction, under zombie invasion.

However, the most innovative aspect of the novel is its focus on how technology and communication, rather than easing international relations, can lead to internal divisions in nations. In World War Z, the civil war motif is not restricted to the U.S. By imagining cyber-hacking operations between major world powers, Brooks’ novel foregrounds familiar tropes of the cyber-gothic, depicting the scale and potential of digital technology exceeding the national and international resources of government control. However, China’s censorship backfires on itself. The Taiwan civil war, generated to distract the CIA, inadvertently provokes nationalist tendencies within the borders of China itself, igniting a civil war which posits the ruling the PRC against an insurgent Chinese Nationalist Party (CNP). The prolonged conflict between the two rival factions is ended only by the CNP’s detonation of a nuclear bomb outside the Communist Party headquarters. This rebel nuclear strike leads to the end of the civil war, with the loyalists and rebels united to form the new nation of the United Federation of China. This unification begins a five-year long military campaign to retake mainland China. This new super-bloc which forms, echoing the Russian Federation in The Country of Ice Cream Star, indicates that the concerns of the imperial gothic have evolved to reflect new twenty-first century militarised factions and strategies which resonate with Clinton’s vision of ‘America’s Pacific Century’.

Additionally, whilst China is engaged in civil war, the U.S. is leading to the rebuilding the relationships which comprised the UN: indeed, the new U.S. capital has moved to Honolulu on the island of Oahu, Hawaii.

If anything, the new location of the U.S. capital indicates that the U.S. itself is turning in a new direction, away from the insular government and assumed military superiority which led to the strategic mistakes of the War on Terror. Instead, organised from the symbolic location of Honolulu, the U.S. enters a new pace of national development which stealthily evaluates its now-limited military capacities and only launches a national attack against the zombies when U.S. military leaders are ready and equipped. The core emphasis of U.S. military strategy is on measured pace, rather than high-tech speed and capacity. In the early phases of zombie war, the U.S. fails to adapt to post-zombie world relations. A new U.S. ‘Department of Strategic Resources’ (DSR) funds a failed Silicon Valley initiative called ‘Project Yellow Jacket’. As the DSR head recalls, ‘these Silicon Valley eggheads, all of them geniuses in their own field, convinced me that they had a “wonder weapon” that could win the war, theoretically, within forty-eight hours of deployment’. Defying predictions, it is the U.S. marines who make the key break-through in the zombie war. Using the ‘steel of recycled cars’, they develop a ‘cost-effective’ weapon which ‘looks like a fusion of shovel and double-bladed battle-axe’ (145-6). It is this basic weapon, rather than the promise Silicon Valley ‘wonder missile’, which proves most fatal to zombie hosts and gives the U.S. the confidence to announce, at a UN meeting in Honolulu that it will begin the three-year-long process of retaking the U.S. from the undead.

The setting in Hawaii is resonant of Clinton’s 2011 announcement of America’s Pacific Century from the same location and, with uncanny prescience, adds to the novel’s tension and future-facing gothic aesthetic. At a UN conference, the U.S. announces a plan to retake the North American continent from zombie inhabitants, framing their ventures as a necessary step for humanity as a whole: ‘Was this the legacy we would leave to our children? […] What kind of world would they rebuild? Would they rebuild at all?’ (267). In keeping with the imperial gothic mode, this announcement is made at a conference arranged for the ‘exchanging [of] warfighting tactics and technology’ (265). Organised at the secure location of ‘USS Saratoga’, a former U.S. aircraft carrier, international leaders are ‘anxious’ to see and compare containment strategies, including ‘the British method of fortified motorways’ as well as researching the possibility of reintroducing ‘some measure of international trade’
Whilst it is clear that technology is regressing to traditional military barricades and weapons, U.S. confidence in its military strategy does not wane. In fact, in contrast, the regression of technology means that the country is disposed to have more control over the flow of intelligence and, therefore, more accurate information to inform their proposed reclamation of the U.S. continent.

Diplomacy is only resumed through the gradual reconstruction of outdated technologies, most notably short-wave radio broadcasting from isolated military bases. International relations become more predictable as communication technology becomes more unreliable. Following the example of the South African government, which develops a national radio station called ‘Radio Ubuntu’, the U.S. encourages the UN to set up ‘Radio Free Earth’ to discourage misinformation about zombie contagion. Radio Free Earth is a thinly veiled reference to ‘Radio Free Europe’ or ‘Radio Liberty’ which, during the Cold War, sought to defy Soviet Union propaganda and bring Western news to Soviet satellite states. These radio stations mark a new phase of international relations. As one recruit to Radio Free Earth claims: ‘Ignorance was the enemy. Lies and superstition, misinformation, disinformation. Sometimes no information at all. Ignorance killed billions of people. Ignorance caused the Zombie War’ (194).

Technology and communication, therefore, are linked to the coordination of U.S. diplomacy, based in Hawaii, and it is the U.S. regaining of control over intelligence which is central to resistance to zombie contagion. World War Z warns that intelligence does not guarantee a successful containment strategy. In fact, governments tend to act upon intelligence without reassessing ground-level information. World War Z foreshadows the central logic which is at the heart of all

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44 The USS Saratoga (1956-1994), one of the most renowned vessels in the U.S. Navy, was a supercarrier with resonant political connections for the American public to various major U.S. naval campaigns and presidential events. Her sea-trials were held at Guantanamo Bay (1956). President Dwight D. Eisenhower observed displays of naval power from her decks (1957) as did President Richard M. Nixon (1969). She served as a centre of intelligence gathering in the Mediterranean after the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of the United Arab Emirates which threatened political stability in the Middle East (1970). She also participated (1972-1973) in the Vietnam conflict and in Operation Desert Storm (1990-1991).

major conflicts from the War on Terror onwards: high-level technology is not a guarantee of superior defences, in fact high technology can be a source of exposure and vulnerability.

This theme is key for the development of the new American civil war novel. Rather than following the lead of earlier examples of the imperial gothic, Brooks’ novel introduces a more modern pandemic narrative which foreshadows *The Country of Ice Cream Star*. Through the representation of ‘Radio Free Earth’, the legacy of Cold War radio propaganda traces the contours of a growing fear of the abstract and uncontrollable scale of global communications which are vulnerable to sabotage and can be repurposed as hostile weapons. This is most apparent in the meticulous reconstruction of communication technology after contagion. When the U.S. seeks to retake the North American continent, the restricted character of radio broadcasts becomes a strategic advantage. In other words, the primary antagonist of *World War Z* is technology itself. This is noted by a propaganda film director hired by the reformed U.S. government to produce morale-boosting films on American exploits against zombie hosts:

> Because Americans worship technology. It’s an inherent trait in the national zeitgeist. [...] We split the atom, we reached the moon, we’ve filled every household and business with more gadgets and gizmos then early sci-fi writers could ever have dreamed of [...] most Americans were still praying for the God of science to save them. (166)

This timeframe in the novel identifies zombie pandemic with the political context and legacy of the Cold War arms and space race. The zombies are a new opportunity for America to prove and develop new military technologies which can defy this threat to American stability and world order. However, *World War Z* depicts the unravelling of Cold War victory. Advanced technology cannot overpower the enemy, instead technological regression and more astute and precise military strategy can quarantine the zombie hosts.

Unlike earlier instances of the imperial gothic, the American frontier in *World War Z* does not represent American superiority. In the first official military engagement of the zombie war, the ‘Battle of Yonkers’, the U.S. military lose their territory to the invading zombies. The narrator of *World War Z* cynically reports:
I know ‘professional’ historians like to talk about how Yonkers represented a ‘catastrophic failure of the modern military apparatus,’ how it proved the old adage that armies perfect the art of fighting the last war just in time for the next one. Personally, I think that’s a big ‘ole sack of it. Sure, we were unprepared, our tools, our training, everything I just talked about, all one class-A gold-standard clusterfuck, but the weapon that really failed wasn’t something that rolled off an assembly line. It’s as old as … I don’t know, I guess as old as war. It’s fear, dude, just fear. (103)

Similarly, an on-the-ground soldier recalls the failed technological interventions: ‘Land Warrior, high-tech, high-priced, high-profile, netro-fucking-centric Land Warrior’ (101). The ‘shock-and-awe’ tactics of the U.S. military fail against the brain-dead zombies. ‘But what if the enemy can’t be shocked and awed? Not just won’t, but biologically can’t! That’s what happened that day outside New York City, that’s the failure that almost lost us the whole damn war’ (104). These zombies swarm on a large scale like bees or ants, piling relentlessly upon one another to scale the city of Yonkers and flow through its streets like a flood of lost humanity. The impotence of the U.S. army is a disconcerting failure of the values of national victory and progress represented by the American frontier. This chapter recognises *World War Z* as the current zenith of the American imperial gothic’s transition from a localised victory narrative to an international defence narrative between super-blocs, a shift which reflects growing distrust of the destructive potential for technology and hostile changes in international relations.

*World War Z* makes it clear early on that rebuilding global communications is a long-term project without the competitive zeal of the Cold War. Nowhere is this more apparent than on the International Space Station (ISS): ‘Radio Free Earth’ is made possible by the astronauts who help keep essential casual satellites in orbit for human use during zombie war. When the war begins, as one the surviving astronauts recalls, ‘[n]obody had a better view of what was happening than us’. Replacement crews are no longer sent from earth and the ISS crew are divided into two groups: those who would return to Earth and those who would stay behind on ISS. The ISS is crucial to the climactic U.S. victory over the zombies; but, to attain this victory, the astronaut crew realise that they have to sacrifice the vast technology of the ‘ISS [as]
one of the greatest marvels of human engineering’. Solutions could only be found by focusing on the most well positioned satellites in orbit and diverting all resources into these satellites:

Our plan was never to save them all. That was unrealistic and unnecessary. All we had to do was concentrate on the systems most vital to the war effort, just a few dozen birds that had to remain aloft. That alone was worth the risk of staying. (255-6)

Many of World War Z’s dynamic action sequences involve lack of control over technology. The astronauts work hard to keep devices including robotic ‘spy birds’ in orbit, with spy-birds equipped with high-level surveillance technology to provide on-the-ground views of battle. However, they have ‘no control over what the spy birds [choose] to observe’. After the world divides into Cold War-style rival factions, technological competition cannot resolve the crisis. Indeed, there is no mythical weapon which can return the world to stability.

This sets World War Z as a generic model for later post-apocalyptic texts in the late 2000s and early 2010s. As Chapter Six of this thesis argues, the relationship between closed borders and technological communication grows more acute during this decade in the post-apocalyptic genre. Even the representation of radio broadcasting, through ‘Radio Free Earth’, focuses on the erratic and unpredictable glitches which lead to delays in communication. The ‘Information Reception’ team for the early broadcasts of ‘Radio Free Earth’ are forced, by necessity, to transmit data ‘across conventional, open, civilian bands, [with] many of these bands […] crammed with ordinary people’s cries for help’. All transmissions are required to be ‘devoted to official business’; as key information is shared between countries, operators are forced to ignore the ‘millions of wretched souls scattered throughout [the] planet, all screaming into their private radio sets’ (198). With this focus on radio, and on the static white noise of initial broadcasts, the post-pandemic world contrasts with the issues of global communication, surveillance and sabotage which are the focus of the opening of the World War Z.

As an early example of the new American civil war novel, this text highlights a subtle and yet decisive shift in public and cultural suspicions of cyber-technology. After zombie invasion restricts global communication, radio symbolises more than
post-apocalyptic regression. Instead, it indicates that diplomacy is becoming more restrained and predictable. The radio broadcasts quickly combat ‘misinformation’. As the operator describes, ‘Medical? Scientific? Military? Spiritual? Psychological?’ (196). The transcription of data is slow and methodical: ‘It was a maddening grind, eighteen, sometimes twenty hours a day. […] There was so much raw data, so many dispatches arriving every minute [about] basic survival: how to purify water, create an indoor greenhouse, culture and process mold spore for penicillin’ (196). The information which can be shared across these civilian radio bands is often in English, and from America, so that Radio Free Earth can only disseminate information as they employ translators for multilingual transmissions.

‘Radio Free Earth’ is a decidedly multi-national organisation and, with translators including Barati Palshigar based in India, the broadcaster benefits from invaluable skills from a variety of countries and ethnic groups. However, by integrating translators into Radio Free Earth, this representation is a way of reaffirming U.S. oversight over the intergovernmental exchange of news and intelligence. This plot device sees the collapse of ICT and other digital technology become a positive international trend for the U.S. They use the slow pace of static radio broadcasts as a way to oversee the information being shared between countries. This reassertion of U.S. leadership, through ‘Radio Free Earth’, occurs just as the authority of the People’s Republic of China crumbles under pro-democratic resurgence. This contrasts with the beginning of the novel which centres on U.S. rivals, including China, becoming more capable and robust cyber-operatives than the CIA. China convinces the CIA that the Taiwan civil war is the greatest regional threat. As the CIA director recalls, ‘we were so convinced that World War III was about to break out in the Taiwan Strait, that we diverted other intel assets from countries where undead outbreaks were just starting to unfold’ (47-8).

By the novel’s conclusion, World War Z has used conventions of the imperial gothic to construct a new national fantasy, through which the U.S. benefits from military investment during the Cold War in durable communication infrastructure. The appeal of this imperial gothic fantasy becomes more comprehensible in light of increasing frequent cyber-attacks since 2006, such as the major 2014 hack against Google. The central trope of this imperial gothic fantasy is that cyber-technology, as
a contemporary source of military prestige and economic growth for China, is in the long-term unsustainable. *World War Z* imagines that investment in these technologies will prove to be short-sighted and even self-destructive. This premonition is even more apparent in its representation of the key regional players in the Middle East, including Israel and Iran. Writing in 2008, Paula Newton claims that ‘intelligence officials in Britain and the U.S. believe Hezbollah sleeper cells could use their computer expertise to launch a cyber-attack, on the orders of Iran’. In *World War Z*, this indirect sabotage within cyber-space is replaced by a return to nuclear weapons after zombie contagion. Ultimately, *World War Z* embodies contemporary fears and anxieties concerning the advances of cyber-technology through mobilising iconic gothic features of militarised borders. Only by embracing the loss of technology, and by controlling the flow of communication across borders, can the world led by the U.S. realise a future – a future with more predictable, if equally hostile, international relations.

In keeping with the novels examined in this thesis, these themes illuminate early fears of cyber-war in the information age and reflect a unique fusion of old and new Gothic traditions. When *World War Z*’s various sequences are taken as a whole, they can be read as disclosing specific anxieties concerning the changing character of warfare. Cyber-hacking in *World War Z* is a source of disinformation which magnifies the consequences of early outbreak. In the mayhem, military and intelligence agencies cannot discern which crises are artificial and which are genuine. However, as the novel progresses, these same agencies adapt to more fragmentary communication systems which allow them to oversee and even control information being shared beyond U.S. borders. The Cold War-style factions which develop after zombie war offer a nostalgic microcosm of international relations before the information age. In a similar vein to *The Country of Ice Cream Star*, this factional world scene shows that key tenets of this mode of the American imperial gothic were emerging even before speculations of a ‘New Cold War’ became mainstream.

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46 Maya Rhodan, ‘Nearly 5 Million Google Passwords Leaked on Russian Site’, Time, 10th September 2014  

47 Paula Newton, ‘Hezbollah and Cyber War’, CNN, 14th March 2008  

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5. Conclusion: Imperial Gothic and American Civil War Novels

This chapter has illuminated a set of key themes which are central to the new American civil war novel. The central paradox which concerns the new American civil war novel is that as global communication becomes more accessible, the U.S. becomes more susceptible to national conflict and division. Evincing a new development in the American imperial gothic, *World War Z* and *The Country of Ice Cream Star* adapt formerly patriotic representations of the American frontier to express growing cultural fear and anxiety about the ominous influence of cyber-technology and the prospect of cyber-conflict, espionage and sabotage. Adapting tropes of post-nuclear American fiction which typically symbolise patriotism, Newman’s novel depicts an American frontier in which news and intelligence, as well as censorship, become a crucial weapon of warfare. This premise reflects an anticipation that hostile international relations may be renewed between former Cold War powers. However, *The Country of Ice Cream Star* forewarns that these tensions may never escalate into overt conflict. Instead, they register the fear that sabotage and espionage may become more underhand – with direct confrontation never materialising as warfare becomes a matter of subversive tactics. As Fred Botting states, the ‘gothic figures, always responsive to changing times, continue to serve as sites of projection and fantasy, metaphors of form and medium, screens of anxiety and desire operating at the limits of norm and meaning’.48 The generic tropes of nuclear fiction, including the invasion of the U.S. by a hostile power, are used to work through contemporary anxieties about exposed borders and infrastructure in the age of cyber-technology and information.

However, this is not a new theme which has arisen with recent international events, including Russian re-militarisation. Instead, earlier texts, including Brooks’ influential *World War Z*, establish a generic pattern in which a desperate siege becomes a more subversive open-ended engagement which relies upon intelligence. As the virulent threat of cyber-attack becomes a redundant threat after the collapse of cyber-infrastructure, the U.S. is able to repurpose military devices from the Cold War

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for a limited post-zombie era of communication. Ultimately, the Cold War has re-emerged in post-apocalyptic fiction as the threat of cyber-attack and cyber warfare has become more prominent. *World War Z*, therefore, is a milestone text which captures a set of imperial gothic conventions which promise to grow more pronounced in future gothic fiction and texts. With their representation of the American frontier, these texts reveal that the War on Terror, with its focus on surveillance, was the first in a series of watershed events with which the post-apocalyptic imperial gothic engaged during the late 2000s and early 2010s. As renewed tensions between key world players, most notably the U.S., China and Russia, become more unpredictable, it will be both intriguing and significant to see how these tropes continue to evolve to reflect U.S. uncertainty about the direction of the twenty-first century. While this chapter has demonstrated how the new American civil war genre looks outwards, and addresses U.S. international relations, the next chapter turns to how the genre addresses the consequences of a formidable global crisis with long aftereffects: the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.
Chapter Four

‘Search and Seizure’: Economic Crisis and Suburban Colonies in Lionel Shriver’s *The Mandibles* (2016) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Heart Goes Last* (2015)

1. Real Estate, Mortgage Debt and the New American Civil War Novel

In an approving *New York Times* review, Ruth Franklin praises Lionel Shriver’s novel *The Mandibles: A Family, 2029-2047* (2016), centred on the eponymous Brooklyn family who lose their fortune amidst a global currency war, as a ‘searing exemplar of a disquieting new genre – call it dystopian finance fiction’. With this proposed sub-genre, Franklin joined early reception which praised Shriver’s novel as a timely ‘financial dystopia’ reflecting upon ‘events of 2008 and the financial collapse that occurred’. Yet *The Mandibles*’ dystopian scenario – the global boycott of the dollar and the devolution of national power in the U.S. – does not follow financial speculations on Wall Street, but rather from U.S. national debt and from presidential misjudgments at the White House.

Each chapter in this thesis examines how an identified sub-set of contemporary U.S. novels interrogate themes of conspiracy, reactionary politics and populism through the post-apocalyptic genre. This chapter argues that the new American civil war novel is a genre which is directly concerned with the vulnerability of U.S. infrastructure to hostile sabotage by foreign nations. It has emerged as a key post-apocalyptic genre at a political moment in the twenty-first century when technology

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See also Stephanie Merritt’s equally positive review, ‘The Mandibles: A Family, 2029-2047 by Lionel Shriver – review’, *The Guardian*, 8th May 2016

and communication are developing at a rapid rate which exceeds the formal capacities of U.S. political and diplomatic institutions.

However, *The Mandibles* is an especially illuminating contribution to the genre. The novel imagines U.S. secession, with the eventual transformation of Nevada into the ‘Free State of Nevada’, as the outcome of the 2029 global currency war. The abstract crises of finance capitalism have tangible and calamitous effects upon the U.S. nation. Closed borders are erected around Nevada. Indeed, during currency war, President Alvarado renders all treasury bonds invalid, and turns the U.S. into a global pariah as increasing numbers of American citizens (in a reversal of current U.S.-Mexico border tensions) enter Mexico as illegal economic migrants. As noted in the previous chapter, the central focus of the American civil war novel is ‘borderless’ communication meeting resistance from closed national and state borders. This becomes a profound post-apocalyptic motif for interrogating the political implications of developments in new media and communication. In *The Mandibles*, this motif takes a different form. ‘Borderless’ finance capital meets resistance from closed state borders and, most crucially for this chapter, from self-organizing colonies which seek to preserve gentrified Brooklyn.

*The Mandibles* depicts the subprime mortgage crisis as a white, middle-class predicament and casts this scenario as leading to U.S. secession with the formation of the ‘Free State of Nevada’. The novel, therefore, adopts the motif of the seceded state or colony to comment on the legacy of the 2008 financial crisis and the momentum it gave to misconceptions about responsibility for the financial crisis. Specifically, these misconceptions overlook that the worst affected homeowners were African American or minority subprime homeowners. Ultimately, *The Mandibles* is a new American civil war novel which illuminates how financial crisis can become a catalyst for reactionary political ideas about the U.S.’s future.

Expanding this argument, this chapter compares *The Mandibles* with another novel utilizing similar conventions: Margaret Atwood’s *The Heart Goes Last* (2015), published in the year before Shriver’s novel. Commentary on Atwood’s novel has been sceptical of the novel’s critical place or offering within the post-apocalyptic genre. As the following section discusses, this novel uses similar generic conventions, including a focus on an insular colony, to critique cultural perceptions of middle-class homeownership associated with the subprime mortgage crisis. *The Mandibles* and *The Heart Goes Last* imagine finance crisis as a national disaster which leads to internal
hostilities and divisions. Market crisis is invisible in both novels, and yet at the same time middle-class destitution – predominantly through home foreclosure – becomes synonymous with U.S. national collapse. The potential recovery of the middle-class becomes dependent on the revival of the very market forces which led to economic recession. Both novels, therefore, exceed the remit of the ‘finance novel’ which, Arne de Boever claims, has been experiencing a contemporary revival since the 2008 credit crisis.\(^3\) Instead, financial crisis in both novels brings the nation to the edge of catastrophe, before its destructive scale is concealed behind a set of other calamities (including, in Shriver’s case, a U.S. immigration amnesty with Mexico). Since these calamities have a particularly deleterious effect upon middle-class America, whose plight in both novels is synonymous with the fate of the nation (at the expense of minority groups), financial capitalism is ultimately recast as a redemptive authority with the potential to return national stability.

In this chapter, the new American civil war novel addresses new kinds of anti-establishment sensibility which promise to grow more acute in the globalised world. Through imagining the loss of middle-class suburbia, *The Mandibles* and *The Heart Goes Last* reflect how understanding of American homeownership – and who has the right to American homeownership – can be used to inflame extreme or reactionary predictions about America’s economy and future.

### 2. From Economic Crisis to Civil War: *The Mandibles* and *The Heart Goes Last*

The eponymous Mandibles dynasty are the focus of Shriver’s novel. All four generations of the Brooklyn-based family – from great-grandfather Douglas Mandible to great-grandson Willing Mandible – live through foreclosure until, by midway through the novel, the family are reduced to sharing one townhouse in drought-affected New York. Finally evicted from this house at gunpoint, by a former neighbour who has lost his own home to foreclosure, the Mandibles join destitute encampments in Prospect Park. In Franklin’s description, ‘homeownership, the foundation of the

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American dream, proves to be the longest-lasting currency’ in Shriver’s future U.S..\(^4\) Brooklyn, therefore, becomes the preserve of the middle-class which is rapidly losing its status. The relationship between real estate, mortgage debt, and American literary fiction is an ambivalent one. Whilst critics including Annie McClanahan have begun to trace representations of homeownership in genres including horror and science-fiction, American suburbia as more often seen as a less stark – if still imprisoning – residential landscape of sterile predictability.\(^5\) Writing on Peter Weir’s film *The Truman Show* (1998), for instance, Robert Beuka claims that this ‘consistent focus on suburbia as an American dystopia’ in popular and political culture is ‘more than coincidence and […] reflects our uneasy relationship to an environment heavily invested with, even defined by middle-class America’s cultural aspirations and anxieties’.\(^6\) Yet whereas *The Truman Show* and comparable films focus on late-twentieth-century fears around middle-class conformity, Shriver’s *The Mandibles* depicts middle-class America in grave economic and national peril. However, *The Mandibles* uses the sheer scale of economic crisis to adapt and reverse these fears about American suburbia.

A key theme in the new American civil war novel is the presence of the closed colony which means that news and accurate information are not shared across the U.S.. The novels in this chapter expand this theme by imagining inaccurate information about economic crisis being authorised by the U.S. presidential administration. In *The Mandibles*, the eponymous dynasty loses its fiscal assets after a cataclysmic stock market crash. When U.S. President Alvarado ‘resets’ the national debt it leads to intensified national debate about its economic validity which, in turn, encourages the revival of American military confidence and triumphalism. The Mandibles’ only hope of continuing to live the American Dream arrives with the separation of the ‘Free State of Nevada’, which promotes libertarian economic policy including a ‘Flat tax of 10


percent. And that’s not 10 percent plus sales tax, property tax, state and local, Medicare tax, and Social Security. Ten percent, period’ (385). The Mandibles, therefore, highlights a key theme for the new American civil war novel by responding to the profound turmoil of the decade in America after the 2008 financial crisis. American militarism increases through economic decline. It highlights that the consequences of economic crisis are not solely financial – a comparable focus to Atwood’s The Heart Goes Last.

As the casino capitalism of Las Vegas becomes the last retreat of America’s besieged middle-class in The Mandibles, the ‘city of sin’ also redeems Stan and Charmaine, the young protagonists of Atwood’s novel who, at the beginning of The Heart Goes Last, are first-time house buyers in a new starter home. After losing this new home to foreclosure in an ‘overnight’ crash, the couple sign up for the secretive Positron Project which, demanding that they forfeit their lives in the outside world, offers them the lifestyle of nineteen-fifties suburbia in the town of Consilience. Just as authorized news and media broadcasts cannot be trusted in The Mandibles, a media advertisement persuades the couple to sign up the Positron Project. This opening vividly captures the distrust of formal media or journalistic and advertising platforms which is a recurrent feature of the new American civil war novel. A television advertisement first offers a series of homely images of ‘young couples, holding hands, energetic and smiling. Pastel clothing, springlike’. A voiceover intones:

At the Positron Project in the town of Consilience [...] [w]e offer not only full employment but also protection from the dangerous elements that afflict so many at this time. Work with like-minded others! Help solve the nation’s problems of joblessness and crime while solving your own!7

Since this façade of suburban life conceals the Project’s illegal exploitation of residents – through, among other activities, organ harvesting – the original source of the couple’s predicament (the precarious housing market) is displaced by the profit-

7 Margaret Atwood, The Heart Goes Last (London: Virago Press, 2015), pp. 34-5. Henceforth, page references are given in the text. Later in the novel, with background music playing Judy Garland’s ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow’, the town’s name is explained on the ‘Consilience TV’ channel as: ‘CONSILIENCE = CON + RESILIENCE, DO TIME NOW, BUY TIME FOR OUR FUTURE’ (157-8).
driven aims of the Positron Project. As the novel concludes with Stan and Charmaine rewarded with their own private house, for their role in exposing the Positron Project (after Stan smuggles himself into Las Vegas), the origins of economic crisis are never interrogated and homeownership is separated from the burden of mortgage debt. In this respect, Atwood’s novel is especially significant for this chapter’s exploration of the new American civil war novel. Foregrounding middle-class strife at the expense of finance, both novels use the tropes of closed borders and colonies to inversely eclipse one of the major origins of the U.S.’s ‘shrinking’ middle-class, namely the transformation of mortgages into free-market sources of financial speculation. Moreover, since both novels equate white, middle-class homeownership with national prosperity, *The Mandibles* and *The Heart Goes Last* provide an opening for a timely critical debate about how loss of homeownership and foreclosure risks being co-opted into ‘dystopian’ visions of U.S. breakdown which reinforce conservative predictions.

3. Subprime Mortgage Crisis: Between Disaster and Dystopia

Published after protests by organisations including the TEA Party (‘Taxed Enough Already’ Party), these texts provide a rigorous vantage point from which to study the generational questions after the 2008 financial crisis. These questions include how finance – and finance crisis – can influence future American democracy and encourage reactionary politics or nationalism. Before examining the importance of *The Mandibles* and *The Heart Goes Last* to the new American civil war genre, this chapter will provide a brief economic and political context of the subprime mortgage crisis (2007-10). The fall and bankruptcy of the investment bank of Lehman Brothers on 15th September 2008 was not the first event or milestone in the 2008 financial crisis. Over the previous decade, against the backdrop of a prospering housing market, mortgage lenders had been offering low-income Americans subprime mortgages. In June 2002, President Bush announced an ambitious tax credit and domestic programme, the ‘American Dream Down-Payment Fund’ to increase African-
American and Hispanic homeowners. However, these borrowers were penalised when, in late 2006, the Federal Reserve began to raise interest rates against the prospect of an American property bubble. As Andrew Lawson documents in his article on ‘Neoliberal Suffering in the Great Recession’:

Since the late nineteen-sixties, U.S. homeowner debt had been parcelled up and sold to investors around the world in the form of mortgage-backed securities. However, now that bad debts were so dispersed in a variety of complex financial instruments – including debt obligations and credit default swaps – that lenders and investors did not know precisely where the most ‘toxic’ risks were located.10

Between 2007 to 2008, when panic began to grip the housing lenders, four million low- and middle-income American homeowners lost their homes Alex Schafran observes how ‘commentators [...] reached for the pejorative urban language upon which generations of Americans have been weaned—slum, blight, ghetto—and begun unleashing them on the suburbs’ in cities including Cleveland, Ohio and Detroit, Michigan.11

Political commentators seized on the foreclosure crisis as a means of envisaging the ‘shrinking’, ‘crippling’, or inevitable ‘destruction’ of middle-class America.12 The subprime crisis was widely perceived as a force hastening the demise of American prosperity and ambition. However, whilst responses to the crisis included

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left-wing demonstrations which demanded measures against economic inequality, including ‘Occupy Wall Street (2011)’, public responses and campaigns leaned in an opposing political direction. As discussed in Chapter Two, ‘Populism and American Zombies in Colson Whitehead’s Zone One (2011) and Max Brooks’ Zombie Survival Guide (2003)’, on 12th September 2009, the ‘TEA’ Party (‘Taxed Enough Already’ Party) marched on Washington, D.C. The original ‘Tea Party Rant’ (by CNBC pundit Rick Santelli from the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange) explicitly opposed Obama’s ‘Homeowners Affordability and Stability Plan’ (2009), intended to help homeowners avoid foreclosure (‘How many of you want to pay for your neighbor’s mortgage?’). Whilst decrying Obama’s proposed health-care reforms, the march communicated a more ominous message. As Will Bunch, author of The Backlash (2010), recalls, placard images of the Taxpayer March, including ‘Photoshopped pictures of a young Barack Obama with Adolf Hitler’ framed the inauguration of the U.S.’s first African American president, as an omen of disaster and dictatorship. This rhetoric of the Tea Party (as a prominent instance of ‘backlash’ populism) situates homeownership at the intersection of national catastrophe, racism and state intervention which threatens the American Dream.

Critics, including Sean Brayton, have productively illuminated the lineage of US ‘racial dystopias’, and their culmination in the ‘spate of Hollywood films’, including I Am Legend (2007), ‘that visualise “multicultural” landscapes in a calamitous near future’. However, The Mandibles and The Heart Goes Last offer a different perspective which is especially pertinent for the decade after the 2008 financial crisis. They depict how economic crisis can fuel cultural disillusionment and division. They imagine this through two generic motifs in the new American civil war.

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novel: state nationalism (in which citizens are encouraged to identify with specific states or colonies rather than the U.S. Union) and inflammatory rhetoric under the guise of patriotism. Both novels seize on foreclosure as the blight of the American homeowner which exemplifies the U.S. national predicament and makes their rescue (from destitution) synonymous with national recovery. Closed states or colonies attempt to revive failed or outdated economic models. In The Mandibles, the ‘Free State of Nevada’ attempts to revive free-market capitalism with low tax. In The Heart Goes Last, the Positron Project, with its reconstruction of nineteen-fifties American suburbia, demands that residents forfeit all contact from the outside world. With this focus on closed colonies and borders, these novels enable a distinctly modern critique which, representative of the new American civil war novel, asks how economic crisis encourages ideas and platforms of anti-democratic persuasion.

Nevertheless, high-profile reviews have struggled to make sense of The Heart Goes Last in which recession wipes out savings and leaves aspirational Americans, including young couple Stan and Charmaine with their foreclosed ‘starter two-bedroom’ property, unemployed and living out their existence amidst a now-barren US whilst moving across the country in a ‘third-hand Honda’ in search for food and shelter (3). As Sarah Lyall observes in her review for The Guardian, this ‘chilling’ dystopian premise quickly turns on itself to become a ludicrous dystopian parody in Atwood’s novel: ‘a strange quasi sex-romp concerned almost exclusively with erotic power, kinky impulses and the perversity of desire’.16 Indeed, Shriver herself offers a dismissive Financial Times review which questions the ‘internal logic’ of Atwood’s parallel world: the ‘whole model of putting a labour force in prison, with guards, for six months a year doesn’t logically rack up a big profit. […] Yet this text makes frequent mention of Positron’s “investors”, who presumably expect dividends’.17


17 Lionel Shriver, ‘“The Heart Goes Last”, by Margaret Atwood’, Financial Times, 25th September 2015. <https://www.ft.com/content/bd29a288-5e2b-11e5-9846-de406cbb3712> [accessed 13th October 2018]. Similarly, Cecilia Mancuso, echoing earlier rebukes from science-fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin, debates Atwood’s claim that ‘speculative fiction is the antithesis of those cheesy, teenage male escapist fantasies’, and instead sees The Heart Goes Last as ‘mired in the territory of pulp fiction’ – and undermined by a conclusion which departs from ‘the narrative and thematic work done by the rest of the novel’. The review, originally published
However, the representation of Consilience’s propaganda in *The Heart Goes Last* highlights the novel’s generic significance. As discussed in the thesis introduction, the central paradox which concerns the new American civil war novel is that as global communication becomes more integrated, and access to global news increases, the U.S. becomes more susceptible to national conflict. *The Heart Goes Last* is an example of a new American civil war novel in which financial crisis encourages rumour and conspiracy. Specifically, it depicts how rumour and conspiracy can become factors which lead to irrevocable divisions in the U.S. nation. This theme is initially apparent from outlandish events in the novel which confuse the protagonists and prevent them distinguishing fact from fiction and lies from reality. Once the couple enter the Positron Project, the novel unravels an implausible tangle of extramarital affairs, as Stan is enslaved by a woman named Jocelyn who, after implicating the couple in a blackmail plot, is revealed to be a double agent working to expose the profit-driven motives of Positron investors. After Charmaine sees the television advertisement for the Positron Project, whilst eking out her pitiful waitressing salary at ‘PixelDust’ Bar, the couple enter the newly-built town of Consilience with the hope of ‘gainful employment, three wholesome meals a day, a lawn to tend, a hedge to trim’ (56).

Behind the well-kept neighbourhoods, the couple discover that Consilience is essentially a penal colony, with an adjoining Positron Prison where residents like Stan and Charmaine, who have ‘alternates’ in Positron, ‘take turns being prisoners – one month inside the prison, one month in the Levittown-like suburbia that surrounds it’. Beneath this ‘middle-class comfort’, Positron is exposed as an ambitious player in a global organ-trafficking ring, and a key supplier in ‘the big market for transplant material among aging millionaires’ (56, 173). Charmaine is drawn into this black organ market when, unbeknown to Stan, she is recruited by Positron as a ‘Special Procedure’ administrator (of lethal injections to supposedly disruptive prisoners) and becomes an oblivious pawn in the project’s ‘main operation in Las Vegas’. Atwood describes the procedure, which gives the novel its title, as follows:

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18 Ibid.

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He strains upward. His eyes are horrified, but not for long. His face relaxes; he turns his gaze from her to the ceiling, the white blank ceiling, which is no longer white and blank for him. He smiles. She times the procedure: five minutes of ecstasy. It’s more than a lot of people get in their whole lifetimes.

Then he’s unconscious. Then he stops breathing. The heart goes last. (92-5)

*The Heart Goes Last*, therefore, is not a story of financial crisis. Instead, national peril and decline, through economic recession is imagined, perversely, within the conventions of a domestic novel in which middle-class angst and tribulation is elevated to the level of the apocalypse.

Atwood’s novel is attuned to the changing relationship between government and its institutions and how they can become complicit with reactionary politics. The Consilience project represents a key tension, apparent across the new American civil war genre, between accurate news and informed U.S. citizens. *The Heart Goes Last* is a novel in which American homeowners seek to regain their former status. However, to do this, they implicate themselves in a closed project which relies upon disinformation and propaganda. Charmaine is blackmailed into administering a lethal injection to Stan (assumed to be dead), who is then shipped to Las Vegas, by Jocelyn’s double agents, as a live-sized sex doll in the image of Elvis Presley (with these ‘Possibilibots’ another profitable enterprise for Positron) (372). Armed with incriminating ‘extensive document trails and video footage’, Stan exposes the Positron Project on Lucinda Quant’s reality TV show, *Home Front*, and sets social media ‘ablaze’ (‘Prison abuses! Organ harvesting! Sex slaves created by neurosurgery! Plans to suck the blood of babies’) (388). Yet whilst the novel may read as ‘escapist’ fantasy, this conclusion fulfils Stan and Charmaine’s frustrated efforts – which structure the entire novel – to reverse their destitution after foreclosure, and to integrate themselves into the aspirational middle-class which economic recession had prohibited them from joining at the beginning of *The Heart Goes Last*.

This conclusion reflects a consistent theme in the new American civil war novel. This theme is protocols and algorithms of social media becoming a political influence. As Ito Mal expands, under this phenomenon, ‘populism [has] has fundamentally changed’. Users are ‘engaged in an endless algorithmically shaped
battle to co-construct the “voice of the people”’.

However, the unique angle of *The Heart Goes Last* lies in how this use of social media follows censorship in the closed colony of Consilience. From the novel’s opening, the U.S. is a lost cause, and as Ed declares during Stan and Charmaine’s induction into Positron (which reads as a eulogy for their deceased nation), a ‘festering scrap heap, out beyond the Consilience gates. People are starving. Scavenging, pilfering, dumpster-diving. Is that any way for a human being to live?’ (44). The wasteland which the U.S. has become is beyond redemption, and resonates with ‘thoroughly familiar survivalist scenarios’ and barren horizons which Ursula Heise claims are now populating the post-apocalyptic and dystopian genres, and making the genre politically defunct by ‘failing to outline a persuasive alternative’. However, by retreating into Consilience, Stan and Charmaine disrupt the scale of national devastation and, instead, constrict this horizon to an illusion of domesticity which offers them a false promise of middle-class status. After the loss of their new starter house, Charmaine pines for domestic comfort, and wistfully recalls her ‘sofa with the flowered throw pillows that [she] had taken such trouble to match’ whilst sleeping in the Honda with Stan (10).

A key argument in this thesis is that new American civil war novels do not offer ‘end time’ visions of apocalyptic catastrophe but, rather, a series of imagined futures in which technology and finance, rather than assuring U.S. stability, slide the U.S. further and further towards secession or civil war. *The Heart Goes Last* is unique within this canon of novels since it does not depict explicit civil war. However, it offers an insightful premonition of this type of conflict by imagining Consilience to be a product of an increased U.S. wealth divide between a U.S. elite and U.S. majority. Throughout the novel, perceived threats to the oasis of Consilience are enough to calm Charmaine’s reservations about her assigned role at Positron: ‘it’s only the worst criminals’, she’s told, the ‘troublemakers, the ones who’d ruin Consilience if they had the chance. It’s a last resort. They’d reassured her a lot about that’ (94). Middle-class aspiration, and wilful blindness to mass elimination of inconvenient residents in

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19 Maly, [https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/algorithmic-populism-activism](https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/algorithmic-populism-activism) [accessed 14th May 2019].

Consilience, arrives at full circle when Charmaine is settled with Stan and their infant daughter, Winnie, in their own home at the novel’s conclusion. Contrasting her present idyll to her former life, she ‘tries not to think about [...] the work she used to do, back in her other life at Positron Prison’, concluding that ‘[t]hinking too much about this could really spoil everything, which would be selfish’ (413). The external condition of the U.S., and the compromises which the couple have to make inside Consilience, become secondary to the overriding priority that Stan and Charmaine, as former homeowners, return to a colony which promises to protect them from economic recession.

This U.S. wealth divide is a crucial motif for the new American civil war novel. It reflects the populist sentiment which, according to Norris and Inglehart, ‘divid[e]s “Us” (the “real people”) against “Them” (“Not Us”), stoking anxiety, corroding mutual tolerance and poisoning the humour reservoir of social trust’. Just as The Mandibles eliminates the subprime mortgage borrower from a scenario of global currency war, so Atwood’s panorama of economic recession becomes a search to regain the privileges of a (now defunct) middle-class idyll of American suburbia. The Heart Goes Last marks out the contours of a new critical convergence. Whilst literary critics have long engaged in the study of antebellum domesticity, and joined media critics in scrutinising the American white middle class of the twentieth century, Atwood’s novel points to how the prospect of suburbia’s collapse (through emptying suburban neighbourhoods) seems to enhance and amplify conservative predictions in a ‘climate of fear’.

In other words, this chapter proposes that Stan’s and Charmaine’s discovery of a ‘re-conditioned’ 1950s suburbia in the form of the ‘constructed’ Consilience is the actual dystopian future in the face of specifically economic disintegration. In an earlier era, for example, Stan and Charmaine’s antics might have been understood as a rebellion against what Tony Tanner calls suburbia’s ‘compromised environment’, with their off-the-wall liaisons defying the anomalies at the heart of prosperous suburban life. However, since this prosperity is now in short supply The Heart Goes Last reads more like a frantic, and yet ultimately futile, effort from Stan and

\[21\] Norris and Inglehart, Cultural Backlash, pp. 7-8.

Charmaine to regain white, middle-class suburban privilege. When they enter the Positron Project, this proves to be a hollow ambition since the suburb and the suburban house co-exist with a prison cell. Their renewed status as homeowners is only temporary so that instead of regaining middle-class credentials they enter a criminal underclass and instead of domestic comfort they are resigned to austere communal living.

_The Heart Goes Last_ thus signals the creation of a new and generically important suburban dystopia which requires a re-imagination of sterile American suburbia. Atwood’s novel counteracts this familiar indictment of suburban homogeneity with its depiction of American suburbia as a material ruin frayed by abandonment and decay. When Stan and Charmaine are first evicted from their newly-bought house after the real estate crash, the ‘houses on either side of theirs [are] already empty, the looters [having] been through them, ripping out anything that could be sold’ (10-11). As they wander fruitlessly across the anonymous states of the former U.S., eventually settling in the eastern U.S., these scenes of devastation are repeated across the country. An endless series of formerly prized residences, typified by a ‘boarded-up bungalow on a street that’s only semi-inhabited’ by squatters, is repeated in other places signalling that no location – however prosperous - has been spared in this downturn (26). Rather than staging a familiar survivalist scenario against the current and specific backdrop of economic fallout, the novel offers a more subtle, illusory motif with the Positron Project, especially since the comfortable but artificial world of Consilience acts as a screen for the more frightening prospect of the Positron Prison next door.

Critics including Peter Fitting have been rightly sceptical of this ‘motif of a pseudo reality’ in the dystopia genre which shifts attention away from the ‘concrete features of the traditional dystopia to the mechanism that produces the illusory reality and to what is hidden behind it’. In the popular imagination, as demonstrated by films including _Pleasantville_ (1998) and _The Truman Show_ (1998), Fitting argues that such cultural productions tend to dismiss the effectiveness of ‘conventional political activity’ and instead glamorise the allure of conspiracy through emphasising ‘hidden forces that supposedly control and manipulate us’.²³ Whilst others including Brian

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Baker have defended the estrangement effect of this ‘pseudo reality’ motif in, for instance, *The Truman Show*, the argument here posits a further, politically incisive direction mined by Atwood in *The Heart Goes Last*. Whilst all prisoners nominally labour for the economy of Consilience, as already noted, Charmaine is selected for the confidential role of Medical Administrator in the Positron Prison, with duties involving administering lethal injections to anonymous prisoners and supposed troublemakers in the project. When she begins an affair with Max (the ‘alternate’ husband), she is drawn into a blackmail plot which exposes the Positron Project as a front for an illegal organ trafficking ring which executes criminals from the outside world to harvest their body parts to sell to medical organisations for wealthy elites.

The pseudo-reality of Consilience’s nineteen-fifties suburbia becomes the source of the couple’s predicament as they are thwarted in escaping from Atwood’s post-economic fallout U.S. upon entering Consilience. The disaster at the centre of Atwood’s novel, therefore, is that middle-class America had imploded, rather than that gaping inequalities perpetuated by capitalism – which generated successive foreclosures during the U.S. foreclosure crisis – are transforming the U.S. into a wasteland of ‘gangs and the solitary vandals’ (3). In *The Heart Goes Last*, the white – and formerly affluent – American homeowner is the primary victim of foreclosure. Yet in *The Mandibles*, U.S. government taxation (of future America’s middle-class) substitutes the remorseless logic of neoliberalism which Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy describe as ‘searching for efficiency from an appetite for profit’. *The Heart Goes Last* participates in, and vividly exemplifies, competing dystopian currents which connect the loss of homeownership – and the American Dream – with the end of middle-class America, and of the U.S. itself.

*The Heart Goes Last* participates in and, as this chapter argues, also broadens traditional (almost clichéd) literary treatments of the American suburb which, as Catherine Jurca has argued, ‘convert the rights and privileges of living there into spiritual, cultural, and political problems of displacement’, and in which being ‘white and middle class is imagined to have as much or more to do with subjugation as with


social dominance’. In Atwood’s novel, this assumption is amplified into an apocalyptic scenario as the novel’s protagonists, Stan and Charmaine, are evicted from the newly foreclosed starter home, and find that the only way to regain their former homeowner status and security is to enter the ominous Positron Project. With the Positron Project uncovered as an organ-trafficking ring, Atwood’s protagonists are entangled in the financialised housing market, and yet this same precarity is removed from its source (of finance) and displaced onto the Project itself. Yet whilst *The Heart Goes Last* arrives full circle, with Stan and Charmaine restored to their own private house for their role in exposing the Positron Project, the time bomb of accumulating mortgage debts – as the original source of their predicament – remains unacknowledged and uncovered, with the novel’s conclusion only serving to highlight Stan and Charmaine’s emotional disconnection from the residential suburbia – and neighbourhoods of homes, gardens and ‘caucus hedges’ – which was constructed for their sole occupation. The hollow illusion of the Positron Project, which is half penal colony and half suburbia, reconfigures homeownership into a lifetime contract which exposes the resident to the profit-driven intentions of a faceless enterprise extracting its debt in human flesh (or harvested organs which prolong the health and lives of a minority elite).

Yet, as in *The Mandibles*, as discussed in the chapter section below, whilst registering the mantraps of the U.S. housing market, these challenges only become apparent in *The Heart Goes Last* through the familiar scenario of white, middle-class exclusion, with their destitution eclipsing the unequal penalties of a housing market which more acutely impacted upon minority subprime borrowers. Ultimately, this chapter argues that the same sequence of opacity and exclusion characterises *The Mandibles* and *The Heart Goes Last*, with both dystopian novels ushering in scenarios of middle-class destitution which, whilst registering the growing inequalities of the housing market (and the exclusions of growing numbers from the American Dream), still overlooks the subprime borrower primarily penalised by the mortgage crisis.

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4. ‘Capitalist Realism’: State and Homeownership in Lionel Shriver’s *The Mandibles*

*The Heart Goes Last* adapts the motif of the colony to comment on the legacy of the 2008 financial crisis and the momentum it gave to populist antagonism. In these novels, the subprime mortgage crisis is recast as a tragedy for white, middle-class America which distracts from its especially deleterious legacy for African American and minority subprime homeowners. However, returning to *The Mandibles*, the state becomes a site of exclusion, a social and economic experiment which can return free-market and economic leadership to America. This premise resonates with Mark Fisher’s influential study *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?* (2009), which opens with a meditation on Alfonso Cuaron’s film adaptation (2006) of P.D. James’ novel *Children of Men* (1992), centred upon a near-future United Kingdom where mass infertility has brought mankind to near-extinction. ‘What’s unique about the dystopia in *Children of Men*’, Fisher claims, is that ‘the world that it projects seems more like an extrapolation or exacerbation of ours than an alternative to it’.

The near-future of *Children of Men* – where ‘internment camps’ co-exist alongside ‘franchise coffee bars’, and where the state is reduced to ‘core military and police functions’ – demonstrates Fisher’s argument that dystopia is a cultural and popular genre which prompts Ursula Heise to despair that it is ‘becoming routine and losing its political power’ and is no longer somewhere in the future but is in the here and now.

Shriver’s *The Mandibles* resonates with this growing consensus, exemplified by Fisher’s polemic, that the interrelated genres of dystopia, science-fiction and post-apocalypse, once deriving their estrangement effects from future (or otherworldly) scenarios, are now depicting the reverse: a scenario in which it is the present, rather than the future, which is re-imagined as ‘end-times’.

As Andrew Hoberek recognises, the ‘2008 banking crisis and the recession it engendered’ are now defining events for ‘[l]atter day post-apocalypses’, including Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014), which register ‘the breakdown of

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capitalism’s fundamental premise of eternal growth’ after the ‘defining events of the 2008 banking crisis’. According to Hoberek, novels such as Mandel’s use post-apocalyptic settings ‘to unwind narratives of contemporary life that are paradoxically more real than the ones realism can manage’. Realism becomes insufficient to register the fiscal and psychological ramifications of the 2008 downturn, and Hoberek argues that the ‘image of the post-apocalypse lurking within the present’, and survivors living amidst civilization’s ghostly ruins, register capitalism’s ‘continuous, exponential growth’ despite the ‘breakdown of capitalism’s fundamental premise of eternal growth’ with the crisis of 2008. Yet through deploying the post-apocalypse and returning to ‘hunter-gatherer ways of life’, which are supposed to indict ‘tragically or satirically, the destructiveness as well as the ultimate fragility of current socioeconomic systems’, critics including Ursula Heise argue that this new post-apocalyptic canon runs up against an opacity or obscurity, a crisis of representation.

However, *The Mandibles*, offers an alternative perspective for the new American civil war novel. Resonating with other post-apocalyptic novels examined in this thesis, it repurposes the motif of U.S. secession to interrogate antagonistic and populistic politics after financial crisis. In Shriver’s novel, barricaded colonies – including the Mandibles’ Brooklyn neighbourhood – force the eponymous family to confront the frailties of U.S. democratic institutions. *The Mandibles*, with its affluent American family in financial peril, appears to exemplify the despondency of this ‘capitalist realism’ – in which ‘capitalism is the most real of our horizons’ – with its backdrop of global currency war. Certainly, Shriver’s dynastic novel, and her family narrative of foreclosure, resonates with other contemporary finance novels, including Cristina Alger’s *The Darlings* (2012) and Justin Cartwright’s *Other People’s Money*

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Following, amongst other postmodernist critics, Fredric Jameson’s interrogations of genre fictions (such as cyberpunk) as prisms which illuminate the ‘economic organization of late capitalism’, the new temporal register of ‘capitalist realism’ suggests that global capitalism is inescapable after the ‘2008 banking crisis’. *The Seeds of Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 31-2.

30 Ibid.

(2011), which Annie McClanahan describes as ‘rooted in the genre of domestic realism’, featuring characters in ‘fiscal and psychological disrepair’ and bankers who are ‘morally bankrupted by their financial speculations, marriages ruined by unpaid mortgage bills’.\(^{32}\) Yet whilst *The Mandibles* shares a commitment to literary realism, the novel departs from the gathering literary conversation which is addressing realism’s supposed relation to ‘austerity’.\(^{33}\) Although the Mandibles’ ordeals may read as cyclical instances of what Anna McCarthy calls ‘neoliberal’ suffering, or suffering caused by the structural inequalities of finance capital, their wavering economic status does not ensue from the logic of finance, but rather from the calamitous state intervention of President Alvarado’s administration (and its demonisation of affluent or ‘uber-rich’ Americans).\(^{34}\)

In his televised ‘Address to the Nation’, President Alvarado denounces ‘countries that wish this nation ill’ and who threaten the economic prestige of the US by ‘cobbling together the so-called “bancor” – an artificial pretender currency with no history as legal tender’ (54).\(^{35}\) Rather than enclosed within the accumulation process, and the particular logic and rationale of capital, the Mandibles, whose domestic tribulations are the focus of the novel, are entrapped by their government’s draconian

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35 Although Shriver’s choice of a Latino U.S. President has obvious political resonance for readers in relation to contemporary U.S.-Mexican tensions, it has not been possible to trace any commentary on her use of ‘Alvarado’, a common Spanish name: for example, the current (from May 2018) President of Costa Rica is Carlos Alvarado Quesada. While this choice by Shriver may have been random, her ruthlessly repressive and socially destructive Latino President affords a stark contrast to one of the most notable and enlightened Mexican leaders of the early twentieth century, General Salvador Alvarado Rubio (1880-1924), Governor of Yucatán (1915-18). His regime, based upon his extensive study of U.S. and European methods, liberated peasants from bonded servitude, enhanced the provision of state education, instituted old age pensions, placed constructive fiscal controls on state expenditure and enhanced women’s rights while restricting the powers of the clergy over public affairs. He was murdered in 1924 by associates of Álvaro Obregón, President of Mexico from December 1920 until his own assassination in July 1928.
legislature, and by the U.S.’s first Latino President’s subsequent efforts to forestall U.S. bankruptcy. In the place of finance capital, Alvarado’s administration dictates terms of access to currency (as holding ‘bancors’ is ruled an act of treason and amounts over $100 are prohibited from leaving the US) and also exacts fines in fees and payments (as Alvarado calls for all private gold, down to wedding rings, to be surrendered to the state) (55-6). Therefore, rather than reading character, narrative and meaning back into the abstract, disembodied world of financial capital (or contextualising individuals within neoliberal frameworks of risk profiling, as McClanahan argues for in Gary Shteyngart’s dystopian novel *Super Sad True Love Story*, 2010), *The Mandibles* eclipses structures of capital accumulation by incriminating government taxation and bureaucracy in the inequality which quashes ‘middle-class’ America.

Shriver’s apparent resistance recognising the aggressive logic of finance, and attributing its destructive capacity to the government, involves a wilful blindness to economic structures which Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy describe as continually ‘searching for efficiency from an appetite for profit’.

However, as this chapter argues, this opacity registers a newly emerging landscape of class in *The Mandibles*, where a precariously located middle-class perceive themselves as a besieged minority in their own country (as the state deems them ineligible for social services, including Medicaid for Douglas Mandible when he is evicted from his luxury retirement home) (125). As thirteen-year-old Willing Mandible observes to his mother, Florence, following a military raid searching for private gold reserves which trashes their townhouse in East Flatbush, Brooklyn: ‘They’re [the government] in a corner. They can’t borrow. They could raise taxes. But the rich already pay high taxes. And now their investments are gone. The rich aren’t rich. So the only people left to tax are people like you’ (113). In *The Mandibles*, the persecution of middle-class America ultimately ensues from global currency war and calamitous state taxation and intervention.

It is important to note that *The Mandibles* reinforces dystopian narratives of the state which are neither exclusive to science or genre fiction nor naturally opposed to a ‘white, nationalist, or imperialist cultural dominance’ (in Rob Latham’s

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36 Duménil and Lévy, *Capital Resurgent: Roots of the Neoliberal Revolution*, p. 191.
description of the science-fiction cyberpunk genre). Since the late 1980s, the Patriot movement, Christian fundamentalists and white nationalists have evoked a dystopian set of fears to articulate various libertarian anxieties relating to government regulation of private property and personal freedom (including gun control). By the 1990s, a ‘new white pride, white protest and white consciousness movement […] developed in America’, as extremists were convinced of a liberal orthodoxy in which government-sponsored ‘re-education’ programmes implement homogenous, liberal political discourse. Yet, significantly, what distinguishes The Mandibles’ from these far-right, extremist ‘doomsdays’ is the extent to which the restoration of the extreme logic of neoliberalism, through the secession of the newly-independent, libertarian ‘Free State of Nevada’, holds the key to reviving the prospects of the upper-to-middle-class Mandibles (365).

As in The Heart Goes Last, a U.S. wealth divide is a crucial motif for The Mandibles. However, it combines this motif with the reactionary themes described in the paragraph above. In the final third of The Mandibles, all four generations of Mandibles are evicted from Florence’s townhouse at gunpoint by a foreclosed neighbour, Sam, and his family, whom Florence’s sister, Avery, recognises ‘as neighbors from a couple of streets over – the Wellingtons, or Warburtons, something with a W’. Invited into the house under the pretence of needing medical help for their daughter, Sam, and his wife Tanya, force the Mandibles out of the house to walk the three or so miles to Prospect Park (now a squatters’ camp): ‘Because there is nothing I won’t do to put a roof over my family’s head. Your roof. I’m afraid you’re all going to have to leave’ (267, 270).

The Mandibles, therefore, adds to a perspective which, from all sides of the political spectrum and seizing on the foreclosure crisis as a means of articulating solidarity with the working poor, is envisaged as the despair of a ‘shrinking’ middle-

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Neoliberalism has produced what Duménil and Lévy call ‘two-tier capitalism’, the ‘capitalist and upper-salaried classes versus the rest’, with the elimination of middle-class economic influence. The Heart Goes Last is unique within this canon of new American civil war novels since it imagines U.S. secession to result from finance crisis. The novel imagines civil war to be the outcome of a U.S. wealth divide between a U.S. elite and U.S. majority. They face the continued threat of foreclosure in Alvarado’s U.S. (as experienced by Florence’s sister, Avery, after her husband’s redundancy), and yet, again as homeowners, the Mandibles have a final defence against predatory government, and against unravelling social disorder of New York City (176-7). As Alvarado’s administration liquidates all pension funds, after its renunciation of national debt, the Mandibles endure successive foreclosures or evictions: Douglas Mandible, with his dementia-impaired wife, Luella, is evicted from his luxury retirement home; Carter, his son, accepts reduced insurance compensation after Luella burns down his home in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn; the Mandible granddaughter, Avery, sells her own Brooklyn townhouse to avoid foreclosure after her husband’s redundancy; and all generations are forced to shelter in Florence’s townhouse as the only family property safe from foreclosure (113-14, 176-7, 261, 264-5).

Following Douglas’ removal from his retirement home, the Wellcome Arms, his son, Carter Mandible, admits to his wife, Jayne, that their address in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, is the one family asset which is safe from government reclamation: ‘Our 401(k)s [salaries] and pensions have been slaughtered, but we do own this house’ (125). Their Carroll Gardens home allows Carter and Jayne, as members of a precariously located middle-class, to sense their own economic vulnerability (through foreclosure), and yet at the same time resist any essential affinity with the working-class (who, rather than accurately depicted, contextualised or regarded, are swept into destitute multitudes of Prospect Park). After Luella burns down Carroll Gardens, the couple (like Avery and her family) are able to turn to Florence, whose own townhouse (and paid-off mortgage) in gentrifying East Flatbush

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40 As in the title of Emanuel Collado’s The Shrinking Middle Class: Why America is becoming a Two-Class Society (New York: iUniverse, 2010).

is safe from foreclosure (264-5). Florence’s townhouse then becomes the epicentre of
the novel as the Mandibles (in ‘dank’ shared rooms and garrets) barricade themselves
against a hazily anticipated, and yet deeply feared, future in Prospect Park – where
foreclosed subprime borrowers live alongside bankers on hard times in ‘improvised
dwellings’ which sweep across Long Meadow (282-4).

Homeownership, as the poor occupy the margins, at once seen and then
engulfed by a surrounding panorama of residue and waste, and indistinguishable from
the ‘sorry version of the promised land’ in Prospect Park where the multitudes squat
amidst a ‘patchwork of plastic tarpaulins, planks, pressboard, Sheetrock, and
corrugated iron’ (284). Shriver’s images of destitution follow a long US tradition of
associating poverty with ‘cultural pathology and moral failure’. According to Gavin
Jones, the middle-class observer on the edge of socio-economic abyss is a favoured
trope which ‘rationalizes poverty by describing the poor as inherently disordered and
degraded’, and so in large measure responsible for their own fate.42 From the chronic
financial panics of the antebellum period, through the long economic downturns of the
1890s, to the Great Depression of the 1930s, writers have attempted to respond to and
comprehend the suffering of the poor through middle-class descent into the abyss, an
engulfing and perplexing space made up of ‘sloughs, chasms, and spatial voids’,
conveyed through images of contamination, and of ‘residue and waste’.43

The oft-cited and long-standing exemplar is Jacob Riis’s pioneering book of
photojournalism, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New
York* (1890).44 In the U.S. this discourse was reinforced by a commitment to ideas of
social mobility, equality of opportunity, and individualism so profound as to make
poverty almost unthinkable, or a ‘partial blind spot in the broader culture, unable to be
seen directly or for long’. With the poor unable to comprehend, communicate, or
remedy their predicament, through their own ‘expressive mechanisms’, middle-class


43 Ibid, pp. 8, 97.

44 Another title which offers a touchstone for this analysis includes Jack London’s *People of
the Abyss* (London: Macmillan, 1903), documenting extreme poverty in the East End of
London.
descent, and redemption from the same poverty, became ‘a coordinate against which middle-class fears are assuaged and faith in capitalism restored’.45

As the origins of foreclosure resist ready interpretation in The Mandibles, there is a similar opacity which, characterising the middle-to-upper-class family’s experience, involves a wilful blindness to the ways in which homeowners, and particularly subprime homeowners facing foreclosure, are drawn into complex, global networks of indebtedness and financial mediation. This contrast is central for the new American Civil War novel. This chapter suggests that in The Mandibles Shriver’s narrative incriminates the U.S. government, in the place of the finance sector, in the Mandibles family’s predicament. At the same time, this sequence also sees the Mandibles, as (white) middle-class homeowners, become the alternate – and both inaccurate and unjustified representative – of the (minority) high-risk subprime borrower. In this new discursive twist, Shriver appropriates the empirical realities of the foreclosure crisis, and repurposes them into a lament over the squeezed middle, with the subprime borrower euphemistically not named, and instead eclipsed by the Mandibles’ travails as they are priced out of their neighbourhoods by foreign investors. Being forced into foreclosure is intuited as a marker of the lowering socioeconomic status of America’s middle-class, and being forced to sell a house (under the threat of foreclosure) is a sign that former middle-class prosperity has been gambled away by the government (to be assimilated into the international wealth of a Chinese business elite).

Opening with the axiom, ‘Collapse is a sudden, involuntary and chaotic form of simplification’, from James Rickards’ bestseller Currency Wars: The Making of the Next Global Crisis (2011), The Mandibles depicts the US in an economic twilight zone, on the border of either national recovery or catastrophe, as President Alvarado isolates his country from global trade, and refuses to trade in the IMF-backed bancor which replaces the dollar.46 The Mandibles is essentially a narrative of U.S. national survival after Chinese ascendancy to world superpower status. As such, the novel participates in a larger discourse preoccupied with ‘the rise of the Greater China economy’, one that intensified after the 2007-2008 credit crisis as scholars debated,


and interrogated, the ‘new truth of the early twenty-first-century that the Western world we have known is fast losing its pre-eminence’ in ‘China’s century’.47 When Avery, midway through the novel, finds a buyer for her townhouse, she laments, as she arrives at Florence’s townhouse, that property has become the privilege of Chinese oligarchy: ‘Who can swing a nice American house, really? Some guy from Shanghai. Asians are buying up everything. Not only residential real estate, but companies. Any day now it’s going to be the Mao Monument in the middle of the Mall’ (177).

By the time that the Mandible fortune is lost in a cataclysmic stock market crash following ‘the Renunciation’, the middle-class are a besieged minority, caught between a hostile government, which depletes their careful investments (including, in the case of Florence’s colleague, Chris, a ‘ten-K Treasury bond’ from college graduation), and a volatile majority which celebrates ‘the demise of the universally despised “uber-rich”’ (with demonstrations on the National Mall in Washington, D. C. declaring ‘STINKIN RICH NOW JUS STINKIN’) (72, 154).

Shriver’s novel addresses the various processes of ‘capitalist subjectification’ which commentators, including Stuart Hodkinson, see as reconfiguring citizens into ‘factors of capitalist production (wage labour) […] as consumers of the capitalist market, as ideological adherents of capitalist society (entrepreneurs or property owners) at the mercy of “capitalist realism”’.48 Instead, The Mandibles, with Shriver’s dark narrative of family foreclosure, depicts the Mandibles family as homeowners with properties subject to impromptu invasions by state authorities, as the underdog of Alvarado’s future U.S., and as the demographic most exposed to government reclamation of fiscal assets. Whilst Shriver’s U.S. panorama registers the after-effects of economic crisis, as U.S. citizenry are displaced through mass foreclosure, The Mandibles attributes responsibility to a liberal and therefore fiscally irresponsible U.S. government, rather than to the globalization of the housing market (through its opening to global investors). The Mandible family’s predicament begins early in Shriver’s novel, when President Alvarado prohibits the exchange of bancors, in place of US

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47 Scholars including Michael Beckley have debated predictions that the twenty-first century will be China’s century in ‘China’s Century: Will America’s Edge Endure?’, International Security, 33 (2011), 41-78.

dollars, as an act of treason which results in a ten-year prison sentence. The symbolic
denial of the bancor currency, and the cataclysmic stock market crash which follows
this ‘Renunciation’, obliterates the Mandibles’ investments as Douglas Mandible, and
his dementia-impaired wife, Luella, are, as previously noted, evicted from his luxury
retirement home, the Wellcome Arms (120-5).

At this pivotal moment, homeownership in The Mandibles – and loss of
cultural aspirations associated with homeownership – parallels the U.S.’s economic
downfall, and the Mandibles’ foreclosure signals that the U.S. government is
abandoning former middle-class Americans who were the nation’s primary resource
and tax base. This eviction is preceded by successive state intrusions into Mandible
family properties, including a military search of Florence Mandible’s townhouse after
Alvarado orders all gold reserves (down to wedding rings) to be surrendered to the
state (101-7). Douglas’s removal from the Wellcome Arms prompts his son Carter
Mandible resignedly to acknowledge the one family asset which remains safe from
government reclamation after the loss of their once-generous ‘401(k)s’ salaries and
pensions. In a pattern repeated throughout The Mandibles, Carter’s home, in Carroll
Gardens, Brooklyn, becomes Douglas’ and Luella’s final refuge as Medicaid refuse to
‘pick up the tab’ for couple’s ‘state nursing home care’, due to them having ‘immediate
living relatives with assets’ (125). Since, as Florence reflects at the beginning the
novel, being middle-class is ‘merely the residue of hailing from a learned, literary
family’, their ‘tiny, ramshackle but larcenously overpriced house in a Brooklyn
neighborhood’ is not a decisive financial asset, but rather a final confirmation – as
they all congregate under one roof – that all their other economic resources have been
liquidated (8, 22).

Homeownership has become the last refuge of America’s beleaguered middle-
class, Yet whilst the Mandibles’ ordeals may indeed be read, in Anna McCathy’s
telling phrase, as cyclical instances of a ‘neoliberal theatre of suffering’, this chapter
proposes that they, in fact, illuminate a misplaced sense of being besieged which
reconfigures the advantages of white, middle-class homeownership (and
accompanying privileges) into a source of abasement.49 The Mandibles, therefore,
vividly captures how finance is antithetical to formal accountability and democracy.

Homeownership, representing the loss of financial value and the dollar currency, also represents the inability of government to mitigate financial crisis. This inability leads to U.S. secession and this becomes a key theme and prospect for the new American civil war novel. By the time that the Mandibles, including Douglas’ daughter, Nollie, who has returned after two decades in France, are living in Florence’s townhouse, homeownership has become a paradoxical symbol of – equally disastrous – state intervention (in the currency) and state withdrawal (of public services). Alvarado’s liquidation of fiscal assets, through ‘the Renunciation’, means that private properties are the only structures – now valuable for their physical shelter – which can protect homeowners from the worst penalties of recession (and segregate them from destitute numbers congregating in Prospect Park). The Mandibles, therefore, charts a new revealed landscape of class, where the precariously located middle-to-upper-class begin to sense their own economic vulnerability, and yet can still refuse any structural affinity with the working-class who, rather than accurately depicted, contextualised or regarded, are swept into the multitudes of Prospect Park alongside former bankers on hard times. The interiors of Florence’s townhouse are now a socioeconomic defence, the final barricade against a dimly intuited and deeply feared future of ‘improvised dwellings’ in Prospect Park, constructed from salvaged Sheetrock ‘from the abandoned construction sites that hulked across all five boroughs’ (284). When Avery Mandible moves into Florence’s townhouse, along with her husband Lowell and three children, daughter Savannah and sons Goog and Bing, their two ‘dank’ garret bedrooms offer haphazard living arrangements which resonate with destitution rather than domesticity. Looking at the ‘[o]ne double mattress’ on the floor ‘next to two single airbeds’, and the ‘compact kitchen unit’ with small stove, Avery laments that the ‘comedown was precipitous – from a roomy, leather-walled DC kitchen’ (189).

Whilst the house is a physical barricade against dissolving law and order in Alvarado’s US, this protection no longer confers the state of ‘ontological security’ which meets the basic needs and cultural aspirations that Ofelia O. Cuevas associates with ‘house and home (property and possession) in the United States’. The house is a shell of the original home which, in the immediate months before ‘the Renunciation’, Florence saw as a ‘savvy’ purchase in a gentrifying neighbourhood, and as a stabilising

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nest-egg against looming recession (7). Yet, by the end of the novel, the Mandibles not only dread foreclosure, as ‘banks all hire private security firms’, but also ambush by former neighbours, including Sam and his neighbouring family who eventually force all four generations of the Mandibles from the house at gunpoint (267, 270). Ultimately, against the backdrop of early right-wing backlash to government action after the 2008 Financial Crisis, especially by the TEA Party, The Mandibles joins The Heart Goes Last in critiquing the reactionary values emerging from post-2008 socio-economic immobility.

5. Conclusion: White, Middle-class Disillusionment

The novels examined in this chapter are compelling contributions to the new American civil war novel, which explore the relationship between culture, reactionary politics and economic backlash after the 2008 financial crisis. As this chapter proposes, both Margaret Atwood’s The Heart Goes Last (2015) and Lionel Shriver’s The Mandibles (2016) vary a common scenario which is a definitive trope of ‘dystopian finance fiction’: the destitution of the white, middle-class American homeowner after mortgage foreclosure. This is a racially divisive premise for a post-2008 financial-crisis novel since it omits the fact that foreclosures leading up to the 2007-2008 subprime mortgage crisis, and the ensuing foreclosure crisis, produced ‘the greatest loss of wealth for people of color’ in recent U.S. history. In both novels, middle-class America becomes synonymous with U.S. national destiny, and ultimately eclipses the origins of economic crisis within the financial sector, and the unequal penalties of foreclosure which fall most heavily on the minority subprime borrower. In The Mandibles, Shriver conflates nationwide house foreclosure with U.S. national breakdown and, by doing so, depicts what Manuel B. Aalbers calls the ‘financialization of the home and mortgage market crisis’, where ‘homeowners become viewed as financially exploitable’, to instead incriminate the U.S. government (and their triggering of global currency war) in her economic scenario of national

51 United for a Fair Economy, January 2008
The loss of homeownership – and the Mandibles’ successive foreclosures – symbolise the paralysis of the U.S., in global trade and exchange, through liberal (and multicultural) government. If, as proposed in this chapter, the loss of homeownership here symbolises the inadequacy of U.S. government, then Shriver’s novel adopts, and unifies, competing dystopian currents in U.S. political and popular culture which recurrently frame homeownership, in Lawson’s description, as a symptom of ‘failure common to both the financial system and the wider culture’. 53

The emotional and cultural capital of the private, single family house (which Dolores Hayden has shown to influence ‘organizing principles of the contemporary American city in the era of monopoly capitalism’) has long been at odds with its status as a speculative commodity on the housing market. However, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis amplified this uneasy relationship into a crisis of four million low- and middle-income families in the U.S. who lost their homes through foreclosure. 54

By comparison, Atwood’s The Heart Goes Last reframes the intersecting themes of ‘national breakdown’, foreclosure and state intervention, which are apparent in The Mandibles, to offer a redemptive narrative in which Atwood’s protagonists – as a young professional couple who lose their starter home to foreclosure – endeavour to regain the security and privileges of American suburbia.

In The Heart Goes Last, Stan and Charmaine, Atwood’s protagonists, enter the self-titled Posotron Project – which promises revived 1950s style domesticity and community – to escape the destitution which has engulfed the majority of the U.S. populace, now living amongst the U.S. wasteland in their ‘third-hand Honda’ (3). Again, as in The Mandibles, the fiscal and psychological effects of foreclosure in The Heart Goes Last are synonymous with the white American homeowner and, more particularly in Atwood’s novel, the white American suburbanite. Both of these novels update this tendency towards white, middle-class disenfranchisement in the twentieth-century suburban American novel, which critics including Catherine Jurca, see as


53 Lawson, ‘Foreclosure Stories’, p. 49.

deflecting guilt associated with ‘white flight’, to illuminate new racial and class restrictions of homeownership which are now increasingly realised through mortgage debt and foreclosure, rather than through the exclusionary logic of suburbia.\textsuperscript{55} Both novels, therefore, associate the end of America with the loss of the American Dream, much like the conservative mantras which denounced Obama’s presidency, and yet also contradict this same rhetoric (of the reckless homeowner) by presenting middle-class homeowners as primary victims of foreclosure. Ultimately, the association of middle-class America with American destiny is a blind spot in the contemporary dystopian imaginary, with the losses of the American homeowner becoming a narrow – and all too constricting – touchstone for broad, and at times contradictory, cultural and political anxieties (including the subprime borrowers forgotten by the deluge of media attention) that developed from the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.

\textsuperscript{55} Jurca, \textit{White Diaspora}, p.13.
Chapter Five

Water Wars: Climate Change Denial in Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* (2015) and Chris Beckett’s *America City* (2017)

1. The American Civil War Novel and Climate Fiction

The central focus of the new American civil war novel is how traditional and new media have the potential to encourage vitriolic politics and extremism. This genre does not offer apocalyptic ‘end time’ visions but, rather, a series of imagined futures in which technology and communication become key factors in sliding the U.S. towards secession or civil war. This chapter develops this premise by arguing that civil war within the U.S. has become a key motif within a category of American fiction which addresses anthropogenic climate changes as a central threat and prospect for global stability. This category has been categorised by various titles including ‘eco-fiction’, ‘climate fiction’ and ‘cli-fi’, the label coined by climate activist Dan Bloom.\(^1\) Analyses of this climate fiction have started to recognise how conventions of literary fiction and science-fiction have combined to imagine the planetary scale of global warming and, according to Caren Irr, to ‘envision apocalyptic destruction of the human species, carbon-based life, or the planet as a whole’.\(^2\)

However, scholarship of climate fiction has neglected a literary sub-genre which was described by Shawn Schollmeyer in a 2007 issue of the *Library Journal* as ‘one of the newest fiction subgenres’ to emerge in climate fiction: the eco-thriller. In the decade since this article, this subgenre has offered an important and, as yet neglected, generic contribution to climate fiction. It has interrogated how new and social media have become platforms for public debate about anthropogenic climate


change and how sceptics gain media exposure and undermine climate expertise and science. This chapter argues that American novels are adopting eco-thriller conventions and combining them with central themes for the new American civil war novel, including closed and censored borders. With this focus, the new American civil war novel offers a distinct critique and exposé of how climate denial, sponsored by private industry, is driven by expanded digital and new media.

In his article, Schollmeyer raises important thematic and ethical questions about ‘[m]ixing high-octane adventure with an attention to the natural world and humanity’s effect on it’, and argues that ‘these novels have replaced the Cold War tensions of the classic spy thriller with our struggle to survive ecological threats’. These ‘plot-centered’ stories, with examples including Frank Schätzing’s *The Swarm* (2004) and Liz Jensen’s *The Rapture* (2007), were later critiqued by science-fiction historian Eric C. Otto as ‘Adrenaline novels’ or ‘airport novels’ which ‘do not offer much in the way of critical reflection on the ecocatastrophes they stage’.

The new American civil war novel reflects a decisive shift in America’s political culture which, as detailed in the thesis introduction, has ensued from depleted public trust in the U.S. government after the 2008 financial crisis. With this focus, the novels in this chapter are distinct from broader generic categories of climate fiction. Especially prescient in the light of the Trump administration, two novels, Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* (2014) and Chris Beckett’s *America City* (2017), are key instances of the new American civil war novel which interrogates how climate change has become an issue of public information and education. These novels have been selected for their attention to eco-thriller conventions. The protagonists, typically climate scientists or specialists, are placed in immediate danger by ecocatastrophe and must use the expertise and skills of their profession to fight or mitigate this danger. In contrast to their predecessors, these texts integrate scientific- and climate-based research into their fictional scenarios and, to adopt Otto’s phrase, refuse to allow readers to ‘engage with ecological issues as onlookers only’.

Through this analysis, this chapter argues that a new generation of American eco-thrillers use speculative imagery to reveal how American policy and industry are...

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implicated in environmental destruction. However, most innovatively, these eco-thrillers also address how climate change is immersed in politicised media debate, and how climate change denial is amplified by contrarian journalism. This political context is discussed in further detail in the next chapter section, ‘Generic Diversity in the Eco-Thriller Genre’. These fictions also share tropes which this thesis has already identified in the new American civil war novel, including corporations which attempt to privatise state authorities, politicians who use rhetoric against rival states and the U.S. losing its status as the world’s leading power.

However, among this body of American fictions, we might recognise a growing number of prominent motifs, including the desertification of the American Southwest in Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife*, apocalyptic deluges leading to urban displacement in post-Katrina New Orleans in China Miéville’s *The Scar* (2009) and Jeff Todd’s *Storm of Hate* (2012), and melting polar icecaps at U.S. Arctic bases in Tobias S. Bucknell’s *Arctic Rising* (2013) and Jack Castle’s *White Death* (2016). These texts represent climate change as a social problem as well as a scientific prediction. This focus offers an insightful new angle on the conventions of the new American civil war novel. The novels in this chapter, as twenty-first-century eco-thrillers, offer compelling perspectives which critique U.S. inaction in the face of climate change, whilst also illuminating the external pressures, especially from industry sponsors, which shape media coverage of climate science.

2. Generic Diversity in the Eco-Thriller Genre

Before examining the relationship between the eco-thriller and the new American civil war novel, it is necessary to situate the genre within broader categories of literary and genre fiction which imagine futures based upon predictions concerning climate change. An especially prominent trend in post-apocalyptic fiction during the early-twenty-first century has been its distinct focus on the long-term effects of environmental disaster: from the eco-catastrophes of flooding and tsunamis, to the looming prospect of desertification, to the depletion of food resources, as well as the collapse of oil-based economies. As Irr writes in her entry, ‘Climate Fiction in English’ for the *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia*, American literary scholars ‘argue for a productive emergence of cli-fi motifs out of North American national conventions’.

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[Whilst] E. Ann Kaplan argues that the cli-fi narrative, whether literary or filmic, is embedded in a trauma-laden sensibility that is recognizably American, [...] Heather Houser explores the ways that the affectively moving figure of the ill protagonist embeds eco-consciousness in culturally specific accounts of bodily vulnerability. These figures, Houser argues, condense several interlocking features of contemporary American life (from biomedical technologies to digital networks), joining these to a holistic perception of the environment.

Eco-thriller conventions are especially attuned to this premise. Over the past decade, climate fiction has depicted a range of cataclysmic eco-catastrophes and utilized the eco-thriller’s attention to ‘high-octane’ drama and spectacle. These catastrophic events range from coastline tsunamis, in settings from New York to New Orleans, to regional desertification in the American Southwest, to planetary accounts of melting glaciers and rising ocean levels. This prospect is a central theme for the new American civil war novel since, according to Michael Brüggemann, the realities of climate change, ‘driven by changing technological and economic contexts’, are ‘immersed in a polarized and politicized [U.S.] debate’.⁵

republished as *The Drought* in 1965), and *The Crystal World* (1966), an intensifying hurricane sweeps humanity from earth:

Manhattan’s under hundred-foot waves, most of the big skyscrapers and office blocks are down. Empire State Building toppled like a falling chimney stack. Same story everywhere else. Casualty lists in the millions. Paris, Berlin, Rome – nothing but rubble.\(^7\)

Despite once being singled out by Bruce Franklin as an inimitable threat to the integrity of the science fiction genre, Ballard’s *Wind From Nowhere* is now viewed, after the new millennium, as pre-empting ‘a global discourse of environmental anxiety’. As Adrian Tait summarises, this was “‘cli-fi’ before climate change was itself understood”.\(^8\)

However, the speculative conventions of eco-thrillers also resonate with more recent calls for climate fiction to ‘open up perspectives on eco-crime, disaster, and injustice on the level of genre’.\(^9\) As this chapter argues, the category of the new American civil war novel directs these calls to the U.S.. From the perspective of postcolonial literary studies, Anthony Carrigan argues that such fiction can illuminate the ‘transnational interdependencies between human actions and social and environmental effects’ whilst unmasking the ‘environmental violence’ at work in twenty-first-century capitalism.\(^10\) Addressing this perspective to ‘climate politics in the Anglosphere’, Amitav Ghosh admits that unmasking this eco-violence is no straightforward task. Instead, climate change in the U.S. has been viewed through a


\(^8\) Tait, ‘Nature Reclaims Her Own’, p. 30. Bruce Franklin criticises Ballard for pandering to ‘the broad and deep expansion of doomsday mentality in our culture’, in ‘What are we to make of J.G. Ballard’s Apocalypse?’, in *Voices For the Future* 2, ed. Thomas Clareson (Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1979), 82-105 (p. 82). As Tait details, other New Wave science-fiction includes John Wyndham's alien invasion *The Kraken Wakes* (1953) and John Christopher's survivalist texts *The Death of Grass* (1956) and *The World in Winter* (1962).


\(^10\) Ibid, p. 160.
'conspiratorial lens’ and has become ‘one of many issues that are clustered along a fault line of extreme political polarization’.11

With this conclusion, Ghosh references extensive work by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway which identifies U.S. climate change denial with ‘the political tradition that [Richard] Hofstadter called “the paranoid style” in American politics: a style that sees grand conspiracies to undermine America’s free-market system and constant threats to American liberty’.12 It is here that it is most useful to address the political context which is especially formative for the eco-thriller genre. After the new millennium, decisions by President Bush, especially apparent during the 2004 presidential race, had a detrimental effect on public trust in American science. As Chris Mooney details, Bush misrepresented the ‘state of scientific understanding on the issue of climate change’ when speaking to Science magazine ‘during the 2004 presidential race, after the magazine asked both campaigns whether “human activity” is “increasing global temperatures”’.13 Whilst Obama’s administration was criticised for a contradictory approach, his administration’s policy decisions, including U.S. involvement with the UN Paris Agreement, offered hope for a robust strategic response.14 Maria Ivanova, for instance, notes how the ‘personal commitment of President Barack Obama and President Xi Jingping sent a strong signal to the rest of the world that ambitious action was underway’.15

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13 Chris Mooney, The Republican War on Science (New York: Basic Books, 2005) [<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=KYQ5DgAAQBAJ&pg=PT287&lpg=PT287&dq=%22state+of+scientific+understanding+on+the+issue+of+climate+change%22&source=bl&ots=w48aPXj1T-&sig=ACfU3U0xNoS70Xk9R_ARxyY_yU0GFJSDZg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiD6f6W9rHkAhVQZcAKHWj6AyoQ6AEwAXoECAQQAQ#v=onepage&q=%22state%20of%20scientific%20understanding%20on%20the%20issue%20of%20change%22&f=false] [accessed 9th July 2019].

However, Obama’s administration, and his various policies introduced in the House of Representatives and the Senate, saw a clear increase in climate change denial. As Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright document in their article on ‘Organized Climate Denial’, the period of Obama’s administration saw ‘escalating attacks on climate science and scientists as well as the IPCC, with considerable support from corporations such as ExxonMobil and associations such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’. Under the incumbent administration, corporate America promises to remain active in climate change denial. From President Trump’s infamous 2012 tweet, describing climate change as hoax, to his promise to advance ‘American energy dominance’, the current administration seems poised to reverse earlier policies from Obama’s administration. Indeed, in March 2017, Trump signed an executive order for the Environmental Protection Agency which prioritised America’s coal industry over federal government’s enforcement of climate regulations. As Dan Merica reported, this ‘executive order […] represents the greatest fears climate change advocates had, when Trump was elected in November 2016’. It was during this political period, when climate science is being ignored in the U.S., especially within high levels of government, that a set of eco-thrillers adapted generic conventions to interrogate political conditions which encourage climate change denial.

With this context in mind, reading American eco-thrillers requires an awareness of the generic slippages at work in the eco-thriller itself, especially as the genre broadens post-apocalyptic conventions and adopts tropes from crime, detective


fiction and science-fiction. This is especially important for the new American civil war novel which this thesis recognises as combining a range of conventions beyond the post-apocalyptic genre. A brief examination of the eco-thriller’s generic lineage provides a useful starting point to consider how the genre is especially suited to respond to the political dimensions of U.S. environmental disaster and climate change denial. As Eugene Thacker argues in his article ‘Notes on Extinction and Existence’, the eco-thriller ‘has become something of an index for thinking about human extinction’, especially in blockbuster films about eco-catastrophe (including *Independence Day* [1996], *The Day After Tomorrow* [2004] and *2012* [2009]) which often imagine spectacular structural violence. In interpreting the colliding scales of the eco-thriller, Thacker turns to the eco-thriller novel to identify a formal contradiction which ‘seek[s] to combine human drama with nonhuman ecological events’. As he writes:

> [T]wo narrative levels can only exist together in the most awkward of ways: the human, all-too-human, scale of desire, greed, anxiety, and heroism is often at odds with the nonhuman scale of extreme weather, rising sea levels, and tectonic shifts. There is a sense of the absurd in the eco-thriller. The moment we begin to form attachments to human characters, a flood or earthquake suddenly intervenes, causing us to wonder why we should bother to care about the characters to begin with – their private hopes and anxieties quite literally engulfed by the scale of the issues at hand’.20

As Thacker suggests, this human and non-human fusion produces a compelling generic context in which the long-term legacy of environmental disaster is clearly inscribed on a damaged nation and its citizens. However, eco-thrillers are particularly suited to defying generic expectations, with their texts often fusing noir, private eye and science-fiction conventions to reveal disasters to be legal and government failures as well as natural catastrophes.

As Patrick D. Murphy argues, the eco-thriller has the potential to ‘initiate intervention and action’ if generic conventions are combined with ‘the extrapolation

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effect’ of the science fiction genre. Adapting this generic hybridity, Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* (2015) and Chris Beckett’s *America City* (2017) are taken in this chapter as representative eco-thrillers which depict fictional legal investigations against U.S. government failures and, at the same time, implicate climate denial in environmental disaster. First, *The Water Knife* extrapolates real-world dilemmas which follow current – and intensifying – drought conditions in the Colorado River Basin. In the novel’s near future, a permanent ‘Big Daddy Drought’ blazes across the U.S. Southwest, with the Mojave Desert expanding at the borderlands between Utah, Arizona and Nevada whilst the Colorado River is ‘reduced by droughts and diversions’.

This thesis chapter has selected *The Water Knife* since it captures each of the three central themes which are central to the new American civil war novel. *The Water Knife* is a novel which features the following themes: censorship (after states separate due to conflict over water resources), state nationalism (which encourages states to compete for limited water resources) and partisan rhetoric (which translates into interstate attacks on water infrastructure). With its focus on water scarcity, *The Water Knife* resonates with a set of genre-melding climate fictions which Caroline Edwards calls and identifies as ‘flood fictions’. Whilst envisaging droughts rather than floods, in contrast to titles including Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York: 2140* (2017), *The Water Knife* is similar to flood fictions since, as Edwards describes, it ‘addresse[s] the gaps in scientific- and policy-based research’. However, *The Water Knife* expands the focus of these floods fictions. Set in Las Vegas, Nevada, the novel is consistent with the new American civil war novel since it addresses new interactions between climate denial and both professional and online media. Drawing on Bacigalupi’s record as a journalist for the environmental newspaper *High Country News*, *The Water Knife* fictionalises legal disputes in the American Southwest, which include the

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Southern Nevada Water Authority’s (SNWA) proposal (still ongoing as of 2019) for a multibillion-dollar pipeline to pump rural groundwater to Las Vegas.\(^{24}\)

Furthermore, through its characters, including a private eye journalist, *The Water Knife* addresses how regional drought, as a long-term prospect for the U.S. Southwest, is being encumbered by legal contests and corporate investment in the water industry. Similarly, Beckett’s *America City*, set in the early twenty-second century, turns America’s Southwest into an uninhabitable desert whilst the Eastern U.S. – now known as the ‘storm coast’ – is vulnerable to superstorms and subject to ‘federal regulations under the Hurricane Defenses Act’.\(^{25}\) State populations are displaced and huge numbers of people have fled into Northern and Western states. Senator Stephen Slaymaker, a Republican politician, promises government funding to build homes for the migrants in northwest states, most notably Alaska, despite federal commitment to non-interference in state politics. The novel’s central character is Holly, a PR executive, describing herself as ‘a professional story-teller’, who ‘craft[s] narratives that made self-interest feel like virtue’ (77). Slaymaker’s political campaign, in which Holly oversees publicity whilst Slaymaker puts his political ideas into practice, is the focus of *America City*. Beckett’s novel joins *The Water Knife* in using conventions of the eco-thriller genre to interrogate the role of PR and media campaigns in public knowledge and understanding of climate change.

Therefore, *The Water Knife* and *America City* offer not just end-times disaster but, rather, a series of near- and distant-futures in which contrarian pundits, the private water industry, and politicians either deny climate science or propose plans which worsen environmental degradation. Such disastrous futures, as both novels make clear, are the long-term result of corporate interests which have long battled environmental activism. In *The Water Knife*, the Southern Nevada Water Agency, as a former state

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government agency, has become a private corporation which competes with agencies from the neighbouring states of Arizona and California. Focusing on federal government, in America City, a senator recruits a PR executive to draft publicity for a federal rehoming project on the ‘Storm Coast’. As a ‘professional storyteller’ and self-confessed crafter of narratives, Holly finds herself having to persuade members of a new ‘Freedom Party’, with a staunch commitment to free markets and a disdain of ‘any sort of big government program’ (74). In both novels, climate legislation and action are hindered by PR battles which, led by industry-funded parties like the Freedom Party in America City, distort climate science and orchestrate campaigns disguised as ‘grassroots’ movements.

Both novels, therefore, offer a distinctly modern critique which, consistent with the new American civil war genre, interrogates the relationship between media, private industry and climate science. In America City, this fictional conflict has direct parallels to political advocacy groups which, with the help of PR firms during Obama’s administration, played key roles in discouraging political attention to climate change. Most notably, ‘Americans for Prosperity’, as the political advocacy group funded by David H. Koch and Charles Koch, sponsored a multi-state ‘Hot Air Tour’ (2008) under the slogan, ‘Global Warming Alarmism: Lost Jobs, Higher Taxes, Less Freedom,’ whilst another group, ‘Energy Citizens’, sponsored by the ‘American Petroleum Institute (API)’, organised 2009 rallies against climate legislation in over twenty states.26

These novels, therefore, not only dramatize an environmental disaster but also raise policy questions about American industry and involvement in climate legislation. More specifically, they aim to highlight the links of a well-funded and coordinated ‘denial machine’ which Sharon Begley outlines, in her article for Newsweek, as spanning American political advocacy and industry.27 As noted at the beginning of this chapter section, The Water Knife and America City are notable for being published after Obama’s election and after Democratic policies made legislation to limit carbon emissions feasible. The result was corporate lobbying to oppose various measures in

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26 Dunlap and McCright

the House of Representatives and the Senate. Both contemporary eco-thrillers foreground these legal battles as a key feature of climate legislation during Obama’s administration, as well as PR and media campaigns. However, America City, in particular, also illuminates how PR and new media will be increasingly central to future legislation, including Trump’s ‘America First Energy Plan’ which does not plan for future renewable energy. Both novels, combining their focus on hostile tensions between U.S. states within eco-thriller conventions, offer important contributions to the new American civil war novel. With these speculative features, both novels, rather than offering ‘high-octane’ drama, provide a compelling speculative form which explores such political and legal questions as well as environmental questions for twenty-first century America.

3. American Southwest and Climate Change Denial in Paolo Bacigalupi’s The Water Knife (2015)

The Water Knife is a novel concerned with real-world dilemmas ensuing from drought conditions which afflict the Colorado River Basin. However, the novel is most notable for imagining future civil war in America which has ensued as a result of environmental crisis. In the novel’s near future, a permanent ‘Big Daddy Drought’ blazes across the US Southwest, with the Mojave Desert expanding at the borderlands between Utah, Arizona and Nevada whilst droughts and diversions reduce the Colorado River. As with each of the novels in this thesis, The Water Knife focuses on civil war in America. Bacigalupi’s hostile landscape breeds increasingly treacherous politics, with the regional powers of California and Nevada employing private militias to ‘attack people from Arizona and Texas and New Mexico [who] try to cross the Colorado River’ and enter their states (161). The novel features three central characters: a journalist, Lucy Monroe, based in Phoenix and following the story of water rights to the Colorado River, Angel Velasquez, the titular ‘water knife’ who

‘cuts’ or sabotages water rights for the SNWA against rival agencies in Arizona and California, and Maria, a young Texan refugee now living in a refugee camp in Phoenix.

The Water Knife is immediately identifiable with the noir genre, being marketed as a scientifically realistic vision of the near future. Bacigalupi’s narrative is summarized as an ‘accidental future’ which envisages the long-term consequences of political decisions.29 Set in a future drought-ridden Las Vegas, reviewers, including Denise Hamilton in Los Angeles Times, describe the novel as invoking an American tradition stretching back to Walter M. Miller Jr’s Mojave Desert in A Canticle for Leibowitz (1959) and Frank Herbert’s desert planet in Dune (1965). Bacigalupi’s indebtedness to American science-fiction is further underscored by stylistic allusions to William Gibson’s seminal novel Neuromancer (1986) which uses the scale of Las Vegas to make ‘imperceptible’ operations of advanced capital both ‘physically and perceptibly familiar’ to its inhabitants.30

These allusions set up the generic framework within which The Water Knife may be contextualized. Closed borders in the Southwest U.S. represent violent and protectionist tendencies within the future region. Evoking dark visions of civil war, The Water Knife envisions a fractured U.S. nation which, due to escalating drought, has become danger to its own democracy. Bacigalupi’s novel takes its title from a practice of protecting the city of Las Vegas by ‘cutting the water’ from both outlying now abandoned suburban buffer zones and rival cities including Phoenix. Whilst these battles for the ‘water rights’ to partitions of the Colorado River and its reservoirs (including Lake Mead) are frequently contested in state law courts, Bacigalupi’s vision depicts more violent methods being deployed against neighbouring states. Las Vegas is now a lawless city and region characterised by military conflict and illegal water-


grabbing – some distance from *Neuromancer* which conceived the city an illusory space, or a city produced by the ‘consensual hallucination’ of what Gibson famously terms ‘cyberspace’ in *Neuromancer*. Drastic events include an operation led by the SNWA to blow up ‘the Carver City water treatment plant’ which supplies the city of Phoenix. Aiming to detonate the plant before ‘Carver City files an appeal’ against a ruling dictating that the water is Nevada’s, the SNWA authorises an immediate collapse of the entire complex (3). Without the necessary water infrastructure, Nevada will retain the water, regardless of later legal decisions which may decide in favour of Arizona.

*The Water Knife* is a new American civil war novel which offers incisive and profound insights into the tension between private industry and public water infrastructure in the region. In the Southwest, state agencies and industry groups have assaulted public water access for over two decades. Outside Las Vegas, Lake Mead – as an ‘optimistic lake created during an optimistic time’ – is accumulating silt as a tunnel named ‘Intake No. 3, the critical IV drip that keeps the heart of Las Vegas pumping’ distributes water towards the city and away from Phoenix and other ‘outlying communities’ (8). Within the eco-thriller genre, protagonists are forced to the centre of legal, political and, in this case, environmental crises, with the explosion of Carver City realised as a generic encounter which situates individuals ‘as spectators to crime or violence within the “environment at large”’. The dialogue between Velasquez and Charles Braxton, the chief lawyer for Catherine Case, the Head of the SNWA, hints at the ‘fatalism and despair associated with film noir’ and American crime noir. Whilst the Las Vegas economy continues to be constructed primarily through foreign investment, and narco-dollars’, Velasquez and Braxton openly discuss legal loopholes which turn public infrastructure into ‘private property rights’ (3). Meanwhile, alongside political actors, amateur bloggers, media pundits and social media users race against each other be the first to cover legal disputes.

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32 Otto, ‘“From a certain angle”’, p. 118.

However, *The Water Knife* follows other novels discussed in this thesis, including Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011), which trace and interrogate public distrust of America’s media institutions. The novel’s opening chapters introduce Lucy Monroe, the freelance journalist who initially arrives in the city as a ‘green reporter’, making ‘quick cash off voyeuristic enticements’ and ‘sensationalized imagery’ of water-starved Phoenix (24). After Carver City is detonated, she prowls the ‘sloshing sea of social media, stories that she could get to first and claim as her own’:

Supposed to leave again today, except for another damn storm. #Depressed #PhoenixDowntheTubes
How you know you’re at the end. You’re drinking your own piss and telling yourself it’s spring water. #PhoenixDowntheTubes#ClearsacLove
Score! We’re going North! #BCLottery #Seeyoubitches
Choppers in the canyon. Anyone know who’s out there? #CoRiver #BlackHelicopters (23).

Closed borders in the Southwest U.S. mean that accurate news is not shared between U.S. states. Instead, social media become the most prominent source of news. This encourages misinformation and rumour and exacerbates conflict. Controversial regional politics are familiar to the American Southwest. The history of Las Vegas with ‘the rise of the nuclear age’, and the city’s growth into prominence alongside the Nevada Test Site, prompted a generation of authors (including Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion and Thomas Pynchon) to ‘use a peculiar conflation of Las Vegas and the bomb as the symbol and landscape of the cold war’.34 However, in *The Water Knife*, the SNWA reflects a more contemporary and specific intersection: a staunch commitment to free markets and disdain of governmental regulation which reflects climate change denial. Crucially, this backdrop in *The Water Knife* leads the SNWA to pursue a set of decisive and game-changing set of ‘water rights’ to the Colorado River.

As discussed in the thesis introduction, the new American civil war novel invites readers to question profound transformations in contemporary American politics and

34 Ken Cooper, ““Zero Pays the House”: The Las Vegas Novel and Atomic Roulette’, *Contemporary Literature*, 33 (1992), 528-44 (pp. 528, 532).
international relations. However, *The Water Knife* also addresses contentious aspects of water infrastructure in the American Southwest. Andrew Ross describes the significance of these water rights in his urban history of Phoenix, Arizona. They privilege private property which, in turn, is dictated by the ‘doctrine of prior appropriation’ and which grants rights of access to the ‘first, beneficial users’. These water rights date back to the Colorado River Compact (1922) which allocated river water across the seven basin states (including Arizona and Nevada). Due to investment in Arizona’s irrigation system, through the Central Arizona Project (CAP), the terms of this agreement meant that Arizona would have ‘the least priority if the river ran too low to serve all of its eight beneficiaries (the seven basin states plus Mexico)’. Even before climate scientists warned about the effect of climate change on the Colorado River, Marc Reisner’s history of the Colorado River, *Cadillac Desert* (1986), warned that the CAP would ‘become a ruin before its time’.

In *The Water Knife*, water politics becomes an even more cruel and bloodthirsty prospect. Monroe meets Velaquez when she covers a story about the murder of a ‘Phoenix Water lawyer’, complete with alarmist headlines: ‘PHOENIX CITY WATER ATTORNEY SLAIN’; ‘WATER ATTORNEY TORTURED FOR DAYS BEFORE DEATH’ (132). Adapting the eco-thriller’s generic hybridity, Bacigalupi reflects detective and private eye fiction’s use of the ‘spoken language’ of ‘ordinary people’. Monroe and Velaquez insult each other with a series of tough-talking remarks: ‘You’re not a cop’; You’re just a ‘[b]lood rag journo’ who ‘don’t know shit’ (117-18). Velaquez’s description of ‘blood rag’ journalists – as a derogatory term for sensationalist journalists – reflects the legal authorities’ hostile relationship with media scrutiny and journalism. Undercover as a ‘muckraking journo’, Monroe captures the solitary journalist’s determination to uncover the truth: ‘So now Lucy Monroe was kicking over every anthill in creation, hoping to stir things up, with

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36 Ibid, p. 42.


accusations everywhere and “no comments” from Phoenix PD and the attorney general’ (132).

Government corruption encourages Monroe’s and Velaquez’s cynicism. As Monroe negotiates the ‘bureaucratic spaghetti’ of the SNWA, she draws attention to the SNWA’s criminality through deliberately inflicting drought on Arizona. Legal loopholes reinforce government inaction which, in turn, leads to a staunch resistance to accountability. Regional politics are crucial in The Water Knife; these detective and eco-thriller themes highlight the need to account for how the short-term effects and long-term legacy of drought, referred to throughout the narrative, are constituted by the region’s own fusion of privatisation and legal evasion. This becomes most apparent when Monroe, retracing the final movements of the murdered water lawyer, discovers that he was researching in the ‘archives’ of the ‘Bureau of Land Management. Bureau of Reclamation. Army Corps of Engineers. Bureau of Indian Affairs’ (230). Monroe finds that the lawyer was sitting on material which could lead to a ‘civil war’ in America: that Phoenix and Arizona have long-lost water rights, inherited from the Native American ‘Pima’ tribe, which could override those of their larger competitors (231). As Monroe describes to Velaquez, the consequences of these water rights could be game-changing:

And not just California. If Phoenix shows up in court, waving these senior Pima water rights, everything changes. For everyone. Phoenix could have the Bureau of Reclamation drain Lake Mead. Send all the water down to Lake Havasu for Phoenix’s personal use. They could make Los Angeles and San Diego stop pumping. Or they could sell water off to the highest bidder. They could build a coalition against California, keep all the water in the Upper Basin states (231).

Ultimately, The Water Knife refocuses attention on the political, legal, and economic causes of drought. The shock here, of course, is not only worsening drought but the way the novel disrupts common real-world understandings of environmental disasters as ‘tragedies’. The novel, most crucially, highlights the wider consequences – both national and international – of water politics in the Southwest. Upon discovering the existence of the Pima water rights, Velaquez decides to uncover them for Catherine Case, the SNWA’s chief executive. He remembers the ‘lights of Vegas unsnoodled’ with an admiration best captured at the novel’s beginning when he travels, with militia
from the SNWA, to detonate Carver City: Geometries of light sprawling across the
desert floor, all of them overlaid with the electronic graffiti’ and ‘Billboard promises
of shows and parties and drinks and money’ (8).

In order to comprehend the scale of impending water crisis, *The Water Knife*
uses this elevated perspective to survey this ‘Old Testament ancient’ landscape being
policed by modern ‘gunships’ and aerial drones (9). Not only is this elevation literal,
it also leads Bacigalupi to reflect on how the democratic will of state populations can
be manipulated to suit the agenda of rival state agencies. Angel remembers ‘watching
the news […] the relentless rah-rah of energy security from the feeds. He’d enjoyed
watching all the journos beating the patriotism drums and getting their ratings up.
Making citizens feel like badass Americans again’ (11). Bacigalupi’s cynical
descriptions of these campaigns captures the rationale for attacking scientific
predictions. It also reflects the crucial strategy of ‘manufacturing uncertainty’ which
Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway identify with climate change denial from fossil fuel
corporations and industry associations.

These relationships were accompanied by the renewed prominence of platforms
like ‘Fox News, Breitbart, the Government Accountability Initiative, the Center for
Immigration Studies, or Judicial Watch’ which, functioning to reinforce
‘disinformation campaigns’, were pivotal to turning the ‘networked public sphere’ into
a sensationalist ‘networked propaganda system’.39 This highlights a central theme in
*The Water Knife*. As an ‘eco-thriller’ it depicts and addresses how climate sceptics
gain media exposure and undermine climate expertise and science. The novel
interrogates how climate change is as much an issue of public opinion and education
as environmental decline. As Dunlap and McCright suggest, this strategy centres on
‘contrarian scientists’ with ‘considerable support from industry and conservative think
tanks’, stressing uncertainty ‘concerning global warming and human contributions to
it’.40 As they conclude, industries have criticised government and scientific institutions
(including the U.S. National Academy of Sciences) and the expertise and ethics of
climate science and research in these institutions:

39 Ibid.

40 Dunlap and McCright, p. 146.
[M]anufacturing uncertainty is most successful when it is done by individuals that the media and public will accept as experts, and CTTs continue to find and support a number of credentialled scientists critical of climate science, giving them unprecedented visibility regardless of how poorly their typically non-peer-reviewed work fares among the scientific community.\(^\text{41}\)

The connection between manufacturing uncertainty and eco-catastrophe in *The Water Knife* is apparent in the SNWA’s risk assessment of the Blue Mesa on Lake Mead in the Colorado River. A crucial scene occurs after Monroe illegally enters a high-rise building called ‘Taiyang’ to interview a second water lawyer, Michael Ratan, about their colleague’s suspicious death. ‘Taiyang’ is a commercial and residential building which, under the ownership of private investors, ‘control[s] its borders as rigorously as Nevada or California. The reward for Taiyang inhabitants was a space that felt as if it were entirely removed from the dust and smoke and collapse of the greater city beyond’ (170). As Monroe is being escorted from the public plaza by a Taiyang security guard, images of the ‘Blue Mesa Reservoir, Gunnison, Colorado’ are flashed on the foyer television screens. The dam barrier on the reservoir is breaking: the ‘dam spat more and more water. Monolithic hunks of it peeled away. More water shouldered through the gap, spouting. More and more, faster and faster. The people were specks on the edge of the dam, all fleeing’ (184).

A ‘breathless’ news announcement highlights the scale of the impending flood which could affect numerous towns and residences: ‘*We just don’t know how far it will go!* The Bureau of Reclamation expects that the Morrow Point and Crystal Reservoirs will also fail. The Army Corps of Engineers is recommending evacuation alerts’ [italics in original] (184). Bacigalupi’s achievement in this eco-thriller it to develop a premise which engages readers in the scale of climate change and anthropogenic global warming. However, more specifically, *The Water Knife* encourages an affective attention to the pressing and increasingly catastrophic ways in which professional organisations—whether ignorantly or wilfully—can overlook procedures which ensure public safety. Later news broadcasts reveal that the dam had been ‘recently evaluated and considered stable’ by the Bureau of Reclamation: ‘The construction and geological location were ideal. No dam on record has collapsed

\(^{41}\) Ibid, p. 152.
spontaneously, after existing in a stable condition for so long’ (185). The loss of credibility by the Bureau of Reclamation, and other external bodies mirrors Monroe’s and Velaquez’s discovery that the ‘Bureau of Indian Affairs deliberately buried’ evidence of the senior water rights which they pursue together (231).

The collapse of the Blue Mesa Dam, and the SNWA’s response to the incident, draw attention to the fundamental and highly effective methods of manufacturing uncertainty about climate change. Catherine Case launches a rapid response PR campaign to quash rumours that the state of California detonated the dam to initiate open war with the state of Nevada. As she describes, ‘[…] I’m standing around smiling and telling investors that we knew California was going to make this move on Blue Mesa Dam and I had no idea’ (258).

The SNWA has institutional bases which are invested in an ‘Imperial Valley’ agriculture which Velaquez describes as being worth ‘[b]illions probably’ (341). Monroe is aware of the scale of this multi-dollar investment and despairs at the lack of sources which can provide insight into the institutions behind them. She ‘reported events but seldom saw through the dust-caked window to the underlying motivations. She’d always assumed that there was more to the story and that the powers were just too good at hiding it from her’ (342). Over the novel’s course, it becomes apparent that leading senators are in the pay of the SNWA. Facing accusations of ‘militia lawlessness’, state politicians ‘dutifully send out the guardies to hunt down the bandits. He parade[s] theatrical arrests in front of news cameras and line[s] up defiant citizen defenders in court’. However, ‘as soon as the cameras [go] dark, the cuffs [come] off, and Catherine Case’s militias retur[n] to their posts along the river’ (80).

The Water Knife, therefore, offers new insight into key themes of the new American civil war novel, which include satirising and questioning categories of professional and new media. Media personalities defend the SNWA and the SNWA hosts conferences for private or commercial investors, including a ‘Cypress Five Launch Party’ which Case attends after the collapse of the Blue Mesa Dam (257). The SNWA produces and circulates a vast range of promotional material for corporate investors via various forms of media, including reports, press conferences, and

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42 In addition to studies cited in the first footnote of this introduction, see Michiko Kakutani, The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018); and Matthew d’Ancona, Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back (New York: Ebury Press, 2017), p. 23.
television interviews. *The Water Knife*, therefore, depicts the SNWA shielding corporations by bribing state government and orchestrating media campaigns. Using a variety of techniques, the SNWA works to appease private sponsors and interest groups, emphasizing the ‘uncertainty’ of climate science whilst encouraging ‘journos’ to beat the ‘patriotism drums’ to justify privatisation of state water infrastructure (11). Ultimately, adopting key themes which this thesis has discussed across its chapters, *The Water Knife* offers a unique insight into how coordinated and well-funded American industry has the resources to attack climate science, forestall environmental policy and develop PR strategies which ‘manufacture uncertainty’ in America about anthropogenic climate change.


This chapter turns to a comparable novel to *The Water Knife* which also foregrounds the relationship between climate denial, politics and media distraction. In his authoritative study, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century* (2004), Frederick Buell observes that ‘people tend to speak of the environmental crisis – as if “it” were a clear, stable, and ahistorical concept’. However, to do so, as Buell concludes, is ‘unfortunate, because it supresses the complexity, diversity, and dynamism of accumulating environmental problems’ whilst also obscuring how ‘the impact of these problems on U.S. society has changed – and dramatically deepened – over time’. Buell’s conclusion has passed into widely-cited scholarly observation and has been associated with twentieth-century environmental concerns including 1950s fears about nuclear weapons. However, Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* marks an innovative attempt to address this truism to the twenty-first century, especially as climate change has become highly contested in the American political arena and society. Chris Beckett’s *America City* (2017) marks an equally committed literary effort to imagine the influence of climate activism within American politics. Set more than 130 years into the future, Beckett’s novel imagines a future in

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which climate change has bought storms, flooding, and drought to the world. ‘Superstorms’ sweep across entire Eastern states, coupled with widespread pollution of lakes and water resources and the loss of housing and infrastructure in Western desert storms. These are the catastrophic effects of climate change which set the stage for the novel’s post-apocalyptic projection. As the narrator asks, ‘who in America hasn’t watched these scenes many times over? Houses straining and bulging until they burst, cars doing cartwheels end to end, truck cabins crushed by fallen trees’ (5).

However, the central focus of America City is the reverse of the Manifest Destiny which sees vast numbers of the U.S. population move across the continent ‘from threatened areas of the east coast and in the southwest’ (22). Bacigalupi’s The Water Knife, dramatizing the perilous legacy of water management and distribution in the U.S. Southwest, uses its regional setting to illuminate the national history of climate change denial in the United States. The Water Knife addresses questions similar to those which inspired New Wave science fiction authors nearly half a century earlier. These questions include how to discourage ‘high-octane’ readerly enjoyment of sensationalist eco-catastrophe and disaster, instead of pragmatic responses to real-life environmental problems. Bacigalupi’s novel, reaffirms the science-fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson’s observation, during the promotion of his own climate novel New York: 2140 (2017), that ‘at some point, science fiction has to imagine the people who came after, when the situation will be natural, whatever it is’.44

Bacigalupi’s eco-thriller narrative in The Water Knife re-focuses the lack of interest of ecological disaster and uses generic character types, including the private eye journalist, to illuminate legal and anti-democratic barriers in the U.S., including industry-sponsored climate denial, to address anthropogenic climate change. Beckett builds on Bacigalupi’s presentation of near-future drought in the U.S. Southwest to craft a novel which takes seriously, in the sociologist’s Robert MacNeil’s description, the idea that climate change is ‘first and foremost a social objective’ which requires us to ‘replace words like “competition” with “planning”, and “profit” with “social

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If Bacigalupi’s novel addresses barriers to national climate policy, *America City* imagines what pragmatic legislation in America’s political arena might look like even in the midst of twenty-first-century environmental disaster. As Linda Wilson argues, in one of the few reviews of the novel for *Strange Horizons* science fiction magazine, ‘droughts, storms, and floods provide the context [for] questions about identity, crafting story, creating and manipulating political events and policy’.

*America City*, therefore, is more than an alarmist or cautionary tale. Instead, it imagines storm-swept American cities as a feasible socio-political prospect which America’s political representatives will be required to confront sometime during this century or the next. Beckett’s main characters are political campaigners, public relations executives, and officials working for Senator Stephen Slaymaker, a far-right politician and leader of a newly formed ‘Freedom Party’ which advocates a government relocation programme to the northwest states, including Alaska. As Slaymaker explains to Holly Peacock, a PR executive and the novel’s protagonist:

> The Storm Coast is a drain on our country’s resources. So is the Dust Country. So are all those towns on coasts and rivers where they have to keep building the levees higher all the time. Basically, the government needs to shift most of the US population inland and to the north. And then get off people’s backs again and let them get on. (23).

Holly’s recruitment in the novel’s opening chapters introduces the key focus of the novel: U.S. climate policy and legislation which are organised through the laborious process of democratic politics. Holly’s brief is to re-brand Slaymaker’s campaign so that his relocation programme appeals to both core conservative voters and to swing voters who are suspicious of Slaymaker’s policies, and who, like Holly’s husband, Richard, might see the senator as a ‘ferocious American nationalist’, but are still eager to address the U.S. migration crisis (15). Beckett’s achievement in this short novel is to imagine how long-term U.S. climate policy and legislation will depend upon how

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regional and demographic grievances are leveraged to mobilise voters in America. In *America City*, this prospect is realised through two rival parties: the incumbent ‘Unity Party’ (led by President Jenny Williams) and Slaymaker’s ‘Freedom Party’.

Climate legislation is determined by the electoral strategies of both parties. With Slaymaker describing the Unity Party as ‘the party for losers’, the Freedom Party is known primarily for trading insults and mobilising tribal identities to maintain media controversy and coverage during U.S. elections (47). Set against a U.S. presidential election, the novel imagines a closely fought campaign between primary candidates for the Freedom Party and, eventually, between presidential nominees for the Unity and Freedom Parties. With direct allusions to the 2016 presidential election, Senator Slaymaker’s success is dependent upon how his Freedom Party campaign circumvents institutional accountability and, instead, uses new campaign tactics to disrupt the expectations of presidential behaviour. As Holly summarises to Slaymaker’s campaign team: you need to ‘try to win over as many as possible of your usual Freedom Party-type supporters, but […] in a way that’s going to appeal to a reasonably large tranche of Unity Party and minor party voters who wouldn’t normally see you as someone they relate to’ (26).

*America City*, therefore, broadens Eric C. Otto’s observation that eco-thrillers primarily focus on specialists, including climate scientists, who must use their professional expertise and skills to address environmental danger. Instead, published two years after the 2016 election, *America City* uses environmental danger to illuminates questions about the extent to which contemporary media consumption undermines the formal expectations of professional politics and influences the long-term direction of U.S. legislation. The first phase of Slaymaker’s campaign focuses on his pledge to coordinate a ‘large-scale, federally funded resettlement’ programme which moves threatened migrants from the East U.S. to ‘the northwestern states, including Alaska’ (22). This commitment tests the resources of the campaign, forcing Slaymaker’s strategists to use increasingly polarised branding to persuade Freedom Party votes that the programme is a conservative policy which acts in U.S. national interest. As Holly recognises, the ‘demographic groups that your party normally relies on are precisely the ones that are most resistant to large-scale federal welfare projects

and the most worried about migration from other states into their communities’ (24). Slaymaker’s initial aim is to reach a broad audience with the unifying promise to ‘Reconfigure America’. Under this tagline, Holly works to ‘squeeze[e] out the smallest suggestion that Reconfigure America [is] a program of assistance’ Instead, she deploys, ‘metaphors of strength and safety: building fortresses, underpinning foundations, shoring up walls’ (107).

However, the campaign discovers that the American media environment, with competing media sources including a social networking site called ‘the whisperstream’, threatens the campaign’s ability to use mass media to inform voter priorities (3). The realisation echoes the ‘shift from mass broadcasting’, in media theorist Jessica T. Feezell’s description, ‘toward niche media [which] reach more narrowly targeted and attentive audiences’ and is ‘commonly referred to as audience fragmentation and is widely believe[d] to be a source of change in political behaviour’. This shift from mass to ‘niche’ media is the central focus of America City. The campaign team debate the merits and drawbacks of using the ‘whisperstream to deliver customized messages to each different affinity group’. They acknowledge that they can adapt Slaymaker’s public image for different demographics but recognise that it is ‘something you’ve got to be very careful about, because affinity groups aren’t airtight’ (26).

Given that much has been written about the ‘filter bubble’ of social media in recent years, readers might expect Beckett to depict ‘the whisperstream’ as an echo chamber. By contrast, Slaymaker’s opportunistic brand, which he uses to appeal to different voter groups, becomes a media performance with far-reaching consequences which the campaign cannot foresee or control. Joining a ‘twenty-four-hour news channel in the middle of a cycle’ (163), Slaymaker makes his decisive campaign pledge: the demand that Canada takes a specific number of American climate refugees as part of the Reunifying American resettlement programme. ‘We need Canada’s help here’, Slaymaker asserts, ‘[w]e need to ask Canada to take in some of our homeless people. Our northern states will roll up their sleeves and do their part – of course they will, they’re Americans, and that’s what Americans do – but they can’t do it all by

themselves’ (163). Slaymaker is more than a media-aware politician; instead, he embodies the centrality of rhetoric and enjoyment to contemporary political identity and media consumption. Slaymaker invokes a universal American people besieged by hostile enemies. He appeals to ‘America’ as a self-sufficient nation which deserves to be free of the menace of globalists and political correctness. However, the policy content of Slaymaker’s ‘Reconfiguring America’ programme is secondary to its rhetorical style. With this style, Slaymaker’s call for Canada’s participation encourages obscene enjoyment, with this provocative suggestion escalating into Holly’s suggestion that the campaign should organize rallies at border crossings:

[It] was a pretty unusual thing for a senior US politician to stand on the borders of another country and ask for his people be let in, and this, for certain key audiences, was always going to be more important than the words spoken. Holly was gratified to see, within an hour, an angry reaction from the Canadian government: ‘Canada already lets in many thousands of Americans every year... We must protest in the strongest terms about Senator Slaymaker’s deliberately provocative demands’. (174).

The decline in rhetorical tone and content of Slaymaker’s campaign is both chilling and indicative of how new media can defy the structures of professional journalism and politics. Slaymaker’s campaign brings into relief the battle over the political meaning of new media. President Williams’s team of media strategists and advisers are left in a difficult position. ‘International good manners required that she dissociate herself from the inflammatory behaviour of Senator Slaymaker’ (208).

The effect of Slaymaker’s popular demands is to undermine this politics of consensus. Slaymaker represents a fundamental attack on the professional political class’s understanding of diplomacy. Whilst his politics of reaction are thoroughly retrograde, his campaign is entirely consistent with the values of new media in encouraging extreme responses from his audience. On initial reading, America City’s status as an American climate novel seems incongruous with this emphasis. If Beckett’s novel initially emphasises the planetary scale of global warming, by its conclusion it seems more concerned with the political and economic logic of media performance and identity. Yet Beckett’s achievement is to highlight how representation of climate change must be understood in the context of transformed
media and journalistic values. *The Water Knife* is about the political influence of industry-sponsored climate change denial through conservative lobbying and think tanks. By comparison, *America City* is about an accompanying political trend which, after the turn of the century, has encouraged politicians to generate campaigns which use climate change – and climate change denial – to appeal to electorates, all whilst effectively misrepresenting climate science. Together, they contribute to a post-apocalyptic set of novels which is attuned to the changing relationship between government and its central institutions, such as journalism, and how they can become complicit with reactionary politics.

5. Conclusion: Insular Politics and Climate Change

New American civil war novels do not offer ‘end time’ visions of apocalyptic catastrophe but, rather, a complex series of imagined futures in which technology, rather than assuring U.S. superiority over enemies, slides them further and further towards secession or civil war. Instead, the new American civil war novel is a compelling literary form which inherits this national tradition to interrogate new and evolving relations between truth and democracy, and between politics and media communication, in America’s twenty-first century. Beckett’s and Bacigalupis’ novel follow this example and model. Both novelists’ decision to set their novels against the backdrop of a climate change in the U.S. has a twofold importance. Firstly, it shows how political stances on planetary climate change can become insular. In *America City*, beginning as a formal policy, the ‘Reconfiguring America’ programme becomes a broader and provocative signifier for conservative virtue, free-market capitalism and American liberty. Secondly, and consequently, the novel anticipates how future climate legislation will be debated within an American political discourse which is profoundly altered. Beckett’s novel resonates with Olivier Jutel’s work on American populism and media production. According to Jutel, as new media have encouraged the ‘popularization and dissemination of […] conspiracies’, ‘media politics may resemble the political at a formal level’ yet have become ‘void of critical potential’.49

Even after apocalyptic floods and ‘superstorms’, twenty-second-century America confronts the central predicament of democratic politics. Just because the radical prospect of environmental decline is on the horizon does not mean the American political climate will radically shift to meet the challenge. Instead, as America City recognises, a sustainable response requires co-opting social and political resources – and the novel recognises that media production, and high-tech communication, make this more difficult and unpredictable. As Slaymaker’s campaign slides in a more extreme direction, and ‘Canuck traitor’ becomes an aggressive, commonplace chant at rallies along the U.S.-Canadian border, Beckett’s readership may recognise the long-term, destructive consequences of populist politics which promise social collaboration and rebellion. Consistent with the themes of the new American civil war novel, Slaymaker’s campaign is ultimately depicted as the long-term future of American politics: a political-media spectacle which, connecting with an audience or movement, melds media branding and protest to appeal to emotion rather than practical policy.
Chapter Six


1. New American Civil Wars

This thesis demonstrates that the new American civil war novel adapts conventions from a set of American post-apocalyptic, gothic and horror traditions, including the American zombie tradition (as discussed in chapter two) and the American imperial gothic tradition (as discussed in chapter three). In each of these texts, U.S. secession is envisioned as a grave prospect. This chapter now turns to a set of post-apocalyptic texts which, as well as imagining U.S. secession, also depict future Americas after civil war. The proliferation of post-apocalyptic plots which imagine the long-term and brutal consequences of revolution in America is increasingly prominent. Novels including J. L. Bourne’s *Tomorrow's War* (2015), William C. Dietz's *Into the Guns* (2016) and Michael Tolkin's *NK3* (2017) are conspicuous instances of this literary trend which, along with self-published titles including Scott Medbury's *American Falls* series (2014-18) and Mark Goodwin's *United We Stand* (2018), envisage the start of civil war in twenty-first-century America.\(^1\) Released by publishers associated with popular horror and fantasy genres, including Grove Atlantic Press, these novels and series often have a reputation as frivolous, low-brow entertainment which is distinct from the more incisive perspectives of science-fiction and generally places them outside the literary or academic canon. Significantly, critics of these titles, including Sam Metz in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2017), suggest that the 'specter of President Trump currently looms above dystopian fiction – and many other things – and the criticism it has sprouted'.\(^2\) However, Metz joins other commentators,

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\(^2\) Sam Metz refers to Tolkin’s *NK3* in ‘Fiction of Dystopian Times: Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 5th June 2018
including fantasy author China Miéville who warns against the ‘panicky question that often arises in the hot-take universe responding to dystopian fiction [...] “What happens when reality become dystopian?”’

This chapter examines this paradox by addressing two recent North American texts which fully integrate the two genres: the Egyptian-Canadian novelist Omar El Akkad’s debut novel American War (2017) and Christopher Brown’s debut Tropic of Kansas (2017). Both novels acutely capture the apocalyptic themes of the new American civil war novel as a genre which this thesis identifies with a contemporary category of post-apocalyptic fiction. With closed borders and civil war reflecting new relations between the media and democracy, and between politics and global communication, this chapter argues that the new American civil war novel has become a compelling literary form for exploring acute and pressing questions concerning U.S. populism and protectionism. In keeping with each of the chapters in this thesis, this chapter identifies a set of post-apocalyptic subjects and locations which recur in recent North American fiction of this genre.

This chapter offers an in-depth analysis of these civil war novels which, as they become more commercially prominent in the post-apocalyptic genre, offer a critical and subversive commentary on the current decade marked by President Trump’s inauguration and by hard-line rhetoric favouring U.S. nationalism. The above statement reaffirms Edoardo Campanella’s and Marta Dassu’s argument that, after the election of Donald Trump, a form of ‘nostalgic nationalism’ became a reactionary ‘emotional weapon’ for (as the Boston Review notes) ‘contemporary evangelicals’ along with ‘other moralizers, celebrators of the “traditional” family values, white supremacists and men’s rights activists’.

3 Ibid. The Boston Review’s interview with Miéville reminds readers that progress relies upon rejecting historical nostalgia: ‘[a] start for any habitable utopia must be to overturn the ideological bullshit of empire and … revisit the traduced and defamed cultures on the bones of which some conqueror’s utopian dreams were piled up’. ‘A Strategy for Ruination: An Interview with China Miéville’, Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum, 8th January 2018 <https://bostonreview.net/literature-culture-china-mievie-strategy-ruination> [accessed 14th June 2019].

If, as historians of memory have noted, Western and American conceptions of nostalgia have shifted from the seventeenth-century onwards, then its appeal in the late-twentieth-century has been adapted into a rhetorical tactic for narratives about American identity.\(^5\) After the 2016 presidential election, and after the early phase of a new leadership, many citizens have come to ask whether nostalgia has been reframed and recoded in nationalistic or even fascistic terms.\(^6\) Even as public commentary was beginning to turn to such themes, twenty-first-century novels were also addressing this topic directly. In fact, these novels have supplemented historical realism with post-apocalyptic elements in order to examine the relationship between nostalgia and the ideological direction of American politics. To approach this compelling generic trend, this chapter calls on two major critics of the twentieth-century historical novel, Fredric Jameson and Ian Duncan, and brings their conclusions into dialogue with the work of Caren Irr, who identifies the ‘revolutionary novel’, when viewed as a sub-set of the historical novel, as a comeback genre which criticizes ‘the anti-democratic and anti-revolutionary aspects of American foreign policy’, including the Iraq and Afghanistan occupations during the War on Terror.\(^7\) Taking these new developments even further, the two novels in this chapter, *American War* and *Tropic of Kansas*, use the prospect of civil war to reveal the urgent need to rethink existing accounts of ‘anti-democratic’

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revolution, especially in the light of the associated socio-political visions which promise to ‘Make America Great Again’.

2. From the Historical Novel to the Revolution Novel

The novels in this chapter capture and reflect two key generic themes for the new American civil war novel: state nationalism, in which state populations are encouraged to identify with their state, and partisan rhetoric under the guise of patriotism. The novels examined in this chapter have been selected since they adopt conventions from the genre of the historical novel. On initial reading, the historical novel, as an enduring popular category of fiction dedicated to dramatizing the historical past, is at odds with the futuristic ruins of the post-apocalyptic novel. As critics stretching as far back as Jonathan Neild’s oft-cited Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales (1902) have argued, the historical novel is, by definition, a political novel since it risks communicating a ‘mass of inaccuracies’ which may mislead ‘the ignorant’ (i.e., the majority).8 With these terms in mind, the survival of post-apocalyptic scenarios seems less than promising ground for a genre which is animated, according to John McWilliams, by questions of ‘verifiable accuracy’ and ‘fact and dialogue’ which convinces the reader of historical characterisation.9

However, many of the post-apocalyptic texts which are examined in this thesis feature a key political event which McWilliams understands as central to the historical novel – the revolution. McWilliams’ study identifies twenty-five historical novels, from canonical authors including Honoré de Balzac, George Eliot and Leo Tolstoy, ‘in which civil war, revolution, or counterrevolution [are] central to the narrative’.10 However, the revolutions in the texts in this thesis are ignited by political campaigns which weaponize American patriotism. They designate opponents as insurgents or

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10 Ibid, p. xvi.
traitors. They also attempt to endorse a protectionist agenda to defy the effects of
globalisation. These include the Free State of Nevada in *The Mandibles*, the states of
Nevada, California and Arizona in *The Water Knife* and the neutral state of ‘New
Anchorage’ in *American War*. Revolution becomes a catalytic event in post-
apocalyptic narratives which results in the secession of U.S. states and the termination
of the Union. Why, then, are these two generic events so frequently combined?
Furthering this literary paradox, in these post-apocalyptic storylines revolution is not
the fulfilled ‘promise of liberal justice’, as McWilliams describes in his analysis.\(^\text{11}\) This
is a central question for the new American civil war novel which, as highlighted
throughout this thesis, is concerned with profound changes in professional and new
media during the decade before the Trump presidency.

In the closing chapter of *Antinomies of Realism* (2013), titled ‘The Historical
Novel Today, or Is It Still Possible?’, Jameson revisits the two authoritative studies by
Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (1920; tr. 1971 into English) and *The
Historical Novel* (1937; tr. 1962 into English). According to Jameson, whilst it is
‘tempting to characterize the historical novel as the intersection between individual
existence and History’, the contemporary historical novel is at risk of making
‘arbitrary selections’ from ‘colourful segments or periods’ and ‘catering to the
historicist taste’, rather than critiquing the unjust ‘hierarchical social relations’ of
history.\(^\text{12}\) Citing Perry Anderson’s survey of the historical novel for the *London
Review of Books*, which reminds us that ‘the historical novel has never been so
popular’, Jameson asserts that ‘historical content’ has supplanted ‘historical
consciousness’ to turn the critical reader into a ‘theatrical spectator, who observes the
great episodically and from afar’.\(^\text{13}\)

As observed in the Introduction, the texts in this thesis use their key and
recurrent themes to draw readers into complex considerations of technology,
democracy and twenty-first-century ideas of U.S. nationhood. If the critical potential

\(^\text{11}\) Ibid, p. xvii.


<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n15/perry-anderson/from-progress-to-catastrophe> [accessed
16th June 2019].

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of the traditional historical novel had seemingly begun to diminish during the last quarter of the twentieth century, then the pressing need to critique contemporary new technologies, democracy and nationhood has engendered an unexpected revival in the nascent sub-genre of mass-market literature called ‘alternate history’. The new American civil war novel adapts various conventions of this genre. Also known as ‘counter-factual history’ or ‘allohistory’, this genre is described by Madhu Dubey as ‘essentially imagin[ing] a divergence from accepted historical fact and trac[ing] its probable future consequences’. In significant titles published since the 1960s, including Robert Harris’ *Fatherland* (1992) and Harry Turtledove’s *In The Balance* (1994), the most popular subject for the alternate history novel has been a Nazi victory after the Second World War. This subject is followed closely by the Confederate states winning the Civil War. Whilst alternate histories of Nazi ascendancy have received sustained scholarly analysis, Dubey’s article on ‘Counterfactual Narratives of the Civil War and Slavery’ remains the most significant intervention to address a sub-set of alternate histories which imagine a post-Civil War victorious Confederacy.

More recent scholarship on the genre suggests that alternate histories question assumed historical narratives and revisit past historical junctures in order to consider their present-day consequences. In a formidable defence of the genre, Paul Alkon argues that its de-familiarising potential foregrounds questions of ‘causation and consequences’ and provokes ‘speculation about futures that […] will seem utopian or dystopian departures from present and potential realities’. The most notable characteristic of the genre – in Dubey’s words, its ‘peculiar blend of realist and counterfactual elements’ – allows it to interrogate familiar expectations of historical representation. For the most part, novelists follow this rule, attending to the accuracy of their alternative historical scenarios. Yet, at the same time, they often adopt premises such as time travel and alternative worlds to imagine the long-term

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16 Dubey, p. 22.
consequences of historical trends. As Alkon expands, alternate histories ‘may also be more of less explicitly intended as portraits of possible futures presented for convenience as though their distinctive features had already come into being’. The generic experimentation of alternate history novels demonstrates a profound concern with the likelihood of extreme or unthinkable future events.

The fact that an unthinkable future for the U.S., wrought by civil war, figures prominently in the twenty-first-century post-apocalyptic novel raises several intriguing questions. Given the profound generic challenges to the historical novel which Jameson and Dubey, among others, have charted, it seems significant that post-apocalyptic conventions are pivotal to American novels which imagine a sequel to the original American Civil War (1861-1865). If resurgent nationalism has sharpened the mockery of the traditional historical novel, what sort of critiques do post-apocalyptic texts, and the re-imagination of civil war, provide in this presumed vacuum? What does this prospect of civil war tell readers about a geopolitical environment characterised by ‘Anglo nostalgia’ which, according to Campanella’s and Dassu’s definition, ‘rejects a cosmopolitan world and yearn[s] for the socio-economic opportunities employed by older generations’? The answers which this chapter offers take perhaps a surprising direction, inspired by the genre which Caren Irr has termed the ‘revolutionary novel’. This term denotes a mode of the ‘twenty-first-century novel’ which has prompted a ‘host of authors to revise existing accounts of the revolutionary consciousness, the process by which revolutionary ideas are implemented, and the historical narrative itself’. The post-apocalyptic novel, within its generic narratives of survival and resilience, has taken a turn towards depicting revolutionary civil war in the immediate years leading up to Trump. During the 2016 campaign, Trump’s refrains concerned America’s persistent humiliation at the hands of immigrants and global powers (‘They’re laughing at us’). As S. Romi Mukherjee argues, ‘this is a

17 Ibid.
18 Campanella and Dassu, Anglo Nostalgia, p. 2.
19 Irr, Geopolitical Novel, p. 143.
macho politics designed to re-virilize “the victims” – namely middle- and lower-class white men’.  

Whilst Trumpism echoes populism, this scapegoating creates the discursive conditions for speculations about a potentially very real civil war. Within these political conditions, American War and Tropic of Kansas are examples of a new post-apocalyptic trend which adapts the revolution novel to confront America’s political status quo and, by doing so, develops a generic template which promises to generate science-fiction and post-apocalyptic visions for future decades. Both novels capture the post-apocalyptic trend of civil war becoming a catalyst for America’s rapid decline. They also extrapolate the consequences of a scenario which was examined in the previous thesis chapter’s discussion of The Water Knife and America City: the refusal to acknowledge anthropogenic climate change. In these texts, the trope of civil war intersects with the taglines of Trump’s presidential campaign which dismissed global warming as a ‘hoax’ to make ‘U.S. manufacturing non-competitive’. The new American civil war novels in this chapter focus on its characters’ deliberate resistance to the intrusion of official news and propaganda. As discussed across each of the chapters in this thesis, the new American civil war novel is concerned with how asymmetries in communication translate into asymmetries of information and knowledge. Such profound socio-political undertones not only reveal the disturbing underside of recent American politics but also foreshadow the imminent political debates which will become more central to U.S.’s future.


22 Donald J. Trump, Twitter @realDonaldTrump, 6th November 2012 <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/265895292191248385?lang=en> [accessed 22nd July 2019].

Both Omar El Akkad's *American War* (2017) and Christopher Brown's *Tropic of Kansas* (2017) are debut novels which reflect pervasive themes in contemporary literary categories of science-fiction. El Akkad's *American War* was shortlisted for Canada's Rogers Writers Trust Fiction Prize (2017) and it was also a finalist for the Arthur C. Clarke Award (2018) for science-fiction with past notable nominees including Kim Stanley Robinson and Neal Stephenson. Similarly, Brown was nominated for the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for Best Science Fiction Novel (2018) with special mention in *Locus Magazine* as the key journal for English Language science-fiction. With this debut success sealing both authors’ reputations as promising science-fiction writers, their novels are stand-alone publications which take up intricately imagined visions of civil war and, most significantly, imagine speculative futures which recall predictions from climate journalism including *Climate Home News, Climate Central* and *Inside Climate News*.

This analysis revisits questions about the relationship between media and climate denial which were examined in Chapter Five. However, it also combines this focus with themes from Whitehead’s *Zone One*, discussed in Chapter Two, which depicts zombie apocalypse as a catalyst for shifting sensationalist media values into American political debate and government.

In *American War*, the United States of America is plunged into a ‘Second American Civil War’ (2074-95) between the North (or ‘the Union’) and Southern ‘secessionist states of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina (as well as Texas, prior to the Mexican annexation)’. Key events before the war include the assassination of the U.S. President by a ‘secessionist suicide bomber’ after the U.S.


introduces a ‘Sustainable Future Act’, or a ‘bill prohibiting the use of fossil fuels anywhere in the United States’. Guerrilla violence enhances tensions between the North and South, and the latter secedes under the banner of the ‘Free Southern States’. Just as war is due to conclude in 2095, the release of a biological agent by the protagonist, an insurgent called Sarat Chestnut, leads to a ten-year pandemic which kills 110 million of America’s population.

El Akkad’s American War begins over fifty years into the future, in the year 2074, when the U.S. government introduces a ‘Sustainable Future Act’ prohibiting the use of fossil fuels. Four Southern states – Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina – veto this legislation which leads to demonstrations, the assassination of the U.S. President, and the declaration of Southern independence in October 2074. This fictional context recalls opposition, as reported by Climate Home News, to U.S. legislation aiming to reduce emissions, including the ‘Energy Policy Act’ (2005) and the ‘Energy Independence and Security Act’ (2007), which were stripped of ‘environmentally ambitious provisions, including one requiring utilities to generate 10 percent of their electricity from renewable sources by 2020’. Similarly, Tropic of Kansas imagines a doomsday America which, after the successful assassination of Ronald Reagan in 1981, is under the militaristic control of a kleptocrat named Thomas Mack. The U.S. has dissolved the Soviet Union through a series of wars and charged ‘military merchant companies’ to seize natural resources in Central America. The Internet, as a global system of integrated computers, does not exist. Rather, a government-controlled network, operated through a protocol called the ‘Mandatory Open Format Universal Conversion’, is in place for domestic surveillance. Both

novels, therefore, retrace the origins of civil war to a conservative backlash towards U.S. government. However, these novels join *Zone One*, and other post-apocalyptic novels in this thesis, by offering an important engagement with America’s media landscape in the wake of post-millennium debates about U.S. media, technology and democracy. Both novels, through depicting civil war, are concerned with transformations in media and communication which make platforms conducive to populist antagonism.

In *Tropic of Kansas*, for instance, the U.S. has seceded into warring factions and is barricaded from a no-man’s land in the central U.S. (known as the eponymous ‘Tropic of Kansas’) and a ‘separatist political experiment’ has ‘taken root in New Orleans’ after a flood which parallels Hurricane Katrina (2005) (54). This faction’s demands ensue from environmental fears about coastal land loss in New Orleans. Regional insurgents communicate through illegal media channels called ‘the network’ which, using outdated technology, fax machines and discarded antennae, ‘share[s] information about food shortages and power outages […] traffic and weather, potholes and politics’ (79). With the network growing out of independent journalism which covers environmental issues in New Orleans, *Tropic of Kansas* makes specific reference to real-life independent platforms, including the *Fund for Environmental Journalism* (created 2010) and the *Louisiana Coastal Reporting Team* (2017), which are dedicated to enhancing accountability for the New Orleans coast.29 ‘The Network’ warns that Hurricane Katrina is symptomatic of long-term climate denial which not only ensues from neglected investment but also from U.S. government denial of climate change itself. *Tropic of Kansas*, therefore, offers a significant contrast to *Zone One*. Whitehead’s novel interrogates – and warns against – the relationship between new media and populist rhetoric. *Tropic of Kansas*, however, hints at the emergence of a more independent, advocacy-based journalism which broadens professional news coverage.

Indeed, the primary focus of *Tropic of Kansas*, as also in *American War*, is how both official and rebel governments restrict citizens’ access to accurate news and

29 See, for instance, ‘The Times-Picayune establishes Louisiana Coastal Reporting Team’, *Times-Picayune*, 7th January 2017 <https://www.nola.com/news/environment/article_e85b7b8a-ec7a-512f-97e0-e7e9233ae0c0.html> [accessed 15th June 2019].
information about America’s coastal flood levels and fossil fuels. Both novels focus on young adult protagonists who are born in seceded territory in the ‘Free Southern States’ (in American War) and in ‘sovereign territory’ based in New Orleans (in Tropic of Kansas). In American War, Sarat Chestnut, a refugee from St James, Louisiana who grows up in ‘Camp Patience Refugee Facility’, is radicalised by ‘Southern propagandists’ (4, 62). After family members are killed in an attack by the North (or ‘the Union’) on Camp Patience, she is recruited to unleash a biological virus, later called the ten-year-long ‘Reunification Plague’, in Atlanta, Georgia, on the eve of U.S. Reunification (4). As noted in the thesis introduction, and discussed in Chapter Two, the new American civil war novel is concerned with how public opinion can be fanned or distorted into extreme political stances. The life-story of central characters in both novels, as they are recruited by state armies or insurgent rebels, is an important premise for the new American civil war novel. With similar echoes, the chapters of Tropic of Kansas alternate between the perspectives of the novel’s two main protagonists. These protagonists are a brother and sister: Sig, a teenage recruit to the New Orleans rebels, and Tania, a young government investigator, based in Washington, D.C., who is required by the renamed ‘U.S. Motherland Security’ to track down her ‘terrorist’ brother (73-7). In exchange for betraying Sig, Motherland Security agree to rescue her mother from ‘reprogramming’, an interrogative process which leaves its subjects in a near-lobotomised condition (104-8).

Whilst Tropic of Kansas concludes with Sig’s capture by Motherland Security, his abduction and exploitation in a propaganda video becomes the final impetus behind an insurrectionist ‘March on Washington’ which overthrows the dictatorial government. Rebels in New Orleans pick up radio signals from other insurgent cells, in locations including Austin, Texas, and ‘[l]aw and order [breaks] down quickly’: ‘It didn’t take much to light the fire in people weaned on myths of revolution and pent up with a century of media-induced numb’ (442). At their core, American War and Tropic of Kansas are critiques of America’s media landscape, and especially of the disconnect between U.S. voters or citizens and professional news outlets. Both novels use the prospect of civil war, and the propaganda which warring states use against one another, to explore the ways in which twenty-first-century relations between politics and media have developed in unequal ways. In this sense, the illegal channels of ‘the Network’ in Tropic of Kansas reveal that, in this future America, the underlying structural conditions necessary for journalists to do their job in more conventional ways are
redundant. Indeed, the primary restriction to investigative journalism is an executive order called the ‘Mandatory Open Format Universal Conversion’ which ‘mandate[s] that all media – broadcast, terrestrial, cable, online, you name it – operate on the new digital standard dictated by the government’ (92).

It is at this point that _Tropic of Kansas_ uses two of the most prominent themes of the new American civil war novel. The first is the rise of partisan rhetoric. The second is that, as global communication becomes more advanced, professional and new media become more susceptible to sabotage and interception. The civil war-torn U.S. becomes a motif which allows the genre to explore how technology influences divisions in U.S. democracy. One of the key ways in which rebel forces in New Orleans bypass restrictions is through illegal broadcasts on ‘Channel Zero’ as ‘the numbers station’ which after dark runs ‘the straight-up propaganda. Chalk talks and shaky video of people speaking at underground rallies’ (204).

The rebel leader for New Orleans is a black woman called Maxine Price, a ‘writer turned politician’, described in an ironic inversion of the novel’s dystopian context as a ‘woman who took the literary utopias of her early years and turned them into the basis of a new politics’ (205). She proclaims in these broadcasts that the threat to U.S. democracy ensues from U.S. government self-interest in denying the environmental threat due to their investments in ‘MMCs, oil and gas’ (206). In the opening chapters, Tania recounts her intensive training as a government investigator after she is recruited from college, ‘where the professor for her senior seminar on Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles gave her name to a government recruiter’ (68). Her ‘special training’ includes ‘computer forensics, predictive analytics, surveillance and counter-surveillance’ (69). This account reveals the widescale reorganisation of U.S. domestic security and border institutions. However, most importantly, it reveals that the incumbent president’s authoritarian rise to power is not an exception to the rule: instead, it makes visible the fault lines which have evolved over several decades, as Price asserts, to make voter choices ‘illusory’ (206).

Perhaps the most significant moment in the novel, at least in terms of this critique, is the sequence after the broadcast of Sig’s hostage video by U.S. Motherland Security. The video is broadcast six months after Sig’s violent escape from a militia base which, with numerous fatalities of security operatives, seals his reputation as the U.S.’s most wanted man. The video aims to convince U.S. citizens of a coming ‘counter-revolution’ to the predicted rise of rebel New Orleans: ‘We are going to show
your viewers at home what you weak-minded freaks are really made of’ (430). However, this live-streamed video is sabotaged by undercover rebel assassins who kill U.S. Motherland operatives live on-air. Witnessing this live-streamed attack on U.S. forces, ‘Law and order [breaks] down quickly’: ‘It didn’t take much to light the fire in people covered in petrochemicals by the kleptocracy and told it was actually freedom’ (442-3). Overnight revolution is marked by successive acts of media sabotage, including ‘young rebels hack[ing] the Citizen Emergency Alert network and fill[ing] it up with disinformation and misdirection until it broke’ [italics in original] (443).

_Tropic of Kansas_, therefore, uses the theme of censorship, which is central to the new American civil war novel, to reveal profound cultural anxieties around access to accurate and unbiased news. This is especially prescient for the decade during Trump’s early presidency. In Brown’s novel, the failure of U.S. federal government fully to strategize against disinformation tactics leads to the collapse of two central assumptions in U.S. politics – elite leadership and a largely silent majority. It is the symbolism of this collapse which makes _Tropic of Kansas_ such an effective work of social commentary on the ‘post-truth’ moment in politics after Trump’s inauguration. Brown depicts revolution being profoundly intertwined with news and media networks. When the rebels sabotage government monitored networks and resist systematic attempts to reduce citizen access to accurate news, the reader is reminded of the lows in public trust, of both news media and politicians, which played a key role in the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. As Campanella and Dassu observe in their study on political nostalgia, Trump’s victory was at least partly informed by a period ‘when experts and the traditional media are so distrusted’, and when ‘countering the false restorative nostalgia of nationalist and jingoistic leaders’ is perceived to be ‘not so straightforward’.30 This was a notion which Trump himself enhanced over the course of the campaign, with his repeated claims that he would ‘drain the swamp’, in a slogan recalling Reagan’s derision of U.S. federal government, and sever the link between special interest lobbies and U.S. administrations.31

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With this rhetoric in mind, readers can interpret the revolution in *Tropic of Kansas* as reflecting a central feature of ‘post-truth’ politics: that objective facts are less significant for rallying public opinion, and disrupting the status quo, than emotional appeals to injustice. This fictional revolution, with the aim of experimenting with ‘distributed democracy’ after thirty years of an authoritarian presidency, is not politically aligned with the Trump administration which delegitimises legacies of earlier presidencies, including executive orders to overturn regulatory restraints on fossil fuel industries (443). However, the rebels understand that political tactics must be emotionally appealing – they recognise they are living through an era distorted by propaganda issuing from President Mack’s administration. This is an era in which facts are not as important for political campaigns as, first, the speed at which disruption to propaganda can travel and, second, the clear and simplistic sentiment beneath them.

In common with other post-apocalyptic titles published in the late 2000s and early 2010s, including Whitehead’s *Zone One* and Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife*, *Tropic of Kansas* is concerned with a growing distrust of America’s media institutions. Throughout the novel, the rebels share crucial news and information via retuning devices, including televisions, to channels which broadcast ‘a lot of banned programming – foreign news, atrocity stuff, anti-Executive propaganda’ (93). Sig’s first job with rebel forces is with a ‘New Democracy Co-op Fulfilment Center’ which, based in an abandoned mall, distributes ‘Care packages’ that mainly include ‘things to help people communicate – net kits, little handheld televisions with the transmit boxes built in […] pop-up antennas, gear to power the networks with energy from the sun’ (148).

From the outset, finding alternative news sources, which defy the official narratives broadcast by the U.S. government, requires skill and determination. However, this revolution not only faces censorship, and competition with government propaganda, but also risks commercialisation by outside ventures. After Sig’s eventual capture by militia forces, who are in the pay of the U.S. Motherland operatives but still separate from their ranks, he is offered a negotiated release on the condition of a ‘five

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percent’ equity stake in the rebels’ channels. As the militia man, named Walker, asserts:

Seriously, you have no idea. This thing is really just getting going [...] Viral. The content’s all free. We make money off advertising, DVDs, snowflake transaction fees, product placement. And now that the shit’s starting to fly, look out. There is no one better positioned to make money off this revolution. (410)

Walker’s demand sheds light on the relationship between news storytelling and political communication strategies. Walker seeks to monetise a political movement in which citizens do not vote for a leader with whom they identify (like President Mack) but, instead, seek a community shaped by a certain ethos or atmosphere. Tropic of Kansas, therefore, outlines two options for U.S. citizens: to be entrapped in a state of consumer demand and passivity, or to reinvent media practices and, thereby, revitalise democratic life. Propaganda efforts by President Mack represent a ‘one-directional’ mode of political communication which, according to Giovanni Maddalena, has defined presidential campaigns ‘ever since the U.S. presidential debate in 1960 between Kennedy and Nixon’: ‘[t]elevision is one-directional: you cannot participate in the images it produces. A viewer receives them, and they work as a sign to indicate the person for whom the viewer should vote’. As with the Network, the rebels’ use of outdated devices, including ‘handheld devices’ and ‘transmit boxes’, functions as a symbolic acceptance of a new era for social network campaigning. In contrast to the Hollywood productions which valorise President Mack (with federal funded movies depicting him as heroic characters including a ‘freshman senator’ (194) turned Navy pilot who defeats rebel insurgents), the possibility of citizens sharing their own information shifts the focus away from a U.S. leader towards the public.

As highlighted in the introduction, the post-apocalyptic novels included in this thesis repurpose the motif of U.S. secession to examine new political experiments that interrogate this politics of antagonism and its involvement in democracy. The seceded U.S. states come to represent sites which force survivors to confront the frailties of

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democratic institutions under digital capitalism. These range from journalists attempting to locate legal paperwork which will end civil war over water sources in the Southwestern U.S. (as we see in Bacigalupi’s The Water Knife), to the experimental colony called ‘Consilience’ which, claiming to rescue survivors from the debt-ridden U.S, is exposed as a marketized front for an illegal organ trafficking hub (in Atwood’s The Heart Goes Last), or even the U.S setting up a new international radio station to defy the militarised Russian Federation in Brooks’ World War Z. These texts depict closed states as sites which expose how the speed of global communication is implicated in corruption and antagonism, a vision which appeals to alarmist or reactionary tendencies in the U.S. Ultimately, the new American civil war novel addresses new kinds of anti-establishment sensibility which promise to grow more acute in the globalised, digitised world.

With this focus, the novel addresses the political and geopolitical context which has made social media and communication a major contributory factory to U.S. international relations. When the rebels re-purpose political communication in this way, and speedily use alternative networks to circumvent official broadcasts, they recall how the contemporary moment caught the U.S. establishment, and journalism in the U.S., by surprise during the 2016 election race. In the decade before the election, social media was changing not just the dynamics of politics but the dynamics of war and regional conflict. How information was being accessed, adapted and shared had taken on a new diplomatic importance. This resourcefulness was evident in the summer of 2014, when fighters of the self-proclaimed Islamic States (also known as ISIS) invaded Northern Iraq and, amplified by Twitter bots and Instagram images of militants and convoys, became a viral effort under one telling hashtag: ‘#AllEyesOnISIS’. As ISIS attained online virality, other international online elections and campaigns were being contested. Outside the U.S. most notably Rodrigo Duterte, the president of the Philippines elected in 2016, was hailed as the country’s first ‘social media president’ due to innovative online social media campaigning. However, dismissive of human rights, his administration soon set about discrediting journalists and activists with the backing of online hackers and supportive social media

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groups. As P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking argue, as ‘diplomats and heads of state [also] embraced the social media revolution’ they began to embrace its immediacy and to leave ‘behind the slow-moving ritualistic system that governs international relations’.

Additionally, the novel also addresses the early presidency of Donald Trump, With rising economic nationalism, captured by the banner of ‘America First’, the novel dramatizes the national factors and conditions which Alex Ross describes as fostering an ominous epoch of ‘American authoritarianism’.

Within a similar timeframe, in the U.S., Trump, who had praised Obama as a ‘champion’ during his early presidency, became a prominent celebrity critic who rallied against U.S. dealings with China, Iran, and other U.S. trade relations. Although these ‘flame wars’ initially did not translate into political action, they encouraged Internet conspiracy, attacked Obama’s eligibility to serve and that of his administration (‘Let’s take a closer look at that birth certificate’) and steered American politics into more unpredictable and polarising terrain. Writing about Trump’s media tactics, which were a precursor to his campaign strategy, Catherine Happer, Andrew Hoskins and William Merrin describe Trump as manipulating a ‘fractal informational environment’ to make information ‘a weaponizable force for anyone with the power to seize and lay claim to it. This is essentially what Trump achieved. Reality itself was seized, and the valid claims of “fake news” were reversed back against the mainstream media themselves’.

Brown’s novel, therefore, satirises the same political logic which Whitehead satirises, as discussed in Chapter Two: namely, the crafting of political identity as a media brand. Tropic of Kansas reflects this same political use of communication, with rebel activity anticipating key political campaign strategies through new and social media. In the novel’s epilogue which takes place one year after the revolution, the insurgents are confronted with new optimistic possibilities being overtaken by the

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36 Alex Ross, ‘The Frankfurt School Knew Trump was Coming’, New Yorker, 5th December 2016 < https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-frankfurt-school-knew-trump-was-coming > [accessed 17th May 2019].

most exploitative aspects of capitalism. It turns out that the revolution has led to the outcome which America always feared: it is being ‘carve[d] up’ under the economic and fiscal logic of ‘[c]reative destruction’. In a further display of tragic irony, the U.S. is becoming more unequal through wealth divides, as ‘half the places are giant co-ops and the other half are going to be company towns. Hard to confederate that’ (465). This outcome warns against assuming progressive outcomes from carefully arranged media spectacles. In a global networked society, media events arise quickly and even overnight and become both virtual and viral. In certain cases, they are the means of socio-political transformation. At other times, they are moments of hype and media sensationalism. In *Tropic of Kansas*, revolution has fallen into the media tactics used by President Mack: a political figure, this time Sig, performs a well-rehearsed script and generates artificial media events to instil public and national confidence. As the media icon of the New Orleans revolution, Sig is now imprisoned in the Nevada desert, outside Las Vegas, where he becomes a mascot for the new government and broadcasts endorsing updates on economic activity, including ‘real estate speculation’ in America’s cities: ‘It’s the future. The short-term future’ (465).

It seems particularly significant here, in this final thesis chapter, that Sig should be transformed into a propaganda vehicle, with new government activity dependent upon blending politics and media performance. It is this performance which, in the novel’s closing pages, turns the focus of the *Tropic of Kansas* back to the prospect of environmental disaster which originally encouraged the rebels’ resistance to U.S. government. Sig admits from his bunker that the revolution failed to address the rising sea levels which threaten New Orleans: ‘The long-term future is green. No matter what we do. Nature will be better off without us, whenever that finally happens’ (465). *Tropic of Kansas*, therefore, insists that political change is accompanied by, and increasingly dependent upon, new media. As with each of the novels examined in this thesis, Brown’s novel uses the key themes of the new American civil war novel to critique and satirise the influence of new media values upon politics. Ultimately, revolution becomes a tragedy undermined by digital capitalism – with the increasingly sensationalised character of media representation being adapted for extreme and contradictory political causes.

Following a similar model to *Tropic of Kansas*, El Akkad’s *American War* takes up an intricately imagined vision of civil war which begins over fifty years into the future when the U.S. government introduces a ‘Sustainable Future Act’ prohibiting the use of fossil fuels. Four Southern states – Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina – veto this legislation which leads to demonstrations, the assassination of the U.S. President Daniel Ki, and the declaration of Southern independence in October 2074. This future is clearly meant to be read against our present times: a broken political system sabotaged by factionalism, militarism (including drone strikes) and catastrophic deluges in the Southern U.S. due to rising sea levels. This futuristic U.S. defies generic conventions of alternate history novels, as outlined by Gallagher and Dubey. Instead, its vision resonates with Irr’s insightful inventory of the revolution novel’s crucial features in the twenty-first century:

Leaping up for a moment to ponder devastation, the twenty-first-century novel of revolution displaces the form’s conventional confidence in progress with amazement at the fact of radical ruptures, even when it reveals the ill effects and brevity of that change. When joined with shifts in characterization and figuration, this tonal difference pulls the twenty-first-century novel of revolution toward a new genre.

Based on this list of properties, *American War* is in many respects a twenty-first-century revolution novel. As with *Tropic of Kansas*, the life-story of its central character is an important narrative arc for the new American civil war novel. The novel focuses on the life of Sarat Chestnut, a six-year-old girl raised during the ‘Second American Civil War’ (2074-2095) to become a terrorist insurgent for the Free Southern States (4). As in the revolution narratives which Caren Irr examines, the novel does not ultimately follow the identifiable pattern of progress within the larger social order, instead presenting civil war as a catalyst which fractures the American Union and accelerates the U.S.’s decline into a negligible global power.

Contrary to the alternative history genre, which, according to Dubey, constructs a progressive U.S. national narrative, *American War* offers a concrete and intimate account of how ‘visions of social revolution’ can be ‘stripped of the public
and political’ potential and the attendant potential of a large democratic group.\textsuperscript{38} In the novel’s opening, El Akkad dwells at length on the extreme poverty of ‘St James, Louisiana’ in ‘April, 2075’ (9-11). Sarat lives with her family, including two siblings Dana and Simon, amidst a ship-breaking community along the ‘sleepy Louisiana coast’ (25). The Chestnut family, including her mother and father Marina and Benjamin, are ship breakers, scavenging metal from old oil tankers whilst, after the North’s boycott of fossil fuels, sourcing their electricity from rudimentary solar panels. The Southern states rely upon dwindling supplies of petroleum which no longer ‘keep the Louisiana ports and refineries economically viable’. As ‘the rest of the world learned to live off the sun and wind […] the old fuel became archaic and nearly worthless. The refineries were shuttered and the drills were abandoned, even as the rebel states chose open warfare over prohibition’ (25). For Louisiana residents, energy resources are running dry as the South relies more and more upon foreign aid. This aid does not come from Northern neighbours but from ‘new-born superpowers: China and the Bouazizi Empire’, with the latter only a ‘few decades earlier’ being ‘nothing more than a collection of failed and failing nations spread across the Middle East and North Africa’ (26). With this premise, American War not only presents a stark portrait of post-apocalyptic destitution but also represents both the rise of the ‘Bouazizi Union’, as a region occupied by America during the War on Terror and the final death knell for the confidence of the American Union.

Certainly, the future which El Akkad portrays corresponds to Irr’s observation that the revolution genre now recasts previous revolutionary justifications and calls attention to how ‘revolutionary events in culture are accompanied by the militarization of culture in the so-called war on terror’.\textsuperscript{39} Yet what makes the comparison even more intriguing is the extent to which El Akkad reverses U.S. militarization to concentrate influence in the Middle East, as the world’s new ‘orchestrator of gravity, a sun around which all weaker things spin’ (118). In an interview for the Canadian literary magazine Just a Word (2017), El Akkad identifies the ‘Bouazizi Empire [as] a fictional construct’ which imagines a triumphant outcome for the pro-democracy Arab Spring protests in Egypt (2011), Tunisia (2010-11) and Yemen (2011-12).\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{38} Irr, Geopolitical Novel, pp. 149, 172.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, p. 143.

\textsuperscript{40} Nicolas Winter, ‘Interview Omar El Akkad’, Just A Word, 9th October 2017.
A central theme for the new American civil war novel is how new media have the potential to influence politics and extremism. By referring to the events of the Arab Spring, *American War* interrogates the legacy of a political revolution which changed the relationship between understandings of revolution or political progress and new media. In the novel, the Bouazizi Empire, named for the Tunisian street-vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire in December 2010 and ignited the Tunisian Revolution, does not revisit the legacy of the War on Terror. This legacy includes the practices of torture in Abu Ghraib, black-site prisons of Iraq and Afghanistan and indefinite detention in Guantanamo Bay. Instead, in *American War*, the Bouazizi Empire succeeds where the U.S. fails: whilst the Middle East quells nationalistic tendencies within its region, the U.S. exacerbates national divisions by renewed (but misguided) confidence in America’s commitment to fossil fuels.

El Akkad’s novel, in keeping with post-apocalyptic conventions, imagines extreme material conditions, whilst also capturing the unstable distinction between revolutionary idealism and reactionary conceit. In her analysis of twenty-first-century revolution, Irr identifies the Arab Spring as ‘pointing toward a fundamentally new experience of the political’:

Existing political theories do not provide complete explanations for these events. For classical liberalism, the main event that legitimates revolution is a sovereign’s assault on the citizen’s property. However, property rights have not been major slogans in the Arab Spring or other contemporary anti-state movements (such as the struggles in Burma or Tibet). […] they suggest an urgent need to rethink existing accounts of […] justifications for revolution, as well as associated visions of political process and social effects.41

According to Irr, the Arab Spring demonstrations, whilst defiant of one-party dictatorships, were not indexed to either the ‘liberal conception of the possessive individual publicly legitimated by property rights’ or to the ‘leftist tradition of the


41 Irr, *Geopolitical Novel*, pp. 142-3.
party-organised masses’.

Instead, as the protests’ failure ignited renewed speculations about the future of pro-democratic revolution, the ‘peaceful embrace’ of liberal democracy appeared ‘more conflicted, violent, and unlikely at the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century’. In American War, the language of El Akkad’s text foregrounds this tension between views of revolution. The novel’s retrospective account of Sarat Chestnut’s life is interspersed with archival evidence from civil war including news articles, press releases and oral testimonies. Midway through the novel, Chestnut quotes official ‘remarks by Kaseb Ibn Aumran, President of the Bouazizi Union, delivered at Ohio State University (June 4, 2081)’ (144-5).

In this address, President Aumran recasts the Arab Spring as a ‘bloody but necessary revolution, a revolution that claimed the lives of many martyrs’ but granted the region the ‘freedom they had, for almost two centuries, been denied’. Recalling conventions of alternate history – or what Dubey might call ‘redemptive history’ – the president assures his audience that the Bouazizi Union will adopt America’s ‘dedication to liberty’ (144-5). Yet, as with many moments throughout the novel, this progressivism only serves to highlight the insular outlook of the U.S. during civil war. In this passage, we see the Bouazizi Union adopt a liberal, internationalist worldview which, at least within President Aumran’s rhetoric, promises to ‘stand ready as allies to assist in any way [they] can’ with America’s rehabilitation (145).

However, by the end of America’s twenty-year civil war, this stance has shifted into covert intentions to extend the American civil war for as long as possible and to collaborate, through covert arms deals, with Free Southern rebel states. The Bouazizi Union is behind the release in Columbus, Ohio, of a lethal virus which, just before U.S. reunification, kills over one hundred million people. The Arab Spring, founded on pro-democratic revolution, becomes, in the long-term, the foundation for another militaristic superpower which, like the former U.S., conceals its dominance with conciliatory rhetoric. They are able to turn the U.S.’s own military strategy against itself. They recruit a virologist called Gerry Tusk, based in ‘government labs in Lynchburg’, who is originally tasked with finding a cure to a version of the ‘phalanx’ virus which the North’s War Office released in Carolina to pacify ‘the country’s first

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42 Ibid, p. 143.

43 Ibid, p. 141.
rebel state’ (94-6). Tusk’s betrayal is evocative of the predicament which Irr describes in the revolutionary novel. The U.S. assumes former dominance and yet discovers that its position can be rapidly undermined by reactionary dissatisfaction within its own nation.

Tusk’s betrayal takes on additional symbolism in the political context of the brutal, anti-democratic repression which followed the Arab Spring revolutions. In his fascinating study, *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium* (2014), Martin Gurri cites the Arab Spring as the key political event which introduced a new paradigm of ‘viral discontent’ (also captured by the U.S.-led Occupy protests beginning in Wall Street in 2011) and which challenged ‘hierarchical, industrial, and top-down’ modes of institutional life. As Gurri argues, the Arab Spring was the culmination of ‘digital anger’ which was first glimpsed after the new millennium: ‘in the year 2001, the amount of information produced doubled that of all previous history. 2002 doubled 2001 – and this trend has continued ever since’. Gurri’s polemic was reviewed in the blogosphere and linked to by news aggregators, including *80,000 hours*. It was eventually praised, in the left-wing magazine *The Intercept*, for predicting ‘the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom’. In a re-published edition, with a chapter on Trump’s presidential campaign, Gurri observes that the Arab Spring was not a moment which foresaw optimistic renewal. Instead, it was the beginning of a ‘struggle between a digitally empowered public and the institutions of the industrial age’ which, rendering the image of ‘paralysed government institutions’, ‘promoted the ruin of democracy and “legitimized” the authoritarian impulse, at home and abroad’.

El Akkad’s choice to envision the Bouazizi Union as a new ‘motherland’, in President Aumran’s words, of ‘liberty, democracy and self-determination’, suggests that *American War* is committed to interrogating a deep chasm between revolutionary ideals and the chaotic experience of rebellion (144). Since the despondent political

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45 Murtaza Hussain, [Interview with Martin Gurri], *The Intercept*, 3rd March 2019 <https://theintercept.com/2019/03/03/revolt-of-the-public-martin-gurri/> [accessed 2nd August 2019].

46 Ibid.
legacy of the Arab Spring is widely documented, with one-party authoritarian governments in countries including Egypt, the Bouazizi Union is a deeply ironic fictional construction. Imagining an alternative trajectory for the Arab Spring, the Union becomes a narrative device which highlights how Western confidence in democratic revolution has been irrevocably undermined. For many, the early Arab Spring was enmeshed with the changing nature of new digital technologies – what Todd Wolfson optimistically describes as the birth of the ‘Cyber left’ which, ‘from Seoul and Sao Paulo’, would engender a ‘form of democracy at a global scale’. However, retrospective accounts of the Arab Spring have since emphasised the vulnerability of this activism to counter-revolution – ‘each actor’, as Nathan J. Brown concludes, ‘went into democratic politics with unrealistic expectations regarding what it could achieve’ and underestimated how ‘autocratic politics can reach out from its grave to hobble efforts to move toward democracy’.48

This gulf between the Arab Spring’s aspirations and its ultimate failure is significant for the fictional historical narrative of American War. It not only reverses the perceived failure of the Arab Spring, with a successful transition from an authoritarian past to a democratic future under the Bouazizi Union, but its post-revolutionary political order also distances itself from nationalist promises to restore the glory of the past. This is a clear contrast to the U.S. South which deploys promises of restored glory to aggressively fuel distrust and hatred of the North. It is this nostalgic narrative of ‘American prestige’ which divides the U.S. nation into North versus South factions, permitting triumphant campaigns which ignore the depredation and cruelty at the heart of the Free South militia armies. In this future U.S., the Free South resorts to patriotic fantasies, complete with slogans to make America’s uncertain future more comprehensible to citizens living amidst gloomy predictions of environmental degradation.

By portraying these conditions, and depicting the Bouazizi Union’s rise in sync with this decline, El Akkad effectively conveys a new age of what Edoardo


Campanella and Marta Dassu call ‘nostalgic nationalism’ which, they argue, ‘represents an abrupt break from the uninterrupted history of continuous progress’ which has characterised the U.S. since the end of the American Civil War. El Akkad not only depicts nostalgia for American prestige as a cause of future American civil war. Most crucially, *American War* also depicts this mindset being compounded by changing demographic, geopolitical and economic conditions. The novel’s early pages emphasise that, even before civil war, the U.S. was on the cusp of international decline: ‘decades of adverse climate effects’ were combining with ‘the waning economic importance of fossil fuels’ which was undermining the U.S. currency and economic influence (22). The U.S. was no longer the supranational actor which ‘existed in the first half of the twenty-first century: soaring, roaring, oblivious’ (3). Instead, U.S. actions, including the Sustainable Future Act (2074), are tinged with defensive rhetoric and justification. It is an industrial disaster, referred to as the ‘deadly oil train derailment in Williston, North Dakota, in 2069’, which serves as the final wake-up call to federal government to terminate the waning oil industry (22). Such pragmatic actions emphasise the geopolitical context for civil war which has begun to move the U.S., as the former hegemon in the world system, to the periphery.

In response to this detrimental shift in U.S. status, the institutional arrangements proposed by the U.S. South attempt creatively to preserve a past which is falling apart – an activity which is recognisable across each post-apocalyptic novel discussed in this thesis. However, unlike comparable texts, in which nostalgia is a propaganda tool in novels including Whitehead’s *Zone One*, the ‘Free Southern States’ in *American War* also focus on political and policy choice. However, each of the South’s proposals are intrinsically regressive ideas which leave the region vulnerable to more assertive nations. Before civil war, ‘fossil fuels were a worthwhile currency, valuable enough to keep the Louisiana ports and Texas refineries economically viable, even if not flush with cash like in the previous century’ (25). Over two decades of brutal conflict, as this source of raw materials wanes, it becomes clear that the South’s rebellion is more than a socio-economic decision. Instead, it is an expression of loyalty to a mythicised past – a past not only characterised by socio-economic prestige but, in

49 Campanella and Dassu, *Anglo Nostalgia*, pp. 4-5.
the rallying words of a Free South militia leader, led by ‘Southern spirit and the great and noble cause of freedom’ (203).

If the revolution novel aims to shatter any illusions that the historical process can ever be entirely defined, then civil war becomes a crucial motif because of how it reveals that reactionary sentiments often lie beneath assumptions of historical progress or stability. Far from being innocuous, this infatuation with a mythicized national past is central to each level of the novel, including Sarat Chestnut’s personal radicalisation as part of the Free South militias. From the outset, Sarat is not merely converted to the cause by economic necessity after her family are relocated from St James, Louisiana, to ‘Camp Patience’ in ‘Iuka, Mississippi’ (71-3). Instead, her conversion is fuelled by distrust of official accounts of wartime activity and her emerging belief, which evolves over the course of American War, that the South has been oppressed, over generations, by the economic and strategic self-interest of the North. Sarat comes under the influence of a charismatic recruiter for the militia, Albert Gaines, and learns ‘about her people’s history of mistreatment at the hands of the North’ so that she grows ‘to loathe the enemy nation beyond the Tennessee line’ (155). Sarat Chestnut’s life-story epitomises the reactionary patriotism of the Free South. Hatred, rather than necessity or pragmatism, drives Sarat’s conversion. After a Northern attack on Camp Patience, by a rogue militia called ‘the Twenty-first Indiana’, in which her mother is killed and her brother irreversibly brain-damaged, she swears vengeance and volunteers as an agent for the Free South:

‘They call themselves the Twenty-first Indiana’, Gaines said. ‘They’re a militia, not enlisted, but there’s no doubt the Blue commanders knew what they…’

‘Stop talking about them’, Sarat said. ‘I don’t wanna hear about them anymore. I don’t wanna read about them or memorize their capitals ot learn how they did us wrong’.

‘Then what do you want to do?’ Gaines asked.

‘I want to kill them’. (170)

In American War, Sarat’s life-story reflects the U.S.’s failure to adapt to new global relations and, most crucially, how American myths of self-reliance or exceptionalism can be co-opted into reactionary backlash and action. The central irony
of the novel is that these myths are not merely nostalgic. Instead, they are also actively harmful since biased and active interpretation can sow regional divisions which influence the course of America’s future. If, at the novel’s beginning, American prestige is waning through depleting fossil fuels, then, over the course of American War, memory of this lost prestige is integrated into political campaign which violently – and self-destructively – resists sharing of power. Sarat’s radicalisation as a Free South agent, as well as her fatalistic view of the U.S.’s future, serves to capture this paradox of nationalism. After the attack on Camp Patience, even the Chestnut family’s personal grief is co-opted into a pageant of Southern defiance and unity. Sarat, and her surviving sister and brother, Dana and Simon, learn that ‘to survive atrocity is to be made an honorary consul to a republic of pain’ (188). They understand that personal grief is secondary to the image of the ‘noble’ Free South. Sarat ‘and others like her [are] allowed a […] kind of passive bereavement, the right to pose for newspaper photographs holding framed pictures of their dead relatives in their hands, the right to march in boisterous but toothless parades’ (188).

American War, therefore, reflects the three key themes in the future American civil war novel: censorship (after states separate and information cannot be shared across closed borders); state nationalism (which encourages states to compete for limited resources); and inflammatory or partisan rhetoric (which often translates into civil violence). Censorship of Sarat’s personal testimony, along with hollow demonstrations of ‘grand, public sympathy’, symbolise the larger dilemma of the Free South. The South appeals to an illustrious national past which promises a source of identity and security, complete with a ‘flag of the Free Southern State’ emblemed with ‘three stars’ representing ‘the three states’ of Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi (110). However, this solidarity is restricted to small clans and this seemingly unifying rhetoric splinters into tribalism: ‘in the first year after declaring independence, the Free Southerners scrambled to create a flag and compose an anthem. In their panic they botched the stars and could never agree on an anthem’ (111). This factionalism anticipates the further violent divisions in American War, which, in the novel’s concluding chapters, are later described by the President of the reunified United States as a ‘dark chapter in our great nation’s history’ (299).

Within this account, archival excerpts, including minutes from the ‘Special Senate Committee on Insurrectionist and Secessionist Activity’ (225), are a distinctive counterpoint to Free South’s promise of future glory. After Sarat’s recruitment to the
insurrectionist cause, an interview with ‘the War Office Director Joseph Weiland Jr.’ reveals the strategy and motivation behind ‘rebel recruiters’ – described as ‘cowardly men and women who have for years brainwashed young Southerners into violent, suicidal acts’ (225-6). Furthermore, these accounts reveal how jingoistic leaders, of rival factions with names like ‘United Rebels’, sought to divide loyalty to the Free South: ‘you got the Free Southern State and the United Rebels fighting over who’s gonna run the country, but neither of them got much control over anything no more. The fighting’s gotten real bad and everybody’s just waiting on the Blues to push south past Tennessee’ (186).

Such comments reveal how patriotic symbols can be deployed for contradictory political aims. Tribalism leaves the Free South in a state of chronic indecision, utterly susceptible to military attack from the North over the ‘northern and western borders to Alabama’ (113). As the U.S. is divided into competing factions, the Free South becomes a defensive actor which chooses warfare over pragmatic adjustments to technology and fossil fuel. The Free South sacrifices socio-economic development for abstract values of proud Southern patriotism. In this sense, the story of civil war in American War is about how defensive patriotism can become offensive and destructive. El Akkad first explores this threat of offensive patriotism through the hierarchies of the ‘Camp Patience Refugee Facility’, for ‘internally displaced persons of the Free Southern State’, to which the Chestnut family move after the outbreak of conflict in St James, Louisiana (63). Sarat and her siblings, with their mother Martina flee after her father Benjamin is killed by a ‘homicide bomb in the lobby of the Federal Services Building of Baton Rouge’ when he travels across the Tennessee border to seek authorisation for a work permit for Northern territories (30). In their first tragic encounter with Free Southern State authorities, the family are denied compensation which is reserved for ‘the kin of martyrs’ (38). As Martina despairs, ‘we’re not Northerners because we’re from the South, and we’re not Southerners because we tried to move north. Tell me then what we are, then. Tell me what we are’ (39).

As Dubey has suggested, the alternate history genre is invested in celebrating national progress. By contrast, the Chestnut family’s predicament represents the stasis and regression which ensues when such endorsements become celebrations of national glory. Political symbols, which recur throughout the novel, as in the case of the Free Southern States flag, become sources of disagreement. As Sarat notices, on the flag above Camp Patience, ‘the black stars [are] slightly asymmetric’ and the ‘right-
pointing sides were longer than the others’ (111). With this symbolism, the inaccuracies of the flag are aligned with the unnecessary and inflammatory disputes which enhance American helplessness. Such disagreements over national symbols amplify the vision of contradiction and terminus which America faces as it refuses to confront the uncertain future.

El Akkad further illuminates this national predicament by associating – and contrasting – these patriotic symbols with the hierarchical society which characterises Camp Patience. Whilst living under the flag of the ‘glorious Southern rebellion’, the ‘layout of Camp Patience resemble[s] that of a circle drawn into quarters’:

The Mississippi slice occupied the northwest quadrant, Georgia the southwest, Alabama the northeast, and South Carolina the southeast. Refugees were assigned tents according to their native state. The Chestnuts, interlopers, had lived in the Mississippi quadrant since they first arrived, six years ago. (73)

Rather than striving for solidarity, these rival quadrants are preoccupied by competition for waning resources within the camp which is bordered by ‘tree-camouflaged towers of the Blues [Union soldiers] in their forward operating bases’ (73). This Hobbesian society, characterised by brutal conflict, is the logical endpoint of Free South patriotism. Such conditions undermine the idealised past and the sense of proximity to a defining moment in U.S. history which the Free South’s official government claims to offer its citizens. This ambition is continually reinforced by hymns and ceremonies – a phenomenon captured by a revival of apocalyptic ‘cultists’ who combine Protestant faith with national pride. The futility of this zealous mindset is captured by the ‘amateur broadcasters’ who, as civilian radio bands carry intermittent waves, squall into static radio bands and play ‘patriotic Southern hymn[s] Sarat remember[s] from her childhood’ (231). Hymns and ceremonies convey the message that war is a patriotic adventure, an ennobling responsibility for all people of the Free South and a symbol of shared destiny.

However, over the course of American War, El Akkad’s narration of Sarat’s life-story eliminates this link between patriotic sentiment and national destiny. By the middle of the novel, Sarat despairs of civil war partisanship, describing the ‘delicate fracture lines’ of the wartime South as ‘all nonsense, the petty turf wars of insecure men’. For her, ‘the calculus’ is simple: ‘the enemy had violated her people, and for
that she would violate the enemy’ (204). After Camp Patience’s dissolution, Sarat and her family, including her brother, Simon, who suffers brain damage in the North’s attack on the camp, are compensated with a ‘Condolence Payment’ (171) from the War Office which allots them a ‘granted resident allotment (Charity House 027), Lincolnton, Georgia’ (172). As a region and ‘land etched with a network of rebels’ tunnels’ (190), Georgia, in Sarat’s view, represents the hypocrisy of the ‘Free Southern State and the United Rebels and the myriad fringe fighters who controlled swathes of territory in the border battlegrounds’ (204). Deriding the ‘defiant, chest-thumping speeches’ of Southern leaders, Sarat represents the logical end-point of the weaponization of this political mythicization of the South’s history. Sarat defies these aspirational visions; instead, she operates on the vengeful principle that ‘[b]lood can never be unspilled’ (204). With this maxim, the novel reveals how nostalgia, which claims to offer national security and identity through a glorious historical past, can only lead to a fractured and unsustainable present.

In formal terms, Sarat’s conversion to become a Free South terrorist, as a key event in the future American civil war novel, indicates a shift away from the alternate history genre which, according to Dubey, ‘revisit[s] a past juncture explicitly in order to gauge its consequences for the present’.50 Both Gallagher and Dubey have discussed the extent to which conventions of the alternate history narrative idealise notions of historical progress. Gallagher writes that this sub-genre crosses the gulf between ‘individual and social totality’, with ‘individual characters in alternate-historical novels reced[ing] in importance while collectivities, typically nation-states, emerge as protagonists’.51 As Paul K. Saint-Amour expands in his review of Gallagher’s study Telling it Like it Wasn’t (2018), the problem with this inverted, demotic protagonism is that the genre may be able to ‘scale individual character up to national character, but it typically can’t scale individual agency up to collective agency’.52 As with so much else in this novel, El Akkad critiques this narrative emphasis in the alternate


51 Gallagher, ‘War, Counterfactual History’, p. 45.

history novel by depicting how Sarat, and her individual life-story, sabotages the collective agency of the U.S. nation at the precise moment of reunification.

The prospect of reunification, after a ‘drawn-out negotiation process that [is] settled largely in the Union’s favor’, is immediately complicated by the question of the U.S.’s collective agency (22). El Akkad emphasises that the future of the U.S. is restricted by ongoing hostilities ignited by civil war. ‘[B]illboards commemorating Reunification’ are graffitied ‘by angry Northerners who still believed the South was getting away with it all too easy’ (332-3). El Akkad emphasises that Reunification is a national gesture rather than a formal guarantee of future stability. If, as Gallagher recognises, national character is no replacement for collective agency, then U.S. reunification has a profound and ironic symbolism in American War. It symbolises short-term stability which fails to address long-term national hostilities which could divide the nation again in the future. Ultimately, U.S. reunification could be understood to represent the sort of shallow and immature collective character which Gallagher warns against – a reading supported by the fact that reunification, the ‘Reunification Day’ ceremony, is easily derailed by Sarat’s terrorist act (333).

5. Conclusion: From Climate Change to Civil War

After Trump’s 2016 presidential victory, many voters were bewildered at the success of a candidate who could so readily ignite controversy through his inflammatory statements and Twitter feed. However, in the three years since then, there have been diverse analyses of the relationship between news, opinions and voters and a more critical and objective understanding of how these events came about. American Civil War novels like American War and Tropic of Kansas use the generic tropes of the alternate history and post-apocalyptic fiction to reflect a new era of political communication which relies upon the viral potential of social media. In Tropic of Kansas, civil war arises when U.S. government, with allusions to incumbent President Trump, censors all formal or journalistic accountability. ‘The Network’ becomes a grassroots site which encourages rebellion and revolution. However, failure of revolution warns how new media can generate false optimism, and polarise public opinion, without the necessary resources to reunify American citizenry. American War, by contrast, is more optimistic: its coda reveals that the Arab Spring was
reorganised and, eventually, successful, thereby opening-up the possibility for more progressive interventions which are ignited by social media. Irrespective of the differences between both novels, what is certain is that their depiction of revolution, through their use of alternate history and post-apocalyptic conventions, has assumed an increased political significance in the current era of new media. During the decade in which social media became a salient factor to the campaign success of a U.S. President there remains a pressing need for dystopian and post-apocalyptic texts which critique the reactionary potential of new and social media. This thesis chapter has highlighted one of the ways in which a recent post-apocalyptic sub-genre, the future American Civil War novel, has begun to address this major challenge, through an emphasis on themes of illegal communication and revolution.

A recurring observation is that the U.S., in the words of E. Ann Kaplan, is entering a ‘new era, media of all kinds – journalism, the Internet, television, film and, literature’ which ‘offer catastrophic futuristic scenarios’ and imagine ‘ultimately unsustainable worlds’. Kaplan, in her analysis of media representation of climate change, argues that media images can be complicit in ‘proliferating through a society’ to create ““cultural trauma” when people live in fear of imminent disaster and fears of future threat dominate consciousness’.

For Kaplan, these media images do not accurately convey the ‘gradual depletion of resources’ which characterises what Rob Nixon famously identifies as the ‘slow violence’ of global warming (and its implication in Western corporate invasion of developing nations). Tropic of Kansas, however, subverts this trend through depicting media representation of climate change, when its effects unfold in New Orleans, as an inevitably political phenomenon. With the failure of revolution at the novel’s conclusion, the prospect of climate change emerges as the decisive subject of a new relationship between media and political communication. Unlike the dystopian fatalism which Kaplan critiques, in which the media are a platform for amplifying environmental disaster, Tropic of Kansas is a novel which reveals the new economic conditions and the new possibilities for digital networks either to foster public education or, as the novel’s conclusion

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warns, to play into the hands of undemocratic lobbies. With this focus, the novels in this chapter capture the compelling potential of the new American civil war novel. They provide a rigorous vantage point from which to study how the U.S. post-apocalyptic novel is seeking to address generational questions which relate to the future of American democracy in the globalised and digital age.
Conclusion: Future Civil Wars and Future Americas after 2019

This thesis argues that these texts provide a rigorous vantage point to study the revival of the twenty-first century U.S. post-apocalyptic novel. It also identifies the new American civil war novel as a literary form which interrogates contemporary relations between politics and media communication. It has been organised to examine a selective but major set of contemporary North American novels which imagine a range of global disasters: a viral pandemic, drought after global climate change, a currency war, a zombie apocalypse, and the depletion of global fossil fuels. In these novels, post-apocalyptic narratives depict the prolonged breakdown of American political and democratic institutions. Insurgent movements defy federal government which leads to brutal secession or civil war in the United States. As conflicts break out between separate states or between the North and South, and as new governments promise to restore a glorious U.S. future with names including the ‘Free Southern States’ (in El-Akkad’s American War), the ‘Free State of Nevada’ (Bacigalupi’s The Water Knife) and ‘American Phoenix’ (Whitehead’s Zone One), U.S. secession sparks national doubt about whether the U.S. will be able to regain its former prestige.

This thesis has proposed that when literary critics examine these texts, they should recognise a consistent set of generic tropes which mark them out as a product of their specific political and historical moments. The legacy of the 2008 financial crisis is consistently apparent. In Shriver’s The Mandibles, debt crisis in the year 2029 results in the collapse of the U.S. dollar. By seceding from the Union, the Free State of Nevada champions free-market economics and, through defying the U.S, turns economic crisis into a culture war about America’s future and values. In Zone One, the government of American Phoenix is at odds with the interests of surviving U.S. citizens, in part because of its popular rhetoric and in part because of its sacrifice of democratic government to the interests of corporate investment. Equally, Atwood’s representation of the ‘Consilience’ homeownership project, which is exposed as an organ-trafficking ring, can be read as an allegory for the legacy of the 2010 U.S. Foreclosure Crisis. The financial crisis, which has defined the political climate of the late 2000s and early 2010s, is not only an economic disaster in these novels. It is also a major catalytic event which reveals and exploits a series of weaknesses in America’s democratic society via questions about patriotism and mass and new media.
Economic protectionism is thematized as an unfeasible and destructive force in many of the novels from this North American post-apocalyptic canon. In *Zone One*, the economic agenda of American Phoenix, which claims to champion the American people, is derailed by corporate monetization of depleting environmental resources. Similarly, in *The Water Knife*, the Southern Nevada Water Agency (SNWA), a state agency which has become a private conglomerate after U.S. secession, is propped up by a virulent capitalism which destroys the water infrastructure in rival states. In *The Mandibles*, Shriver also imagines a U.S. in which states have become primarily economic entities after currency war. The ‘Free State of Nevada’ becomes a national experiment which tests whether a deregulated economy can revive the U.S. dollar and defy the new reserve currency (‘the Bancor’) implemented by China as the new hegemon.

Patriotism often facilitates the economic protectionism which is depicted in these novels and yet this protectionism is destructive to U.S. self-interest. In Chris Beckett’s *America City*, the need to appeal to patriotism undermines diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Canada. A populist politician, Senator Stephen Slaymaker, proposes a resettlement programme which will mitigate a short-term migration crisis in the U.S. without addressing the long-term trajectory for anthropogenic climate change. With this premise, these texts self-consciously extrapolate modern trends in American politics to interrogate how political conditions after the 2008 financial crisis became fertile ground for detrimental American isolationist or protectionist ideologies.

As outlined in the Introduction, this thesis has traced three key themes in the future American civil war novel: censorship (after states separate), state nationalism (as states compete for limited resources) and partisan rhetoric (which often translates into civil violence). Closed borders, with censorship across state lines, are conspicuous motifs for how, after the new millennium, new media technologies and consumer trends help to encourage ideological polarisation in America’s political climate. In *Zone One*, a ‘new era of reconstruction’ after zombie apocalypse is imagined as the ‘American Phoenix Rising. With *Zone One* as a key example, in these post-apocalyptic Americas the ubiquity of news, without formal accountability, is implicated in the worsening conditions in which survivors find themselves, especially as inflammatory news becomes an obstacle to U.S. recovery and reunification.
A central theme for the new American civil war novel is how new media have the potential to encourage vitriolic politics and extremism about global socio-political issues. Most notably, a prospect which the novel returns to again and again is anthropogenic climate change. This thesis proposes that the new American civil war novel draws upon conventions in climate fiction and eco-thrillers to interrogate how climate change is immersed into politicised debate in U.S. media and politics. In *The Water Knife*, relations between the states of Nevada, Arizona and California are worsened by partisan commentary and journalists ‘hunting for leads in the sloshing sea of social media’ (23). After the SNWA destroy the water plant for Phoenix, Arizona, ‘local stations and personalities, beating the drums of regional anger, generate hits and ad revenue off the battlefield images as they inflame local hatreds’ (22-3).

*America City* (2017) is a comparable climate novel in which the American media’s representation of anthropogenic climate change becomes a high-profile battle about facts and public information, and about climate science and denial. With the character of Senator Stephen Slaymaker, *America City* is an early example of a climate novel which addresses how the sensationalist logic of new media could detrimentally influence future American climate policy. Slaymaker’s campaign becomes increasingly extreme until the prospect of environmental disaster is lost behind false assurances of American strength and liberty.

Comparable texts, including *American War*, examine the origins of civil war in relation to a conservative backlash against resource or environmental regulation. In *American War*, readers learn that the image of American strength is more important than democratic representation. The prospect of civil war becomes a propaganda tool, with the potential for battle existing only in the ‘fiery sermons of radio preachers and the lyrics of war songs and the bucolic pastorals of Free Southern State propaganda’ (114). As the U.S. is re-integrated into the outside world, media and communication, rather than facilitating the sharing of expertise, ironically destabilise the citizens’ already tenuous existence.

The prospect of technological innovation outside of the U.S. leads to challenging questions about the legacy of the American Century. This thesis identifies and inherits key questions posed by critical and secondary studies of post-apocalyptic literature. In his study *The End of the American Century*, David S. Mason analyses the notion that America may have entered a new era in which the U.S. is no longer a leader
in ‘education, science, and technology’. However, whilst late-twentieth-century post-apocalyptic fears of self-annihilation echo anxieties about the end of the American Century, the novels in this thesis take a more nuanced approach towards more topical issues about new media and technological innovation. The novels self-consciously trace concerns with the role of broadcast media and new media in contemporary political agendas.

Within these texts, from Zone One to The Mandibles, and from The Water Knife to American War, a business class masquerades as a voice of the forgotten man and woman whilst it ruthlessly advances agendas which largely benefit the rich and the military and also present a clear danger to U.S. democracy. With this premise, these novels anticipate and critique a threat of ‘authoritarian populism’, in the words of the critical theorist Douglas Kellner, as a media phenomenon which is now global in scope and encourages aggressive conspiracy theories and extremist ideas. Under this formulation, the U.S. is on the edge of a new ethos in its cultural and political sphere, one which changes its relationship with itself and the rest of the world.

This profound disconnection is precisely what the North American post-apocalyptic fictions in this thesis address. These novels, using the post-apocalyptic form, interrogate the ways in which a shared sense of global catastrophe can easily retreat into ambitions which reinforce nostalgic or reactionary national myths and ideologies. The universal experience of being under threat of extinction – whether from climate change or other hazards imagined in these novels – only encourages the U.S. to retreat into reassuring national myths of self-sufficiency and American liberty.

The prospect of U.S. civil war, as it ensues from bombastic and doomed efforts to restore American ambition, is a recurrent theme throughout the texts. Whitehead explores the polarising tendencies of new and social media, as well as the populist presentational style which media branding encourages. Brooks and Newman, in their viral pandemics, consider the menace in predictions of a ‘New Cold War’ (positing U.S. powers against foreign nations) which register the new prospect of cyber-war.

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Atwood condemns the hubris of America’s free-market whilst still defending it over economic alternatives. Bacigalupi uses the fraught history of water infrastructure in the Southwestern U.S. to highlight how official U.S. responses to climate change are restricted by disinformation and conspiracy theories. Finally, El Akkad and Brown satirise and condemn nationalism’s tendency towards nostalgia whilst also envisaging the U.S.’s potential to salvage its future through diplomacy.

The range and creative diversity of the themes identified in this thesis is a testament to the capaciousness of the contemporary post-apocalyptic genre. They include the hopes produced by contemporary science and technology, the Cold War and its legacies, the rise in new kinds of cyber-warfare, the historical continuities and changes which catastrophe might bring, the reactionary cultural threat which ensues from acute wealth divisions and the relationship between the U.S. nation and global events. In addition to the post-apocalyptic conventions, these novels also call on formal elements of other genres and traditions including the eco-thriller, zombie narrative, the American imperial gothic and the alternate history novel. Beyond sharing the three specific themes of the new American civil war novel, the novels reveal other sets of imagery and archetypes which appear with notable frequency in the contemporary post-apocalypse.

Indeed, there are two other key features which this thesis has identified in this selection of post-apocalyptic novels: the colony and the memory of the Cold War. These novels adapt the science-fiction colony which commentators, most notably Fredric Jameson, recognise as critically important to the late-twentieth-century dystopian tradition. From insular communities, including the Consilience Project in Atwood, to individual states in Whitehead, Shriver, and Bacigalupi, each of these novels depicts the formation of a colony which attempts to rebuild America. Traditionally, as Jameson expands, the colony is a radical and progressive motif which offers a new beginning for survivors in Anglo-American science-fiction. However, in these twenty-first-century texts, the colony becomes an ironic space which depicts the failure of national efforts to restore supposedly lost American ambition. This transition emerges in response to a cultural backlash to globalisation, satirising reactionary political forces which promise to ‘take back control’ at the national level and reintroduce an idealised past.

Within this thesis, the Cold War becomes a key reference point which represents America’s prowess. Imagery from the Cold War is deployed in relation to
various apocalyptic predicaments, including zombie quarantine. As this thesis has argued, imagery from the Cold War, with notable reference to weapons and technology from this period, has become a prominent feature in sync with twenty-first century speculations of a New Cold War. Indeed, beyond the colony, the prospect of rival nations defying and exceeding U.S. technological innovation is also a key theme for these novels. The U.S. is represented as resisting this decline. However, this resistance does not follow U.S. adaptability and innovation. Ironically, it develops through the U.S. returning to nominally outdated technology, including microchips and military satellites from the Cold War, and re-purposing them into improvised communication networks.

The significance of cyber-technology for U.S. international relations is also significant for the new American civil war novel. As novels including *The Country of Ice Cream Star* demonstrate, the generic response to cyber-war, which centres on data hacking and technological networks, is to imagine the U.S. responding with creative ingenuity. According to these texts, U.S. success ensues from its adaptability and self-reliance – not its technological prowess. These novels imagine a prospect which counterbalances the idea of the U.S. as no longer being the leading technological superpower. This generic narrative inherits reactionary notions familiar from ‘Yellow Peril’ fiction and adapts post-apocalyptic forms to new perceived dangers to U.S. security and stability.

The novels in this thesis, therefore, use post-apocalyptic conventions from a genre with a specific and illuminating history of reflecting myths and perceptions of American prestige. They pose two central questions. What is the relationship between America’s history and its future? What kind of new challenges must the nation address in a tumultuous political climate (with, in later texts, references to the Trump administration)? Over the decade and up until this current year of 2019, a set of post-apocalyptic novels has developed these politically attuned archetypes and plot devices. In *Zone One*, Whitehead focuses on American Phoenix’s effort to revive patriotic ambition after crisis. Yet the novel illustrates how these ambitions can rapidly turn into divisive rhetoric which acts against the national interest. In *The Country of Ice Cream Star*, Newman imagines a post-pandemic America which is vulnerable to invasion by the militarised Russian Federation. In lieu of military power, Newman’s protagonist can only rely upon sabotage and infiltration which this thesis has interpreted as a commentary on new kinds of warfare, including cyber-warfare.
In *The Heart Goes Last*, American homeowners realise that their aspirations have been repurposed for propaganda efforts which aim to recruit citizens into a corporate-funded organ trafficking ring. Atwood’s novel offers a radical commentary on the cultural legacy of the 2008 financial crisis, which includes the rise of insurgent politics. *America City* adopts similar themes by imagining a future American presidential election in which a patriotic ‘Reconfiguring America’ campaign becomes a popular talking-point. This popularity, which leads to the establishment of American ‘resettlement’ cities or colonies in Canada leads to hostile international relations. Finally, in *American War* and *Tropic of Kansas*, future civil war becomes a key motif which illuminates these trends from earlier novels and, in doing so, offers a microcosm of key anxieties which characterise America’s political climate in the immediate years after the 2016 presidential election.

Here the formal and thematic elements of these novels again coalesce. The post-apocalyptic genre in America is entirely contingent on the concept of America’s future and, crucially, its ability to adapt in a range of circumstances. Contemporary novels in the genre are predicated on the notion of America’s future being led by rhetoric which ensues from its mythicised historical values. Whitehead captures this in *Zone One* with Mark Spitz’s description of American Phoenix:

> Now the world was muck. But systems die hard – they outlive their creators and unlike plagues do not require individual hosts – and this it was well-organised muck with a hierarchy, accountability, and, increasingly, paperwork. (162)

*Zone One*, like each novel examined in this thesis, is a novel about the dangers facing U.S. democracy; and about how the demands of its citizens are counterbalanced with the changing diplomatic challenges to America. Neither Whitehead nor the other authors of the new postapocalyptic canon indulge in pessimism. Instead, they acknowledge the long-term national and international challenges ahead. They warn against the ease of equating innovation with progress and new horizons. Ultimately, they interrogate and warn against how past American successes can be continually repurposed for reactionary gains which polarise America.
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