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Remains of the State: The Post-apocalyptic as Putropian Narrative

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While the pronouncement that 'it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of global capitalism' has become a cliché, American popular culture has become obsessed with imagining the end of both. Concurrently, popular and academic discourse has been replete with discussions of the meanings of post-apocalyptic fictions across media and our fascination with them.[1] Yet, there has been little inquiry into what distinguishes the post-apocalyptic as a recognizable genre or narrative mode. This paper articulates the particularity of post-apocalyptic as a type of narrative time-space by incorporating observations from literary studies of the post-apocalyptic novel in its relation to apocalyptic temporality, science fiction studies' attentiveness to the nova of dystopia/utopia, and political science's interest in post-apocalyptic as a basis for thinking through the death of the state.[2] After proposing the idea of putropia (putrefying place) as the post-apocalyptic's chronotope determining metaphor, I demonstrate its usefulness through a taphonomic analysis of the state in *The Book of Eli* (2010), *Daylight's End* (2016), and *Bushwick* (2017). These American post-apocalyptic films act as discrete examples of the processual stages of decomposition and provide an opportunity to consider how the explorations embedded in post-apocalyptic texts can provide insight into conjunctural shifts in the roles and categories of the state within particular national contexts.

In part, the post-apocalyptic does not seem like it needs much delineation. The term appears self-explanatory: after the apocalypse. Generally, we understand the 'apocalypse' in 'post-apocalypse' in the vernacular sense of a catastrophe that amounts to the end of the world as we know it. As such, like Potter Stewart, we know it when we see it. Additionally, post-apocalyptic texts are deeply entwined with, and often straightforwardly categorized as, other established modes, forms, and genres. post-apocalyptic is often positioned as a kind of science, or speculative, fiction. It is a secularizing of the apocalyptic narrative or the catastrophizing of dystopia. Different texts, and even subsets of texts, overlap with the Western, the gothic, horror, the adventure story, and so on. The logic of post-apocalyptic narratives has been categorized as that of the portal story (Joyce 2018), the robinsonade (Hicks 2016), and even as kinds of political (Curtis 2010) and international relations theory (Aistrope and Fishel 2020). In these formulations, post-

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apocalyptic is a sub-genre *and* a type of narrative that inhabits other genres. Across its many and varied applications, the term post-apocalyptic describes a setting unfurled by an event.

Much of the scholarly work that deals with post-apocalyptic texts discusses them alongside narratives about the anticipation (and sometimes the arrival) of an apocalyptic event. Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction are seen as the secularization of apocalypse wherein religious frameworks are shifted onto those of modernity and post-modernity, displacing divine sovereignty onto Man. However, the *post*-apocalyptic often appears as tribulation without apocalypse-millennium – fundamentally disrupting its relationship to the temporal patterns of the apocalyptic tradition and suggesting the necessity of distinguishing post-apocalyptic from its nominal antecedent. To this end, literary studies of the post-apocalyptic novel have emphasized the genre's rejection of linear temporal frames and its preoccupation with the physical residuum that evidences the teleological failures of modernity (Hicks 2016; Heffernan 2008; De Cristofaro 2019; and Winchock 2017). For example, Dylan Winchock notes post-apocalyptic novels' 'focus on the residue of the past in the aftermath of destruction' (2017: 254). Heather Hicks argues that the most basic requisite of post-apocalyptic is the depiction of 'globalized ruin' at 'at least a national level,' stressing the way local conditions indicate the interdependence of the global and the national (2016: 7). Peter Skult (2015) outlines the categorical and political necessity of space and place respectively, asserting that the transformation of space inherent in post-apocalyptic positions recognizable places as a precondition to futurity. What emerges from recent work on the post-apocalyptic novel is the centrality of the relationship between the continuity of place and the disruption of history for which the physical setting operates as incessant and insistent testimonial. In this sense, post-apocalyptic is productively understood as a distinct, and generically constitutive, type of narrative time-space (what Mikhail Bhaktin called a chronotope).[3]

In science fiction studies, post-apocalyptic texts are often embroiled in debates around the relationship between the meaning of utopia and the political potential of dystopia (Jameson 2005; Baggesen 1987; Moylan 1986, 2000; Miller 1998; and Englender and Gomel 2016). In this framework, following Darko Suvin, post-apocalyptic is considered part of the 'sociopolitical sub-genre of science fiction,' whose effectivity depends on the relationship between the world spun out from the text's novum – its novelty, or new thing – and the author's (and implied reader's) empirical environment (2010: 43). However, the post-apocalyptic refuses the simplicity of inversion associated with dystopia and utopia. While historical trajectories are critiqued

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through the failure of the state in the post-apocalyptic, new and old models of political community are played through in the aftermath presenting both utopia's experimental prototypes and dystopia's critical distortions. In part, the historical and geographic embeddedness of the post-apocalyptic, the proximity to – and fundamental break with – 'the author's empirical environment,' complicates its relation to both utopia/dystopia and science fiction. Yet, as a narrative description, post-apocalyptic implies both a setting and temporality which operates similarly to Suvin's idea of the novum's function as a nuclear metaphor that unfolds the narrative deployment of time-space.

While post-apocalyptic texts often (although not always) contain what could be thought of as a traditional SF novum (such as alien invasion), and the specific apocalypses in these narratives shape the world of the text like a novum, what classifies texts as post-apocalyptic is not identical to the element introduced by the apocalyptic event. The apocalyptic causes and scenarios deployed in these fictions vary widely – from the fantastic (*Reign of Fire* 2002) to the eerily possible (*The War Game* 1965). In some post-apocalyptic narratives the nature of the event/transformation is ambiguous (*The Road* 2006) or unexplained (*Afterworld* 2007). Many of the apocalyptic causes deployed in post-apocalyptic also appear in narratives that are purely apocalyptic (typically about anticipation/avoidance of a global event) or focused on a localized disaster (typically in an urban centre). We have massive damage from nuclear destruction (*Fail Safe* 1964) or alien invasions (*Independence Day* 1996) without the world being irrevocably destroyed. While the specific apocalyptic scenarios developed in individual post-apocalyptic texts are central to any reading, the commonality of post-apocalyptic texts lies not in the nature of the event but in the scale of its effects. Many contemporary texts feature sympathetic zombies without apocalypse (*iZombie* 2015–2019; *American Zombie* 2007). It is the dissolution and end of the state that makes a zombie *apocalypse* such. Post-apocalyptic narratives assume crises the state is unable to cope with, unable to maintain itself through. In other words, the apocalypse in *post*-apocalypse is always necessarily about the material death of the state.

The centrality of the death of the state to post-apocalyptic's narrative logic is well noted by scholars of international relations and political theory who have explored post-apocalyptic as a type of, or at least resource for, theory (Curtis 2010; Holm 2015; MacNeil 2012; Manjikian 2012; Wadsworth 2016). However, by forwarding the post-apocalyptic condition as synonymous with the statelessness of the state of nature (either as the natural, Hobbesian basis of IR theory, or

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as the conceptual basis for social contract theory) these scholars bypass the implications of the central difference between the two. Namely, that post-apocalyptic necessarily proceeds the state. Thinking about the death of the state in terms of Suvin's idea of a chronotope defining metaphor shifts the conceptualization of the state in relation to post-apocalyptic from its assumed emergence from the state of nature to its material historicalgeographic constitution. When the state dies, there are remains. The state apparatus, institutions, and practices are represented through physical remains (e.g., buildings, bridges, badges) and through the recollection, allusion, and storytelling of its former citizens. These remains link the imaginative world of post-apocalyptic texts to the political conditions and lived experience of the audience. While all post-apocalyptic texts clarify both the social construction and materiality of the modern state in the globalizing world, individual texts, through their specific representation of its remnants, contain multiple ruminations on – and meanings of – a specific historically and geographically situated nation-state.

Appropriating the term from an early essay by Raymond Williams, the explanatory label I give to the post-apocalyptic chronotope is putropia.[4] Decomposition, a process wherein the environment acts upon the deceased body, is the appropriate metaphor for distinguishing post-apocalyptic and analysing its texts. 'Post' is a time after the (irrevocable) death blow to an existing socio-political order but before it has materially vanished. Rather than an imagined good or bad place, best or worst government, putropia is an image of a familiar society in a state of putrescence. The apocalypses in post-apocalyptic are never annihilatory and they produce an organic, rather than an existential, death. If they are revelatory it is of the mortality and materiality of the state by putting its carcass on display. Decomposition is a way to think about the relationship between the destroyed society – the author's empirical reality – and what is represented as emerging in its place by drawing attention to the distinction and interaction between the two.

We can locate the socio-political structures in these narratives according to the descriptive stages associated with post-mortem vertebrate animals – running from fresh death, through decay, to dry remains. Fresh death narratives, such as Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* (1890) and Judith Merril's *Shadow on the Hearth* (1950), explore the perishing of the body politic by tracing its weaknesses and framing them as irrevocable. As time passes from the moment of death, the body decays and loses mass as soft tissue liquifies. Narratives fixed in the middle period, such as M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901) and Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954), are preoccupied with human survival within and amongst the detritus. As the corpse of

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the state diminishes, the existing and potential meanings and uses of its material apparatus are both exposed and transformed. In dry bones narratives, such as Richard Jefferies' *After London* (1885) and David Brin's *The Postman* (1985), the apocalyptic event is far enough removed that most aspects of the state in the diegetic world – the flesh that held it together – have disintegrated. Although only its structuring hard tissue remains, these worlds imagine incipient organization growing on the state's armature. These stages inevitably and obviously overlap and many texts span successive stages.[5] However, they furnish a more detailed spectrum on which to locate specific texts and consider their narrative relation to one another.

The Book of Eli, *Daylight's End*, and *Bushwick*, as contemporary feature films, present discrete and ready examples of the stages of putropia and illustrate the potential usefulness of this framework for considering post-apocalyptic's meaning and relevance within and across particular conjunctures. While applicable to print post-apocalyptic, putropia, through the metaphor of decomposition, draws special attention to visual and cinematic elements such as landscape and mise-en-scène. It is images of the material remains of the state that often first establish a particular film as post-apocalyptic. For example, the White House on fire in *Zombieland* (2009), an empty and abandoned Wall Street in *The World the Flesh and the Devil* (1959), and old newspapers in *Five* (1951). *Planet of the Apes* (1968) announces itself as a post-apocalyptic film only in the final scene as the now iconic appearance of the Statue of Liberty reveals, in retrospect, both the setting and plot in which the rest of the film has just taken place.[6] Sometimes state remains appear as the very space in which the characters live and act. For example, the US interstate highway system in *The Road* (2009) and Roger Cormen's *Gas-s-s-s-s* (1970), or the abandoned aerospace factory in the Emirati film *The Worthy* (2016), or the Bor copper mine in the Serbian film *Son's Will* (2022). In their foregrounding of materiality and place, live action post-apocalyptic films, of all periods and types, offer themselves as conspicuous illustrations of the centrality of the death of the state to the logic of the post-apocalyptic narrative.

The three films analysed here have been chosen for practical reasons related to the economy of the essay. On the one hand, their likenesses (US produced 2010s action films) help avoid excessive explication of historical and national contexts. On the other, their differences, such as production context (big budget Hollywood *The Book of Eli*, established B movie production *Bushwick*, independently financed *Daylight's End*) and apocalyptic causes (nuclear destruction, zombie pathogen, civil war), signal at least some of putropia's broader potential. Most centrally,

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their representations of the state are straightforward and highly visible. In other words, while I argue that putropia is a useful way to think about any post-apocalyptic text, feature films' visual emphasis and discrete narratives make them well suited to elucidating the concept within the space allotted and the particular films addressed here make for a coherent, but not overly limiting, grouping of clear-cut examples.

The Book of Eli's survey of the dry bones of federal infrastructure, *Daylight's End*'s view of the decaying structures of state authority, and *Bushwick*'s tracking of local survival at the moment of the United State's death provide marked illustrations of the phases of the state's decomposition. As such, they are usefully succinct examples with which to demonstrate the broad applicability of putropia as both a delineating description and analytical approach to post-apocalyptic texts. The representations of the state in these narratives, appearing as the hindsight of individual memory and as material objects which undergo transmutations of symbolic and practical meaning, act as articulations of political culture in the contemporary United States. In thinking of the death of the state, and representing it in these various stages of decomposition, these films expose the material bulwarks of the US nation state while imagining what 'America' might mean after its end.

The Book of Eli

Taking place thirty years after an evidently nuclear event brought on by a religiously justified war, *The Book of Eli* presents the space of the United States as an ossified and decimated natural and built environment. The film situates itself firmly within the history of American post-apocalyptic literature and film. It draws its visual emphasis on vast dry horizons, for example, from *A Boy and His Dog* (1975).[7] Echoing Walter M. Miller Jr's *Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), the idea of Western civilization is at the centre of the state's self-destruction in *The Book of Eli* and a violent purge of its symbols follows the death of the state. Like Montag in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Eli (Denzel Washington) is the barer of an ostensibly singular King James Bible whose quest ends in joining with a group dedicated to preserving cultural knowledge of the past. As in Miller's novel, and arguably unlike Bradbury's, *The Book of Eli* emphasizes ambiguity in the relationship between knowledge and both the destruction and (re)production of the state. While Bradbury positions the loss of literacy and history as both the aim and mortal flaw of the pre-apocalyptic state, *The Book of Eli* does not assume cultural knowledge as an inherent good,

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but rather positions it as an equivocal, though constitutive, element of producing and maintaining the state.

Like many post-apocalyptic films, *The Book of Eli* follows a loose Western plot. Eli, an outsider journeying west, passes through a town controlled by a despot named Carnegie (Gary Oldman). Eli challenges Carnegie's authority and effectively ends his reign. While the distance from the destructive event that characterizes dry bones narratives often draws them towards structures associated with the Western genre, the lingering context of the death of the state complicates their representations of state formation in ways that foreclose an unproblematic reproduction of the social contract's emergence from the state of nature. Oppositions between civilization/wilderness, for example, become scrambled when the wilderness has been produced through the prior destruction of civilization. In other words, any and all projects towards state formation, or 'rebuilding society,' are held in frame with and against previous failed projects. Like the classic cowboy, Eli's moral violence contravenes the instrumental violence that upholds the villain's dominant privilege (Wright 1977: 15). However, when Eli leaves to continue his journey the town is far from a new social contract or a renewal of law and order. Without Carnegie, the town's existing structure collapses producing violence and social chaos mirroring the disorder of the originating post-apocalyptic breakdown.

While the villains of the Western, whether as agents of corruption or chaos, are positioned as a threat to the state/state formation, Carnegie and his crew embody an explicit state-building project. Carnegie, who like Eli lived through the apocalyptic event and retained his literacy, has patched together a political society ruled by force. Using his knowledge of the local springs, garnered when he was a child before the event, he has built up an armed body of men who maintain his monopoly on water resources and police the town. However, Carnegie, who reads Mussolini's biography, sees the productive limits of a purely political society and seeks to generate the hegemony of civil society reproducing the dialectic of the capitalist integral state (Gramsci). Carnegie sees his path to establishing hegemony as laying in knowledge of the past generally and possession of Eli's Bible specifically. He calls the book 'a weapon,' telling his men: 'If we wanna rule more than one fucking town we have to have it. People will come from all over and do exactly what I tell them if the words are from the book. It's happened before, and it will happen again.' In moving from pure coercion to passive consent, Carnegie seeks to build his power on both the material and symbolic chassis of the old state.

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The town he has founded and hopes to replicate is sustained by the same infrastructure that produced it as a place before the apocalypse. Constructed in and from a crumbling small-town main street, the wreckage of two inward facing, parallel rows of retail buildings provide shelter and resources and appear the only structures left on the horizon. The highway that runs through the centre draws in travellers, including Eli, making it a hub of trade overseen by Carnegie's men and organized around his control of fresh water distribution. While the town evinces the eidetic space of civil society, the visual and narrative emphasis on the ruptured highway system continually reasserts the ghost of national place making.

The film foregrounds the fabric of Eli's 'path,' framing the titular protagonist in ominous empty underpasses and collapsed interchanges. The highway that runs through the film brings Eli and Solara (a girl from town who joins him on the last leg of his journey) to the Golden Gate bridge which, though marred by a gaping hole through its car lanes, has remained standing. The end of the highway finally anchors the film in an explicit place, an unmistakable landmark of the grand geographic ambitions of American capitalism, and lays out the (thus far absent) urban terminus of the dry tributaries mapped throughout the film. As they row their small boat away from the city, towards their final destination, Eli and Solara are alternately framed by the decimated space of San Francisco and the contrasting solidity of the unmarred buildings on Alcatraz Island. The designed marginalization of the island prison, its separation from the economic infrastructure that once wove the nation together, spared it from destruction. However, the space of Alcatraz is overlaid with the history of US imperialism and carceral systems, making it intractable from the material and symbolic structures that dominate the film's landscape.[8]

The infamous island becomes the only thing left whole and unmarred, the only clear memory of the time before, presenting both a juxtaposition and articulation with the reanimation of political and civil society in Carnegie's town and the barren sediment of the state on which Eli is propelled. The penitentiary, as a space of both atonement and transmogrification, underlies Eli's journey. Eli describes his faith, how he knows he's 'walking in the right direction,' with the lyrics to 'Greystone Chapel.' The song, sung by Johnny Cash at his concert at Folsom Prison and written by Folsom inmate Glen Shirley, smoothly shifts between descriptive and metaphorical images of Folsom's austere but open granite chapel and the constricting, iterating walls of the prison itself. This ambiguity of space to contain and repeat or to open up and transform lies at the heart of the film's linking of place and politics. Alcatraz' persistence as a synecdoche for both

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the drama and cruelty of the American legal system makes it a contradictory site: a hypervisible example of what the state wants to hide away.

In *The Book of Eli*, Alcatraz prison becomes a liminal space, a repository for what has been valued as Western civilization and a location from which to reconstruct the world after re-examining its foundations. The cells of the prison serve as both work areas and archives where people move about reading, cataloguing, and reproducing the various cultural artefacts collected. The symbols of civilization, once employed in both the destruction of the world and the relegation of the prison, are housed in the place designed to contain threats to the state. To Eli, it 'feels like a museum.' Its caretaker/librarian insists: 'It's much more than that. This is where we're going to start again. […] We're going to teach people about the world they lost. Help them start to rebuild it.' The work and community of Alcatraz is a reassertion of place and history, but one which attempts to grapple with the implications of both.

As a freshly printed copy of Eli's Bible is slid into place next to the Torah and the Koran, we see that the Island's press bears its name. The reproduction of knowledge of the old world will be marked with 'Alcatraz Press,' (re)asserting the histories and legacies of racial capitalism into the myths of Western civilization. Micheal G. Lacy posits that, though the characters' racial identities remain 'unnamed and unremarkable […] thereby implying that the pre-and post-apocalyptic worlds are post-racial,' *The Book of Eli* makes visible 'racialized bodies, identities, and subjects' in subversion of generic and narrative expectations producing both an interwoven critique of American imperial adventurism and a cataloguing of persistent Black economic inequalities in the United States (2014: 24). By situating Eli, a Black warrior figure who integrates both 'Abrahamic religious traditions' and 'the repressed Native American hunter myth' into the Western (32), within the transformed prison the film insists that the success of any attempt to reconstruct the state and civilization is dependent on incorporating a full account of its cruelties and failures.

Daylight's End

Daylight's End begins three years after the United States has been consumed by a zombie plague, taking place well after the state's death but before any new social structures have begun to cohere. Like many popular post-apocalyptic texts situated in decay, the film focuses on a

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small band of survivors who joined together in a loose social arrangement in the aftermath of social collapse. The protagonist group in *Daylight's End* is constituted by a crew of (predominantly) white Dallas police officers. While the rest of Dallas, defended by the National Guard, made 'their last stand' in a downtown hotel, the Police Chief kept 'his people' 'all together' in the police station. They are the city's only survivors because they identify with each other, rather than the community at large. This tension between the group as the last representatives of the liberal state and as an insular and exclusionary clan stands at the heart of the film's representation of the police.

Daylight's End, like *The Book of Eli*, is shot through with echoes of the Western and its influence on the patterns of post-apocalyptic. Rourke (Johnny Strong), a stoic stranger who has been wandering south from New York in pursuit of the 'Alpha' zombie responsible for his wife's death, joins up with the group whose safe haven in the police headquarters is under threat by the same zombie. Mirroring post-apocalyptic Westerns like *The Ultimate Warrior* (1975), the stoic outsider's violence is framed as a necessary tool for the community, framed as the last hope for (re)building a social order, against an extrinsic threat. Rourke's singular and dogged pursuit of annihilating zombies recalls the central character of Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954), the ur-text of the zombie apocalypse genre, who spends his days hunting the plague-produced vampires who, though transformed, have maintained a certain level of consciousness. Yet, *Daylight's End* offers none of the emergent social possibility that suffuses the recognition between Matheson's protagonist and the creatures. Rather than the acknowledgement of the old world's passing *in* the new world's struggle to be born, the recognition found between Rourke and the Alpha zombie is the recognition of the Other as enemy. In placing the in/subhuman figure of the zombie at the heart of a vengeance plot line, the film positions existential antagonism as foundational to justice. In the classic Western, though both the hero and the society are injured by the villain, the society remains detached from the hero's vengeance in order to maintain its ordered values (Wright 1977: 157). In *Daylight's End*, the community must adopt the eradicative violence of the hero in order to maintain its entwined racial and ideological constitution. In this way, the film (unselfconsciously) works to expose the superficiality of the liberal values claimed by the American legal order.

In post-apocalyptic worlds, the police, as the 'embodiment of law-in-action,' both reveal and play out the complicated implications of the collapse of 'law and order' (Yar 2015: 65). In

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an early scene, a dusty squad car with the words 'Dallas PD' clearly visible comes to a rolling stop at a debris filled intersection. When the group, some wearing dusty police uniforms, exit the car they are ambushed and massacred by a group of heavily tattooed men, coded as 'criminals,' some wearing tattered prison jumpsuits. The post-state world of *Daylight's End* is one that remains, rather than becomes, Manichean. The patterns of opposition play out without the institutional structures and processes that once defined, supported, and justified them. From the outset of the film, as their once constitutive relation is sloughed away, state-based identities are revealed as moral categories. At the same time, within these texts, access to the resources of state violence (guns, vehicles, kevlar, training) is illustrated as an advantage to individuals', and sometimes groups', survival. The instruments, justified as necessary to maintain the order on which liberal society rests, become suddenly conspicuous as the tools of group domination and elimination. Unmoored from their role within contemporary capitalism, historical socio-cultural meanings of the police are simultaneously affirmed and destabilized through *Daylight's End*'s portrayal of the group's transformation from law enforcement survivors under siege to a coterie of settler colonists.

When 'the Chief,' the group's de facto leader, insists that Rourke, as a stranger, must be locked in a jail cell overnight, his son explains: 'He bleeds blue. He did prior to this shit happening, anyways. He was chief of detectives back when detectives still mattered.' The practice of policing is cast as an inherent, even biological, quality. At the same time, what is typically held up in popular culture as the work of the police, determining truth through investigation, is positioned as an irrelevant anachronism leaving only the drive to punish and relegate individuals in relation to the community. What formal relationships to the state mean in the new context becomes ambiguous and fluid but not immaterial. In the eyes of the former police officers, Rourke is external to the normative legal order, either 'ex-military or a convict.' Regardless, the addition of this difference shifts the bearing of the group and reorients their survival strategy from attrition to annihilation. Severed from the pretence of public safety, the group's identity sheds its ostensible representative function, upholding the rule of law on behalf of a democratic society, unveiling the deterministic impulse towards staking out the interlocking boundaries of citizenship and personhood.

The film's strategic racial tokenism unfurls the contradictions at the heart of *Daylight's End*'s treatment of the police as survivors of the state. The only non-white person among the

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group's inner circle, Chris (Hakeem Kae-Kazim), a middle-aged Black police officer who willingly gives up his life to the group, operates as a sacrificial figure whose primary function is to save the white characters (Coleman 2013: 145-60). Chris' selfless death is deployed as a cover for the film's white supremacist politics while serving as the symbolic annihilation made implicitly necessary by film's understanding of both the state's destruction and its possible rejuvenation through the police lead group. Right before they embark on a last-ditch attack on the Alpha and his hoard in a nearby office building, Chris tells Madeline and Max (a white woman and her son who he has 'promised to look after') that he is resigned to die for the group. In the following scene, the Chief and his son liken their planned assault on the zombies to Confederate partisans 'Morgan and his Raiders'' destructive incursions in Indiana and Ohio during the Civil War. Their endurance into the future requires a reversion to a tradition of white terroristic violence that links the origins of the Ku Klux Klan and the institution of modern policing in the United States (Castle 2020).

The majority of *Daylight's End* takes place in and around the Dallas Municipal Building, which plays as Dallas police headquarters at the start of the zombie plague.[9] Its existing fortifications (reinforced doors, surveillance system) and resources (a generator, cache of ammunition and explosives) provide the group with a means of survival against the zombies for three years. The space's use is transformed as jail cells become familial living spaces and the holding cell a Sunday school. However, for a time at least, the cells serve the same ostensive purpose of protecting middle-class whiteness from a dangerous Other. They had planned to hole up in the police station, waiting out the zombies, and eventually use it as a foundation upon which to 'rebuild.' But the building itself becomes the target of nightly assaults by the zombies and by the end of the film, on the brink of collapse, it 'ain't gonna last 'til morning.' The disintegration of the last active symbol of the state signals the impossibility of reconstructing American society on a semblant foundation of legal equality.

Although they destroy the Alpha and his hoard, it is in escaping the police station rather than saving it. In the closing scene, the group flee to 'a survivalist colony in Baja […] 150 miles from the nearest anything.' In its final line, the film frames this retreat as 'hope,' but they have given up the space and (idealized) concept of American democracy in return for the safety of an oasis enclosed by a desert. Rather than regenerate the political-legal order, they withdraw to a

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space organized around the assumption of inevitable state failure in the United States. The possibility of hope/futurity is located outside of the limits of US nation state. At the same time, it projects a particularly American blend of colonialism and isolationism in both space and time. By abandoning the evidently unsound structures designed to uphold liberal democracy, the fleeing survivors burnish the incongruous ideological impulses that rest beneath American political-legal institutions.

Daylight's End is evidently part of a general cultural valorisation of police. However, the 'police fetishism' typical of contemporary media representations depends on the ideological 'assumption that the police are a functional prerequisite of social order' preventing the Hobbesian 'war of all against all' (Reiner 2008: 314). The police in this formulation appear as the embodiment of Carl Schmitt's Katechon (2003 [1950]) who restrains the apocalyptic chaos and disorder that is always threatening the state. However, the worlds post-apocalyptic imagines ultimately subvert the assumptions of synonymity between sovereignty and its enforcement. Texts, like *Daylight's End*, that feature police officers inevitably pull apart the relationship between the practical operation of the police within the capitalist state and the ideological operation of law enforcement as an identity. By doing so, even reactionary texts present an opportunity to sift through the ideological contradictions that are smoothed over in the day-to-day flow of the state's operations and question their material implications.

Bushwick

Bushwick lies on the far end of the spectrum, situated in the ambiguity of the apocalyptic moment and mired in the pathology of the state's demise. The opening credits' scene surveys the physical infrastructure of Bushwick from the perspective of a helicopter gun operator, establishing the tension of an impending discord – the United States is under attack. *Bushwick* quickly transitions to a ground level shaky camera style simulating a real-time sequence shot following Lucy (Brittney Murphy), a young white woman home from graduate school, and Stupe (Dave Bautista), a middle-aged janitor and former Marine combat vet, as their Brooklyn neighbourhood is invaded by a masked military force over the course of the film. Although the identity of the soldiers is at first unclear, it is revealed that they are a secessionist 'insurgency' backed by a coalition of Southern states (or at least a group of rich white men who seem to be in control of them). They had planned to occupy Bushwick and set up a 'green zone.' However, as a captured

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soldier admits, the leaders of the invasion had made a miscalculation by assuming that the 'ethnodiversity' and prohibitive gun laws of the 'designated soft spot' would allow them to 'round up' its population easily. Instead, met with an increasingly armed and unified resistance, the invaders pivot to a shoot-to-kill strategy turning the diverse urban community into a chaotic killing field.

At the beginning of the film, Stupe saves Lucy from some young men who do not believe she is from the neighbourhood. The pair then move block to block through intensifying violence to meet up with Lucy's sister, Belinda (Angelic Zambrana). Initial moments of intra-community violence amidst the mayhem dissolve as people flood into the streets en masse. As the film progresses, the background shifts from an eerily empty neighbourhood punctuated by black clad commandos to scenes of generationally, racially, and religiously diverse crowds, armed to varying degrees, marching together chanting 'Whose streets? Our streets!' The frontline of the 'second civil war' resembles a protest. The neighbourhood's 'fighting back' is situated within a history of action against state violence, austerity, and oppression collapsing any meaningful distance between the whole and the part that seeks to destroy it.

The structuring absence of the repressive state apparatus is established in the opening scene. After Lucy's seemingly ordinary morning is punctuated by a man on fire running through an empty L-train platform, she emerges from the station calling out for the police. As if summoned by Lucy's white womanhood, uniformed police officers, hunched behind a squad car, are the first people she sees. However, they do not see or acknowledge her pleas for help. As the soldiers enter the frame for the first time, the police flee on foot. It is the moment that indicates that the state has ceased to operate and situates the film's story world as post-apocalyptic. No state authority appears on screen in the film again.

Unlike apocalyptic disaster films, such as *Independence Day* (1996), in which the tension revolves around attempts to overcome the threat, it is clear that the proverbial Calvary is not coming for Bushwick. A rumoured helicopter extraction point in a nearby park, which the central characters spend the second half of the film attempting to reach, appears to be the totality of the state's reaction to an attack against its own coherence. Early in the invasion, before it is clear what is going on, we hear a female radio DJ speculate suspiciously about the government's silence on the situation and argue that, given political corruption and indifference, 'this type of domestic terrorism is not such an illogical conclusion.' This framing of the state as generative of its

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own destruction and complicit in the violence produced by its corruption is unpacked through the male protagonist.

While, played by former professional wrestler Dave Bautista, Stupe looks the part of the action hero, he subverts many of its generic expectations. He is not a hyper competent killer; his skills are not preternatural. Rather, it is his knowledge of how to survive in an urban war zone that propels him and Lucy through the suddenly fully militarized space. Lucy asks him repeatedly 'how he knows' the things he does and as they move through the chaos, he imparts skills to Lucy, teaching her how to observe without drawing fire, shoot a gun, and tend a wound. This capacity to survive is emphasized as extrinsic and learned but also as an imposed burden. His own competence in the situation encompasses the painful weight of Stupe's experience in Iraq and acts as a reminder of his own instrumentality. When asked at different points if he is a 'cop' or 'soldier,' he insists he is a janitor and rejects any association with the state. At the same time, Stupe seems to identify with a captured soldier who claims command hierarchy as a defence for indiscriminately killing the people of Bushwick. He draws parallels between US military action abroad and the destruction wrought by the secessionists as the cruel designs of the powerful enacted by ignorant fodder.

Towards the end of the film, *Bushwick*'s hero breaks down in tears, uncertain and unable to cope with the chaos. While waiting for Lucy's sister and some other residents, the two discuss their prior lives for the first time. Finding out that Lucy is studying civil engineering, Stupe seems to hold out the possibility that she will 'be able to help make a difference.' But, the possibility of the state's redemption is immediately undercut as Stupe recounts his transformation into a tool of the state's violence. Moments before he dies, he describes his deployment in Iraq in the early aughts as an engulfing field of pointless slaughter. He catalogues the ways his locations within the web of US geopolitics desolated his life and then draws an equation between his deployment in Iraq and the South's assault on Bushwick: 'And here I am again, right in the middle of it, right in the middle of all this fucking death and killing.[…] it just goes on and on. It just never stops, and it's fucking for what?' The violence that undergirds the state and its undoing are a continuation of one another.

Stupe's death is not heroic. He is shot by a young girl who he has accidentally frightened. While the violence in *Bushwick* is perhaps gratuitous, it is not romanticized. It reaches its fever

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pitch in the final scene as Lucy and her sister Belinda reach the park. Corralled, the fleeing residents take fire from every direction and the ground is increasingly littered with piles of bodies. It is the most chaotic and violent point in the film and marks an end, rather than an escape. As they make their way through, Belinda is shot multiple times. Lucy attempts to help her and is shot and killed. The moment of Lucy's death marks the first break with the long-take-style ground level perspective that characterizes the film. The camera pans up overhead as other residents pull a sobbing Belinda off of her sister's body and towards the helicopter off screen. The shot then moves to the skyline and melds into the perspective of a helicopter surveying Manhattan engulfed in flames. This last moment seems to instantiate the irrevocable dissolution of the US nation state. As the film's director Cary Murnion states, 'New York City is kind of thought of as representative of the United States. As in, if you can take down New York City, you can take down the rest of the country' (Kelley 2017). The deeply local grounding expands outward, multiplying the devastation, and confirming that the state of Bushwick is the state of the nation.

However, it is *Bushwick*'s specificity that works to unravel the ambivalence at heart of the collapse of the United States. Ma (Myra Lucretia Taylor), an older black woman who is organizing the defence resources of the neighbourhood, asserts that those who are stunned by the violence, destruction, and state abandonment 'don't remember the 70s.' Like Stupe, she is not unfamiliar with the 'war zone.' Ma's cool handling of the chaos around her becomes the recognition that the distinctions between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence are often cosmetic. The assault on Bushwick melts into the history of urban neglect and surveillance. As unmarked soldiers descend on Bushwick, the state is simultaneously absent and totalizing.

Finally reaching the park provides no relief from the affective tension. The thick sound of whirring helicopter blades introduced in the opening credits scene, the sonic measure of both the presence of immediate danger and the expansiveness of the destruction throughout the film, becomes overwhelming in the final scene. The perspective of the final shot mirrors the film's ominous opening creating ambiguity as to whether any actual distinction between the US military and the secessionist forces exists. With both protagonists dead, and the nation crumbling, the film's pessimism seems undeniable.

However, Stupe and Lucy's senseless and meaningless deaths cut off the futurity of the state, rather than the community. In the end, military training and experience does not save Stupe. Throughout the film, Lucy's proximity to state power, her whiteness and access to higher

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education, mark her as an outsider in the place she grew up. The unknown fate of the film's peripheral characters signals not quite hope, but a persistent futurity in spite of both the state and its dissolution.[10] It is Ma, her sons, and Belinda, Lucy's Latina sister who sleeps through the first part of the invasion because 'there's always helicopters' outside her apartment, who are left with the possibility of survival. From their positions on the margins, already antagonized and surveilled, they are able to fight back because they have already armed themselves in opposition to the state and they are able to endure its end because they already have been.

Conclusion

Remains, as both material and symbolic resources, play a central role in both basic survival and the development of, and potential for, new social and political structures in these films. In *The Book of Eli*, the material substratum that once held up the state still organizes human life and offers different opposing routes for the resurrection and re-evaluation of American civilization. Though *Daylight's End* centres white police officers as the basis for a human future, in doing so it makes visible the entanglement between latent white ethno-nationalism and the structural violence of the neoliberal state by pulling apart their ideological congruencies and contradictions. *Bushwick*'s politics are ambiguous rather than ambitious, but in its interrelated premise and geography it stands counter to the reactionary tenor of *Daylight's End* by suggesting that surviving the state is a slow process that many have already begun.

I have focused here generally on the remains of the repressive state apparatus, but the framework of putropia has the potential to be a productive lens to examine innumerable other institutional formations and foci across multiple, and within single, texts. While the husk of a cooling tower provides travellers shelter in *The Book of Eli*, the rubble of a nuclear power plant serves a central symbolic function in the nuclear wasteland of *Riddley Walker* (1980). In *Z Nation* (2014-2018), an unmaintained reactor poses a threat that the survivors of a zombie plague must contain. The shifting meanings and uses of nuclear infrastructure in these texts mark out the US nation state's shifting historical relationship to nuclear technology as the potential harbinger of both obliteration and utopian plenty. The way the remnants of the medical system have appeared over the tv series *The Walking Dead* in a myriad of ways, beginning with the protagonists awakening in from a coma in an abandoned zombie filled hospital, offer an opportunity to con-

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sider how public health is meaningfully and materially structured across the United States.[11] Putropia attempts to name and untangle the knotted relationship between post-apocalyptic texts' narrative time-space and the experience of a historically embedded audience by recognizing the residue of the state as the inherent and inescapable political content constitutive of the post-apocalyptic.

Fictions depicting Americans surviving the state in a suddenly, and catastrophically, deglobalized world have been ubiquitous over the last two decades, and post-apocalyptic has become a framework through which we imagine the relationship between our present and a myriad of possible futures. We use 'post-apocalyptic' to describe traffic jams and war zones, currency collapse and overgrown industrial parks. In recent months, over run hospitals (Cha et al. 2020), empty urban centres (Wilson 2020), and civil unrest (Hyatt 2020) have all been deemed 'post-apocalyptic.' Analysing how post-apocalyptic narratives in popular culture imagine the death of the state can provide insight into the role contemporary realities of, and selective attitudes towards, nation states play in our expectations of both current, ongoing and impending crises. In doing so, post-apocalyptic texts can help us flesh out our understanding of the bonds between the politics of the past and future. As the materialist eschatology of the post-apocalyptic itself illustrates, 'the world to come' can only do so within and through the world that has ended.

Notes

[1] For a few select examples see: Joyce 2018; Lorentzen 2017; Bendle 2005; Walliss and Aston 2011; Anders 2019; Berger 1999.

[2] While the state is a complicated concept, that the relationship between three elements – territory, population, and apparatus – constitute the state's basic makeup is fairly uncontroversial. Following Bob Jessop, the definition of the state utilized in this paper includes 'a fourth element, namely the "idea of the state" or the state project, which defines the nature and purposes of state action' (Jessop 2016: 10). Jessop's four element approach settles the question of what constitutes a state in the abstract while raising a series of questions about how states are explicitly, implicitly, and actively constituted, now, in the past, and in the political imaginary.

[3] Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope (time-space) is 'a formally constitutive category' with 'an intrinsic generic significance' (Bakhtin 1981: 85). It is through a narrative's chronotope that '[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history' (Bakhtin 1981: 84).

[4] Dystopia was not a commonly used term at the time Williams' wrote his essay (1956). As such, he coins the term 'putropia' to label what are commonly considered classic dystopias (eg. *1984*). But he also specifies a sub-type which 'stop[s] just short of doomsday' and 'move[s] into putropia,' the *Day of the Triffids* being the example. While Williams quickly moves past this idea, I argue it is the 'stopping short' of human annihilation that distinguishes the post-apocalyptic, or

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what I call putropian, narratives. In his later essay 'Utopia and Science Fiction,' published 1978, he uses the term dystopia to describe *1984* and other classically dystopian texts. I use the term as a way to describe this sub-type he briefly gestures to in the earlier essay.

[5] Some texts span multiple stages through sheer length and expansiveness (*A Canticle for Leibowitz* 1959), framed narrative (*The Turner Diaries* 1978), retrospective narration (*The Scarlet Plague* 1912), etc. However, the processual nature of the putropian concept, in its attention to the effect of the apocalyptic event on the environment, is attendant to the texts' specific narrative time scales. In other words, nature of the state's death (depopulation, nuclear destruction, environmental catastrophe, etc.) shapes the process and the remains of the state appear materially and symbolically different in relation to an individual text's apocalyptic intervention.

[6] In the *Planet of the Apes* (1968), the iconic final moment – Taylor's discovery of the Statue of Liberty – ripples backwards across the film reframing its meaning and discombobulating its dystopian deployment of defamiliarization. Without this final scene the film can be read, as the novel is, as a typical SF dystopia which relies on a distorted projection to critique (in this case, arguably, racially divided, or simply hierarchical class) society. Taylor's final condemnation positions the film within the period's anti-nuclear discourse. The realization that the setting of the narrative is not another world but rather the 'home' Taylor has been trying to get back to all long re-aligns the social critique of the Ape's society entirely, calling into question Dr. Zaius' position as antagonist/villain and, at the least, casts moral ambiguity onto the control of science/knowledge he represents.

[7] The influence of *A Boy and His Dog*, arguably the first post-apocalyptic film to imagine the post-nuclear America as a desert wasteland, is openly acknowledged by way of a poster behind Eli during a key scene and in later interviews with the filmmakers (see Castro 2012).

[8] The structures on Alcatraz island were originally built up as a fort, then a military prison. The penitentiary, constructed with prison labour, was one of the United State's first experiments with the extreme control and depravation of the 'supermax' in a period of penal expansion in response to increased prohibition, immigration, and economic depression in the early 1930s (Carlson and Garrett 1999: 252-8). Six years after the prison's closure in 1963, it was the site of a nineteen-month reclamation by American Indian Movement activists who, in asserting their legal claim on the ground that had been built into the bedrock of US nationalism, 'sought to unravel the legacies of genocide, mass incarceration, and state violence' through remapping of the land from a prison into a functioning community (Hannabach 2016: 51). Since the 1970s, the island has been a tourist attraction and a cultural site.

[9] The Dallas Municipal Building was the location for Dallas' city hall, police department, and jail throughout most of the 20th century. The neoclassical influenced Beaux Arts style, aesthetically and historically, marks the building as unmistakably part of the edifice of the state apparatus. In addition to its importance in municipal history, famously, Lee Harvey Oswald was held in its jail and died in its basement, connecting it to the complex history of both violent anti-statism and the 'paranoid style of American politics.' The building currently houses both the municipal court and a law school.

[10] It is worth noting that, before the film's release, there was criticism from the Bushwick community of the film's centring of a white protagonist in a story about a majority black and Latino neighbourhood with some locals raising concern about Lucy being at the centre of a white saviour narrative (see Hogan 2017).

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[11] From the nursing home where former janitorial staff and local gang members care for and protect the elderly, to the CDC headquarter's dramatic self-annihilation indicating the final death of any hope of combating the crisis, to the power and role of individual doctors within communities as the holders of medical knowledge and skills. And, most strikingly perhaps, the social and labour relations of exploitation which develop in Grady Memorial Hospital, between remaining medical staff, rescued and recovered patients, and a group of former local police who have come to exact increasing control and authority over the workings of the hospital.

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