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Everyman for Himself:

Apocalyptic Fiction's Speculative Examination of Community

Futurist Warren Wagar defines speculative fiction as, “any work of fiction, including drama and narrative poetry that specializes in plausible speculation about life under changed but rationally conceivable circumstances” (Manjikian 22). Speculative fiction is a device within the genres of apocalypse and science fiction, where an author is given the freedom to create and explore the future developments of humanity, science, medicine, and the Earth itself. Speculative apocalyptic fiction is often employed in a manner that proposes a drastic outcome following a cataclysmic event – whether constructed by social, political, or environmental means. This in a way creates a “public service announcement” where citizens can experience a dire fictional future that could potentially come into reality because of the choices they have yet to make (Manjikian 19). Apocalypse is at its heart a word that refers to a great revelation or message of what’s to come, and its role within speculative fiction is no less revealing than any other narrative warning (King 1). When speculative fiction is used in an apocalyptic narrative, the story is frequently less about the cataclysmic event itself, and more about the fragility and breakdown of communities. Other times it is utilized to discuss the way by which a disaster can come about from human ignorance when groups fail to work together prior to or following such an event. Often, these apocalyptic narratives occur in environments where an established community either

exists or have already dissolved, which in turn provides the chance for the complete extinction of community from society or the opportunity for a new one to rise. The apocalyptic event and the story that follows creates a sense of relief theoretically to the reader as well, they might feel calmer and more prepared in the event of the disastrous what-if. According to Clair P. Curtis, author of *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract*, the destruction of a major community or city in literature and media can also be highly cathartic – an act of relief (Curtis 607).

Speculative apocalypses create methods of containment for our anxieties, granting a momentary respite from the inevitable results that come about when humanity refuses to enact serious and systematic challenges to tackle the exploitation and inequality among its citizens. It can also address the lingering environmental green-doom that creates these apprehensions in a community in the first place. This essay seeks to describe the ways in which theories of community are explored in speculative fiction when an apocalyptic flavor is tacked on. It will further explore the potential affects experienced by readers when exposed to such a disaster in the speculative world. In other words, how the narratives affect not just the imaginative communities of the story, but how they do and should affect the community of readers that experience the text's apocalyptic warnings. Four such literary texts take great pains to speculate the effects of apocalypse on community: George Turner's *Sea and Summer*, Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Galapagos*, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

No other text speculates quite as realistically on the effects of a community under environmental pressure like George Turner's *Sea and Summer*. The entirety of the novel's narrative has little to do with the global climate disaster that eventually wipes out most of humanity, and everything to do with the effects of two communities, that at their surface level, appear like night and day. However, by the end of the novel its shown that there is very little that

separates the “Sweet” from the “Swill,” as they are eventually shown to be one community working in tandem to the best of their human abilities in the hopes that some safety will be afforded to the current generation. This is a revelation that Teddy eventually comes to understand by way of his movement through all of the communities that exist on the continent: the Sweet, the Fringe, the Gifted, and the Swill:

My view of the Swill fell apart for the dozenth time as he (Kovacs) realigned my vision of a community at once disorganized by lack of a goal yet close-knit by its own conventions and concerns. There was order because a majority insisted on order, and disorder because a minority would not be ordered; there were groups of floors where peace and community spirit ruled and there were floors that feuded in blood; there were social strata with Boss families at the apex and street kids kicked around at the bottom and, in between, self-conscious snobberies of semi-literacy, gaming groups, entertainers, valued tradesmen and even such exotics as artists. (Turner 273)

The Swill are frequently portrayed by the Sweet as unorganized people without society or community, a place where social realities go to die, and cultural expectations are thrown out the window. However, both Sweet and Swill fail to realize that the us versus them argument perpetrated by the government is frequently a coverup.

As Teddy and the others learn when Derrick lays out the details of the medical culling taking place, both sides of the spectrum are manipulated to suit the supposed greater good of Australia: Nola, “I can understand an enemy. . . but this is barbaric.” Derrick, “Doing it to somebody else’s people is not barbaric? Is not it better than the nuclear winter we have held off for a century and which nobody would survive? No plague in history ever killed off the whole of even an enclosed community. If there has to be a cull – and you know damned well that sooner

or later there has to be – let's at least learn to do it with a minimum of suffering for the culled" (Turner 341). The Sweet and Gifted are seemingly better off, safe from the fate the Swill endure so long as they play by the rules. Turner of course presents the real dangerous question, who makes the community's rules and what happens to us when we resist obeying blindly?

Teddy learns both answers through his journey to understand the two communities. First, that even when a community thinks they are in control, they really are not, Kovacs can continue being a tower boss because he's good at keeping order, at maintaining the Swill community. If he was not, however, the state would simply find a way to replace him. Kovacs is also fully aware of the necessity of the two communities, and why a resistance would prove irrational, a fact he shares with Teddy when the young man ponders the what if of revolution:

Teddy said, 'With that sort of influence and the towers to call on, you could take over the city.' (Kovac), 'You reckon? So we could. Easy. And then what? Would we be any better off when the looting was over? Half a Tower Boss' job is stopping stupid bastards going on the riot. If we took over, we wouldn't know so much as how to run the transport, much less Med section or the food supply. Half Melbourne'd starve before we got going again. Never give people what they want – it's bad for them and everybody else.' So I understood a little more of how the Sweet/Swill balance was maintained – the Swill maintained it because without it they would be worse off. (Turner 272)

Turner is presenting a community under intense pressure, the flood waters are rising, food is running scarce, money is useless, and the two sides of the same nation threaten to war among themselves. It's a speculation on the effects of a superficially constructed them versus us, while the world's declining environment does not differentiate between either one. A decline that could have likely been prevented if the global community had come together sooner and more strongly

than it had to push the back the changing tides of environmental disaster: “We pay now for our great-grandparents’ refusal to admit that tomorrow would eventually come” (Turner 351).

The implication of ignoring a sense of global oneness and the effects of an apocalyptic event on such a community is a theme that continues in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*. In *Tropic*, the idea of a global community is heavily reimagined and criticized by Yamashita. There is an assumption by the characters, that within Los Angeles, and the world at large, there is a multitude of communities in existence. It is only when disasters threaten to unhinge the city that it becomes clear that this world the characters (and the readers) reside in, is not a diverse and separated nation, but rather one community of culture comprised of individuals of varying ethnic backgrounds: “...perhaps they thought themselves disconnected from a sooty homeless man on an overpass ... yet, standing there, he ... joined them, united families, created a community, a great society, an entire civilization ... the great flow of humanity” (Yamashita Location No. 836-842).

Throughout the novel there is a repetition in how the landscape is divided up, whether by maps, palm trees, highways, and borders. Yamashita posits that these superficial border constructions are meaningless in the grand scheme of things. A disaster in one part of the world can easily travel to the front of our own doorsteps, and the actions of one’s neighbor can result in the end of everything. With seemingly simple ease, borders are crossed time and again, Bobby and Xiayue through the immigration office, Archangel and Sol across the border through customs, Buzzworm through neighborhoods and alleys, and Emi into risky and often adventurous physical situations. Yamashita comments on societies foolish need to require a clear picture of the world’s divisions, “If someone could put down all the layers of the real map, maybe he (Buzzworm) could get the real picture” (Yamashita Location No. 1647-1648).

Communities are nothing more than superficial lines drawn by the government to reward a few over many. *Tropic of Orange* utilizes the apocalyptic disaster to speculate about this ideal community, and allow Yamashita to create a narrative that shows the danger in keeping these imaginary borders during dangerous times. Community only survives such disaster when it is willing to work together, to help each other at the risk of their own safety and expense, like when Buzzworm tries to save Emi after she is shot, when Archangel cares for Sol, Bobby rescuing Xiayue (the cousin) from the traffickers, and when Gabriel attempts to care for the wounded Rafaela.

Just as it is mentioned in Turner's novel, the government is often the conductor of creating such a community in the first place, and just like in Kovac's world, those that do not play by the rules of maintaining a community are met with violence and retribution: "The assemblage of military might pointed at one's own people was horrific, as was the amassing of weapons and munitions by the people themselves. If half of the homeless were veterans of war, then half of the current occupants of the valley suddenly returned to familiar scenes of fear and bloodshed, jumping into the foliage, cowering behind jeeps, lugging knives and rifles, carefully surveying the fray from that big ditch. A single shot heralded the ugly possibility of war (Yamashita Location No. 4441-4444). In other words, in the *Tropic of Orange*, if the community fails, so to does the world.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Galapagos* presents an interesting speculation on community failure in his own way too, that if the community fails, the world can finally prosper. For Vonnegut, the world's final community is created by hapless dump luck and circumstance, eventually evolving into something much more ideal, a world without social expectations, families, and politics. He also criticizes traditional roles of community, such as the places that men and women occupy

within these spaces. The community formed on the island of Santa Rosalia is initially comprised of solely women save the lone Captain von Kleist. The captain himself is painted as racists, a drunkard, ill-knowledgeable about sailing and survival, paling in comparison to the academic and rugged Mary Hepburn who's breeding experiments are the only way in which humanity is able to continue: "The *Captain was a burden on the community, which was to say a burden on Akiko. *Mary was surely not. She had often said that, if ever she felt that she was about to become a burden to anybody, she would follow Hisako and Selena down the shoal, and join her second husband on the ocean floor" (Vonnegut 141).

Vonnegut also takes a stance that in times of need following disaster, fortune favors the bold, and the survival of the fittest works the same as it always has by passing down traits and features that embolden and strengthen the survival of a species – a community of humans in this case. The surviving benefits displayed here are Mary Hepburn, the Kanka-bonos girls, and Akihiko's willingness to try and continue life, Kamikaze's numerous sexual exploits, and humanities eventual dumbing-down of the mind. Like the evolving animal kingdoms of Galapagos, human communities are also no less subject to natural experimentation than any other selection of species:

If Selena was Nature's experiment with blindness, then her father was Nature's experiment with heartlessness. Jesus Ortiz was Nature's experiment with admiration for the rich, and I was Nature's experiment with insatiable voyeurism, and my father was Nature's experiment with cynicism, and my mother was Nature's experiment with optimism, and the Captain of the Bahia de Darwin was Nature's experiment with ill-founded self-confidence, and James Wait was Nature's experiment with purposeless

greed, and Hisako Hirogochi was Nature's experiment with depression, and Akiko was Nature's experiment with furriness, and on and on. (Vonnegut 40).

Vonnegut has proposed that the overwhelming community of Earth is a failed experiment. Earth's economic, national, school, and military communities, all have fatalistic shortcomings in one way or another. That is to say, that only when the incessant idea of humans versus the rest of the world is removed, can a true global community made of both man and animal be embraced. When this finally occurs humanity will find a peaceful survival without impending apocalyptic doom hovering at every turn. In Vonnegut's paradise, the future will carry no such idea of community and can appreciate what it cannot now, that "the planet a million years ago was as moist and nourishing as it is today -- and unique, in that respect, in the entire Milky Way. All that had changed was people's opinion of the place. To the credit of humanity as it used to be: More and more people were saying that their brains were irresponsible, unreliable, hideously dangerous, wholly unrealistic -- were simply no damn good (Vonnegut 13).

Like Vonnegut's perspective, for some speculative writers, worlds communities seem to be a fearful leftover of the apocalyptic world. They lead to violence, wariness of others, and dangerous consequences that come about when the 'we' is placed before the 'I'. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* exemplifies the danger of groupings to paranoid extremes in the dying, grey world of his narrative. One of the most impactful scenes in the book is when the father and son, the novel's protagonists, must hide from the caravan that puts on display what it means to give up individual freedom for the community: "An army in tennis shoes, tramping ... They clanked past, marching with a swaying gait like wind-up toys. Bearded, their breath smoking through their masks ... Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and

lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each ... Are they gone, Papa? Yes, they're gone. Did you see them? Yes. Were they the bad guys? Yes, they were the bad guys" (McCarthy 40). The majority of the encounters between the father and the son and others always end with the loss of something important or presents a danger, whether it's the basement full of people slowly being eaten alive, the old man they give up some of their food for, or the thief at the end, the message is delivered loud and clear: in the end, its everyman for himself. The father is eternally fearful of communities, of others, a fear he repeatedly attempts to instill in his young son, "We can't stay, he said. It's getting colder every day. And the waterfall is an attraction. It was for us and it will be for others and we don't know who they will be and we can't hear them coming. It's not safe" (McCarthy 20).

Unlike Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, which focuses heavily on the idea of borders and maps as a useless social construct, in the desolate and far-gone world of *The Road*, maps and boundaries are utilized as a method of escape. The map is a remnant of a time before when things had an order to them, when safety in numbers and established communities still meant something. But even now in McCarthy's world, urban landscapes, highways, and coastlines still offer hope, albeit risky. There is the chance to find food, water, and a freedom from this life somehow, "He sat looking at the map. The man watched him. He thought he knew what that was about. He'd pored over maps as a child, keeping one finger on the town where he lived. Just as he would look up his family in the phone directory. Themselves among others, everything in its place. Justified in the world (McCarthy 73). The map is a relic of the community from a time when it was still a safe social practice.

McCarthy never gives much reasoning to the purpose of the journey to the ocean, its colder and they need to move south to find resources, but there is not any sense to what the father hopes to find at the ocean. What is clear, however, is that even when he and the boy reach this goal, there is still no allowance for others. When the father finds the thief pillaging the cart it is not enough simply to retrieve his lost goods, he must punish the other for attempting to take from their stockpile, show him the danger of messing with the individual and hoping for charity and mercy on the basis of like humans struggling to survive, "Goddamn you, he said ... Take your clothes off.' 'What?' 'Take them off. Every goddamned stitch.' 'Come on. Don't do this.' 'I'll kill you where you stand' ... He stripped slowly and piled his vile rags in the road ... He stepped forward and placed the shoes on top of the blankets and stepped back. Standing there raw and naked, filthy, starving ... 'You tried to kill us.' 'I'm starving man. You'd have done the same.' 'You took everything.' 'Come on, man. I'll die.' 'I'm going to leave you the way you left us'" (McCarthy 101-102). There is a bitterness here not seen in many of the other texts examined, to care for another is to kill yourself quicker. This could perhaps explain some of the residual anxiety the man experiences thinking back to his wife, following her suicide he had one less body to worry about, but the mother removes herself selfishly from their community, leaving them weakened.

All of these textual examples offer one thing in common, a commentary on community as shaped by disaster, or communities that create disaster. While it may seem as though speculative fiction's only benefit is to offer a method by which to comment on a fearful disaster without the reality of such an experience, this is not true. Speculative fiction is unique compared to other genres in that it is inherently designed to directly affect the reality of the reader. That purpose might be to convey a message of warning like in Turner's or McCarthy's novels, or offer a sense

of relief and hope such as found in the works of Yamashita and Vonnegut. In either case, speculative fiction is the way by which the purpose is realized, particularly when paired with end of the world stories. According to Claire Curtis in her book, “End of the world accounts serve multiple purposes. They are both didactic and cathartic. They provide both the voyeuristic satisfaction of terrible violence and the Robinson Crusoe excitement of starting over again” (Curtis 6-7). Part of the cathartic experience is then, that existing communities are destroyed, so that established hierarchies, governments, and systems for organizing people are also destroyed. Social restraints and cultural expectations imposed upon individuals and groups alike are cast aside. A post-apocalyptic landscape creates “a space for exploration and examination of all that we have previously taken for granted: political arrangements, gender norms, and social practices,” and allows for us to go beyond “our own situatedness” (Curtis 7, Manjikian 28). However, what remains is the need for an ‘other’. Even in *Galapagos* and *Tropic of Orange*, which try to construct a shift away from the them versus us perspective, there is still an ‘other’ present within the subtext of the story. Someone must be the bad guy, the antagonist, or the loser, whether it’s the victims of poison oranges, drug cartels, or soldiers gone mad who kill on a whim. A new beginning can only be therapeutic if we have a speculative method of how to identify and overcome these potential dangers. In *The Road* those that fail to let go of the idea of community, or the people who “seem to band up far more quickly than our (novel’s) survivors,” frequently only continue the cycle of destruction and cataclysm, “despite the total irrationality of this” (Curtis 8). They use up precious resources, like the looters in *Galapagos*, turn to cannibalism, continue to destroy the planet – like neglecting climate change, or kill and maim each other.

An “apocalypse which destroys or nearly destroys a civilization can be understood as a sort of psychic wound, as well as a physical wound, inflicted upon society” (Manjikian 27). This is true for both the speculative world as much as it is the real one, showing again the narrative is intended to affect more than the story’s reality. Fear that is created from an apocalyptic story can be thought of as “something which is to come or shape of anticipate future suffering” (Manjikian 47). This fear forces the reader to examine the text more closely in an attempt to decipher the warning, and such an examination of fear is a luxury that can only be found with the inclusion of speculative fiction in the apocalyptic genre, “since it is in essence the fear of something that” will likely occur in the far future (Manjikian 47). It allows for humanity to speculate on both the individual and collective consequences of the disaster, while considering the future and historical implications of the loss experienced (Manjikian 69). Manjikian submits like Curtis, the cathartic benefits of apocalyptic narrative experiences on a community. She describes it as an “out of body experience,” by which the reader uses an “eschatological lens” in order to “carry out an autopsy on the state” (Manjikian 146). Through the narrative, the reader is permitted a death of the community, without experiencing real loss.

Regardless of the messages these novels provide, or the comfort or fear they create, apocalyptic narratives all propose that the biggest threat is that the “community’s passivity may be the inevitable consequences of a collective sense of utter helplessness,” and lead to the creation of the very event the narratives hope to avoid in the first place (Rosen xii). A challenge often found in the examining of communities and individuals in these novels is that “the crises are nonetheless localized, whittled down to a few individuals,” even in an attempt to avoid the ‘I’ perspective in favor of the larger ‘we’, it’s often a highly local and individual perspective portrayed. Communities that feel or seem massive are shrunken down to small collectives, the

group of Sweet and Swill, the seven Los Angeles residents, the survivors on Santa Rosalia, a father and his son. This loss of the global perspective makes it easier to ‘other’, to leave the impending issues of cataclysm for someone else to remedy. Still, perhaps the one key factor in all speculative and apocalyptic novels is the sense that something can be done to ensure life carries on despite humanities passive habits and shortcomings. There is a hope that some embodiment of a community will survive, as all the authors provide a sense that “The end is never the end. The apocalyptic text announces and describes the end of the world, but then the text does not end, nor does the world represented in the text, and neither does the world itself ... something remains after the end,” and that something will be a community, poised for survival and armed with the knowledge these narratives were bold enough to speculate and provide (Rosen xxi).

Works Cited

Curtis, Claire P. *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: We Will Not Go Home Again*.

Lexington Books, 2010. Curtis's work provides a framework for our fascination with the apocalyptic events, and our political debates over global warming, nuclear threats, and pandemic disease reflect a concern about the possibility of such events. This popular fascination is really a fascination with survival: how can we come out alive? And what would we do next? The end of the world is not about species death, but about beginning again. The text utilizes postapocalyptic fiction as a terrain for thinking about the state of nature: the hypothetical fiction that is the driving force behind the social contract. It also examines the way in which a new kind of social contract emerges, one built on the fact of human dependence and vulnerability.

King, Jack DS. "The Origins of Apocalyptic Narratives: Dark Fables That Teach." *Old Dominion University*, 2017.

Manjikian, Mary. *Apocalypse and Post-Politics: The Romance of the End*. Lexington Books, 2012. This text advances the thesis that only those who feel the safest and whose lives are least precarious can engage in the sort of storytelling which envisions erasing civilization. Apocalypse-themed novels of contemporary America and historic Britain, then, are affirmed as a creative luxury of development. She illustrates that apocalyptic narratives can be used to explore America as merely one nation among many, whose trajectory is neither unique nor destined for success. Apocalypse and post-politics ultimately argues that the apocalyptic narrative provides both a counterpoint and a corrective to the narrative of exceptionalism. Apocalyptic concepts provide a way for contemporary

Americans to view the international system from below: from the perspective of those who are powerless rather than those who are powerful.

Rosen, Elizabeth K. *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination*.

Lexington Books, 2008. The story of the apocalypse has been used as a means by which to understand the world and one's place in it. The appeal of the apocalyptic myth is largely rooted in its ability to make sense of instances of crisis by incorporating those crises into a larger plan for history and an end of time that God has planned. Apocalypse is both an organizing principle to be imposed on an overwhelming, seemingly-disordered universe and a fundamentally moral story which offers hope of a new world where good and evil can be clearly delineated and addressed. All of the traditional functions and comforts of the apocalyptic myth are challenged when the myth collides with postmodernism. The characteristics that define a work as postmodern ultimately destabilize the traits that make the apocalyptic myth unique. *Apocalyptic Transformation* examines the collision of the postmodern mode and the apocalyptic myth, explores the process of secularizing this religious story and the reasons for doing so.