FICTIONS OF DESTRUCTION:
POST-1945 NARRATIVE AND DISASTER IN THE COLLECTIVE IMAGINARY

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
AND THE COMMITTEE ON GRADUATE STUDIES
OF STANFORD UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Angela Becerra Vidergar
June 2013
I certify that I have read this dissertation and that, in my opinion, it is fully adequate in scope and quality as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Ramon Saldivar, Primary Adviser

Johannes Gumbrecht, Co-Adviser

Amir Eshel

Ursula Heise

Approved for the Stanford University Committee on Graduate Studies.

Patricia J. Gumport, Vice Provost Graduate Education

This signature page was generated electronically upon submission of this dissertation in electronic format. An original signed hard copy of the signature page is on file in University Archives.
ABSTRACT

In "Fictions of Destruction" I analyze post-1945 narratives that engage with the thematics and aesthetics of mass-scale destruction. The dissertation is based on the thesis that since the explosion of the atomic bombs, a shared imaginary of mass-scale disaster has developed that exhibits a set of concerns particular to the “Nuclear Age,” even while branching out into ecological, scientific and other possible sources of world-destruction. I first redefine the collective imaginary as a product of the oscillating, give-and-take relationship between cultural media and the individual’s experience of the world, particularly with the advancement of mass communication technologies. I then give a comparative study of North American narrative fiction, particularly in the U.S., that hone in on issues related to the experience of temporality. These include the trope of the broken road as a move away from the rhetoric of progress and enlightenment and instead toward the impending downfall of modernity; the heightened awareness of risk and how it changes perceptions of futurity; what tropes of disaster fiction such as ephemera, wastelands, and bunkers reveal regarding historicity and possible futures; and how survivor character types illustrate the oscillation between hope and despair through their positions along the spectrum between stasis and action. In addition to its basis in comparative literary studies, this dissertation engages with a variety of disciplines in the humanities such as philosophy, cultural studies, film and media studies and history. Source materials include novels, short stories, graphic narratives, film, television and gaming.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In a most profound way, Stanford has become a beloved home. I am deeply grateful for the collegiality and care I’ve found in this tight-knit community of mentors, colleagues and friends. You have proven time and again that intellectual work is anything but solitary, and in that spirit I dedicate this dissertation to the following people:

To Ramón Saldívar: from our first visit I felt the excitement of intellectual kinship and recognized the combination of challenge and support that would transform me profoundly as a scholar and a person. To Sepp Gumbrecht: in our first meeting you told me to stop being nervous and just be myself. That advice is at the heart of what I’ve learned at Stanford: confidence in the power of my own ideas and the pluck to incorporate my interests in the “outside world” into my scholarship. Thank you both for leading me through the incredible intellectual and personal journey the last few years have been. I will continue to treasure you as colleagues and as dear friends. Amir Eshel and Ursula Heise: thank you for giving so much of your time and attention to the development of my ideas and for encouraging me to pursue my intellectual passions. Russell Berman and Andrea Lunsford: thank you for inspiring me to excel and innovate as an educator. Your office doors have been as open as your minds are to new ideas and approaches and your courses have triggered avenues of thought that have helped shape my work in many exciting ways. Thank you for guiding me to do the same for others. To Gwendolyn Díaz at St. Mary’s University: thank you for first giving me the opportunity to become a literary scholar, and for showing me how far it could take me.
Haerin Shin: from our first meeting you became my best friend and constant intellectual partner—from founding The Graphic Narrative Project to watching K-Dramas over kimchi. Our collaborations have triggered many of my own research breakthroughs and our friendship has given me energy and relief during the difficult stages. Bronwen Tate: you are an inspiration in so many ways. May our families continue to share in friendship for many, many years to come. Thank you also to the other amazing ladies of my cohort and the many delightful, brilliant colleagues I had the privilege of meeting in the Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages. Very special thanks to Todd, Denise, Margaret, Chris, Diane and Lucas: you really do go above and beyond.

To my son William: Your sweetness and energy light up my life, even while I study stories of darkness. You were born almost at the same time as this dissertation. I have now finished my degree, but you are my life’s greatest project and I pray I will do well by it. Mami y Papi: You taught me to read books, to love them, and to ask questions about them. Your unconditional gifts of love, time, counsel and faith in the strength of God keep me going.

Finally, the most heartfelt of thanks to Alex: partner in friendship, marriage and parenthood, constant provider of ideas, editing, a ready shoulder for the hard times, and best of all—fun. You know better than anyone else what has gone into finishing this project and have contributed most to its completion day by day. Thank you for keeping me anchored in the things that really matter!

The following dissertation contains bits and pieces of all of you, and for that I am deeply grateful.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One:
Philosophical Grounding of a Shared Imaginary ................................................................. 13

Chapter Two:
The Broken Road to the Future: The Destruction of a Metaphor of Progress ............... 35

Chapter Three:
Bunkering Down: The Preservation of the Past and Protection of the Future ............... 71

Chapter Four:
Survivor's Guide to Hope and Despair ............................................................................. 112

Closing Remarks ................................................................................................................. 185

Works Cited ......................................................................................................................... 191
INTRODUCTION

After the 2011 nuclear disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan, following the highly destructive earthquake and tsunami, the undercurrent of apocalyptic themes in cultural media jumped to the front pages of magazines, news websites and editorials. *Newsweek*’s cover for its March 28 and April 4, 2011 double issue features an ominous black tsunami and the equally ominous words from the 1979 film: “APOCALYPSE NOW,” subtitled “Tsunamis, Earthquakes, Nuclear Meltdowns, Revolutions, Economies on the Brink, What the #@%! is Next?” Nuclear anxiety and the fear of natural disasters are prominently present in current dialogues around the world, as well as in the literary environment. “Tokyo Disaster Fantasies,” a March 20, 2011 article by William Tsutsui, is focused on how “[m]ovies, comics, and videogames have obsessively imagined Japan’s destruction, mirroring the country’s real-world vulnerability.” Junot Diaz’s May article for the Boston Review, entitled “Apocalypse: What Disasters Reveal,” centers on the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. In his article, Diaz brings up the commonly misconstrued definition of “apocalypse.” In the spirit of the true root of the word from the Greek *apokalypsis*, to uncover or unveil, this dissertation is a project to uncover the particularities of post-1945 narratives that engage either directly or indirectly with the thematics and aesthetics of mass-scale destruction, thereby revealing the characteristics of a modern collective imaginary of disaster.

Today’s world moves within a zeitgeist of risk, anxiety and a hyperawareness of potential threats to the future of modern society and even humankind as a whole. While the apocalyptic imaginary has been around for thousands of years, particularly in
religious contexts, the events and developments of the past century have pushed mass-scale disaster into the forefront of secular cultural channels. In the following chapter I will focus on these modern incarnations of the (post)apocalyptic that, while influenced by those religious contexts, are now prolifically created and disseminated outside of them. These post-1945 fictions of destruction reveal a shift since the mid-20th century in the ways we imagine the future: predominantly as a catalog of possible disasters.

As is evident in my choice of the year 1945 as a starting point, I find the dawn of the Nuclear Age to be key among the various factors contributing to this collective imaginary of disaster. The development of new weapons of mass-scale destruction and the demonstration of their destructive capacity with the 1945 explosion of the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki had a massive global impact by making people aware of a new height in our ability to destroy within a frighteningly brief period of time. The bombs triggered a political and cultural environment of threat that infamously pervaded the Cold War and continues in different versions into the 21st century. These new, terror-inducing realizations were rendered additionally powerful because they followed immediately on the heels of the mass violence of the World Wars and the Holocaust in particular—events which opened a global discourse on the fragility of our moral frameworks and the willingness of many to perpetrate terrible acts on others.

Many decades later, we have not found satisfactory answers to respond to these questions about the parameters of the human and what we previously thought as inhuman (and therefore somehow apart from the human). Without those answers, we have likewise failed at our promises to prevent such horrors in the future. In the time since 1945 we have seen other genocides and more wars and continued global violence. The
questions about how to somehow prevent our destruction of other humans has
furthermore been occurring in conjunction with a greater awareness of our destruction of
the ecological environment, particularly through the developments of science and
technology. All of these combined fears for the future are increasingly shared on a global
scale and form an important part of our socio-cultural context, thereby feeding into our
fictionalizations of those possible futures.

If we take cultural products such as literature, films, television, games, etc. as an
indicator, we no longer primarily picture a promising road of enlightenment to a bright
future (as many did during, for example, the Industrial Revolution). Progress has not yet
delivered on the utopian destinies we previously envisioned; so despite the advancements
we have made, we instead find ourselves surrounded by evidence of the ways we have
not only failed to improve the world, but perhaps even made it worse. Our increased
awareness of mass-scale risk can thus shift our perception of futurity to darker
possibilities, so that more of us buy into more dystopian visions of the world to come. I
will discuss the changes in the scale of these risk factors and in the scale of the
dissemination of the awareness of those factors in the chapters to come.

While other scholars have addressed mass-scale disaster in their work,
particularly related to nuclear technology, my work contributes several unique points,
including the philosophical exploration of a shared imaginary and formal literary analysis
integrated within a cultural map from 1945 into today, both of which specifically address
the experience of temporality and the rise of a culture of threat. Under the term
“temporality” I include various issues of historicity and futurity and how they relate to
the negotiation of the present.
To summarize, my main thesis rests on the idea that since the end of World War II, with the explosion of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a primary trigger point, a collective imaginary of mass-scale disaster has developed both nationally-based and transnationally shared that, while perpetuating previously existing imaginings of apocalypse and catastrophe, exhibits its own set of concerns particular to what can be termed the “Nuclear Age” (a period beginning with the explosion of the atomic bombs in Japan and continuing into today). Furthermore, the global scale of the cultural imaginary of disaster is only possible because of the development in the 20th century of mass communication technologies that include the radio, telegraph, television, and the internet. These mass communication technologies have been the conduits for the media dissemination of images, stories, news, warnings, public information, and so on - that together enable a simultaneity and similarity of experience across nations with speed and distance previously impossible.

That said, the primary premise underlying the thesis of this dissertation is that there is a give-and-take relationship between cultural media—including literature, film, television, video games, etc.—and the individual’s experience of the world. This oscillating relationship between individual experience and cultural context forms what can be called a collective imaginary. “Collective” implies something that is by nature social yet is different from what has previously been described as a “social imaginary,” most notably by Marxist theorists. Literature is not only evidence of a social situation, but also itself reinforces and shapes these communal experiences of the world.

The following chapters form a comparative, typological study of a body of North American texts (primarily from the U.S.) written after 1945 that both tease out elements
of and potentially contribute to a collective imaginary of disaster. Many of these texts will be directly related to issues of nuclear technology, but I will also be examining texts that deal with other types of mass-scale disasters, such as ecological disasters or epidemics, along with texts in which the type of catastrophe that occurred is not made clear. While the scope of the study primarily spans what I am referring to as the Nuclear Age, I will be parsing out texts from two particular time nodes: the first being the period following the atomic explosion at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the subsequent Cold War, and the second being the period following the political shifts in 1989, including what is now known as “post-9/11,” or the contemporary era following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. The reason for this focus is my hypothesis that the historical conditions surrounding these two time nodes create a particularly potent cultural awareness of issues relating to mass-scale disaster, including ideological concerns of various types.

In a landmark 1937 essay on forms of time in the novel, M.M. Bakhtin defines his term chronotope or “time space” as a name for “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” While I refer to time nodes above, I recognize the “inseparability of space and time” also relevant to a discussion of a collective imaginary of mass-scale disaster. As Bakhtin writes regarding the “artistic chronotope,” time “thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84). The concretization or taking on of flesh of the abstract, together with the charging and responsiveness of history, narrative and temporality are concepts that resonate strongly with the reframing of the collective imaginary that I will describe in the
first chapter. For now, however, I invoke Bakhtin in order to acknowledge the dual temporal and spatial dimensions of the material contained in the following dissertation. I will primarily be referring to questions of temporarily, but the spatial dimension is inherently present in that I will, firstly, be focusing on Anglo-American fictions that reveal *shockwave* effects of the Nuclear Age, rather than the more direct effects present in Japanese narratives. Secondly, the collective imaginary of disaster that I describe, and therefore the fictions of destruction it generates, is spatially concerned in that the post-1945 development of a threat mentality is contingent on a rising perception of the global. The following chapters deal with our perceptions of the way we are moving through time, but also the manner in which we perceive ourselves to share the same space (and therefore share the fate of that space—in this case, Earth).

In Chapter One I propose my philosophical grounding of a shared imaginary. First I describe several previous theories of the imaginary, including the “social imaginary” as described by theorists such as Charles Taylor and Cornelius Castoriadis. The purpose is to differentiate my use of the term “collective imaginary” from these theories, while emphasizing that my aim is not to disprove them, but rather to describe a related but separate phenomenon. I also refer to other theories of the social imaginary with points that resonate more strongly with my own, such as those of Arjun Appadurai and Benedict Anderson. Appadurai’s theories on the various “-scapes” of the social imaginary, along with a discussion of the importance of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” to the development of cultural studies of collectivity and imagination, relate to my theory regarding the contribution of the media landscape to the possibility of a collective imaginary or imaginaries.
This study of mass-scale disaster in the collective imaginary is based on the possibility of mass experience or a sense of collective simultaneity. I will explain what could have led to this possibility in the mid-20th century and beyond, mainly focusing on the development and/or maturation of communication technologies. The goal of this historicizing argument is to explain (a) how something like a collective imaginary can exist, (b) how the facets of that shared imaginary can spread wide enough through new mass communication technologies to emerge as patterns in cultural production, such as fiction literary and otherwise, and (c) how the awareness and/or fear of impending disaster, which is not itself a new development, transitions into something that can be experienced not only individually or among very select groups, but collectively and even globally in a manner that is interestingly specific (as the narrative analysis chapters will show).

I develop my own theory of the collective imaginary through a re-application of the linguistic theory of Louis Hjelmslev, particularly in terms of the oscillating relationship between content and form as applied to the exchange between cultural context and artistic production. The application of this theory will clarify the relationship between the individual experience and a collective imaginary, thus leading to my culminating description of the nature of the collective imaginary I will be examining via cultural production after 1945, most prominently in narrative fiction.

Chapter Two will focus on the role of the road as both metaphor and narrative device in post-1945 disaster fiction. I set up my analysis by describing past literary appearances of the road, particularly as a meeting place that fosters community or provides adventure, or metaphorically as linear path toward progress. I give special
attention to Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* and his utopian theory that humanity will necessarily move toward greater brotherhood and community, a situation which will therefore propel social and scientific-technological advances forward toward necessarily positive ends.

I will then show how the metaphor of the road as progress and enlightenment takes a dystopian turn in post-1945 fiction, which provides a plethora of examples of literal and figurative roads that have been broken or interrupted. In this new metaphor the broken road, rather than a symbol of progress, is a symbol of the downfall of modernity, the perils of modern culture and the interruption of futurity. Instead of a utopian meeting place in which interactions can advance community and understanding (such as in Walt Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road”), the interactions that take place on these dystopian, crumbling roads are fraught with suspicion and conflict, potential violence and the fragmenting of society into more stringent categories of good and evil.

My elucidation of the dystopian road as a narrative device includes several formal analyses. I will discuss the paradoxical presence of both roads that are dystopian in their endlessness and those that are destructive in their interruption. To address the former I will describe imagery of timelessness along with thematic and formal denials of narrative finality through open-ended plots and formats. This section will also include a description of the narrative tension between ceaselessness and permanent immobility. That tension serves as a transition to the next analysis, this time of the interruption as a recurring narrative pattern. Finally, I will connect these aspects of the broken road device to larger questions regarding a shift away from the rhetoric of progress to one focused on the risks of modernization, accompanied by a nostalgically-tinted desire for the frontier, in this
sense as a cleared-out site in which an interruption of modernity creates space for building a different, better future.

Once I have established the dystopian groundwork in Chapter Two that points to the questioning of the rhetoric of progress and enlightenment, the next step is an analysis of some of the consequences of the loss of a dominantly optimistic vision of futurity. As I describe in Chapter Three, those consequences include the elimination of the certainty of our presence on the earth as we have so far experienced it, as well as the forced acknowledgement of the destructive results of human agency. My description will be grounded in part on the work by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash on the emergence of what they call “risk society” and “reflexive modernization.” I am interested in a worldview in which the future is not a given, neither a promising future nor any future at all. The dominant focus of analysis in this chapter will be the bunker, both as a concrete product of the modern culture of risk and narratively as a temporally static space that preserves the past while also protecting the future.

While there was a rush to build bomb shelters and nuclear-resistant vaults immediately after the atomic bombs exploded on Japan, even today such underground structures are being newly built or refurbished, then sold at luxury prices. Now under the context of anxieties about global extremism and terrorism, the Nuclear Age is still very much with us. My argument regarding the implications of both literal and symbolic bunkers will center on risk and anxiety in terms of attitudes toward futurity and the negotiation of the past. The impermanence of human society is echoed in the fate of its ephemera: the tangible and non-tangible traces of human existence that survive (with varying levels of progressive decay). I will discuss how bunkers serve as capsules for
these ephemeral traces of the past, which function as markers of time and the temporal bridging of past, present and future, bear the paradox of impermanence and survival, and can include objects as well as abstract remnants like language and knowledge.

Through these aspects I will connect my discussion of futurity and agency to the weight of history and the possibility to use (or reject) it for change and redemption, including the roles of guilt and culpability, the possibility of learning from the past and what that implies for either the possibility of action in the present or a lapse into paralysis and stagnation. I will discuss two dominant modes of the past in post-1945 disaster fiction: the nostalgic past and the practical past. In regard to the former I will show how and why nostalgia for the past is portrayed in many narratives of destruction as a threat to the survival of individuals and, ultimately, humankind as a whole. The latter mode presents the ways in which the past can be approached, rather than nostalgically, as something we can excavate pragmatically to address the potentially paralyzing challenges of a present infused with the hyper-awareness of risk. The rejection of nostalgia and the willingness to cull the ruins of modernity for materials to build the future are both steps that create the possibility of productive, creative action (which I will connect to the philosophy of action defined by Hannah Arendt). In conclusion I will identify the ambivalent position in many of these narratives regarding the possibilities to change the human trajectory toward destruction and the appearance, nevertheless, of a gesture toward active engagement with the re-shaping of the human fate.

The ambivalent oscillation between hope and despair will be the primary focus of the fourth and final chapter. Also the most extensive chapter, it will bring together the threads cast out in the preceding analyses. Chapter Four is an in-depth discussion of
survivalism in disaster narratives by way of a typological study of some recurring survivor figures: the post-disaster suicide, the leader, and what I term the survivor superchild. The primary components of that typology will be the position of the characters on the spectrum between stasis and action and conversely between despair and hope.

I will foreground the analysis with a description of survivalism through several organizing and illuminating questions: the “where,” “why,” “who,” “what,” and “how” of surviving mass-scale disaster. I will then hone in on the “who” and “how” by analyzing the three character types listed above and their different engagement with the ethical and pragmatic decisions of survival. The group that chooses suicide is unable to escape the clutches of despair and is incapable of stepping forward into a future that will bring continued horror and necessitate seemingly impossible choices. The second group, the leaders, exemplifies a more significant oscillation between despair and hope that leans toward the latter. I will parse out several different iterations of the leader type, including the Incidental Leader, the Skilled Leader and the Leader of Conviction. I will then move on to the third group, which is most resonant with the position of hope. The survivor superchild type exemplifies the shifting role of the child in survival situations. These “superchildren” have taken on positions of greater agency in the post-disaster world, are more free of the burdensome associations of the past, and therefore stand more actively and confidently in the present and represent a glimmer of hope within these bleak, dystopian visions of the future.

In summary, the intent of this dissertation is to gather together aspects of post-1945 disaster narratives that can reveal the fears and hopes that lie underneath our
modern obsession with imagining our own collective demise. The stories we tell, such as zombie horror tales or nuclear apocalypse novels, are not born in a vacuum. Literature, films, television, video games, and other fictionalizations of disaster rise up from shared historical and socio-cultural contexts. There is a back-and-forth relationship between the socio-cultural environment and the fictions we create to process or express portions of that environment; what we experience affects what we imagine, what we imagine goes into what we produce, and the products we put out into the world in turn form part of others’ experience, what they imagine, and so on and so forth. My hope is that the following chapters will contribute both an improved methodology for contextual and comparative narrative analysis and for the calling-forth of the humanistic situations that underlie our imaginative preoccupations.
CHAPTER ONE

Philosophical Grounding of a Shared Imaginary

Can what is imagined also be shared? Is it possible for groups to collectively take part in creative visions? The recurrence of certain fictions manifested both generally and specifically across cultural products implies an affirmative answer. But how can something that is imagined be proven? Measured? Shown? Measuring what is unseen is no longer a stretch for today’s world of scientific development and information technology. Even information itself can be measured, thanks to the coining of the bit in 1948 by Claude Shannon as the official unit for measuring information (a term denoting previously unclassified and ungrouped material such as messages, sounds, images, letters, news, etc.) as a thing that can be quantified (Gleick 4). The imagination, however, as generations of philosophical, theoretical and aesthetic treatises have shown, has been persistently and notoriously difficult to grasp as an object of empirical analysis. Furthermore, while the individual imagination is widely accepted as a given, its existence at the level of the collective can and has been disputed. The answer to the question, “Can the imagined be proven?” may arguably be “no”, in a scientific sense. But if one asks instead, “Can the imagined be seen?” the answer is not straightforward¹. While the imagination is, by its nature, not seen, we can

¹ In The Imaginary Institution of Society, Cornelius Castoriadis challenges the accepted roles of and boundaries between the symbolic (what is most often considered the realm of the imagination) and the real: “Either symbolism is seen as merely a neutral, surface covering, as an instrument that is perfectly adequate for expressing a pre-existing content, the ‘true substance’ of social relations, neither adding anything nor taking anything away. Or else a ‘special logic’ of symbolism is acknowledged, but this logic is viewed wholly as the insertion of the symbolic within the rational order, which imposes its own consequences whether these be intended or not. Ultimately, in this view form is always dependent on substance, and the substance is ‘real—rational’. But in reality this is not so, and this destroys the interpretive claims of functionalism” (118).
point to it on a secondary level once it has seeped out through the creative act into some form of artistic production – be it a painting, a film, or, as concerns us most here, a literary text. Those traces of the imagination are, however, still pointing to something at the level of the individual. It does not answer our question, “Can what is imagined also be shared?”

The following chapters are based on the premise that it can, and is. The theory behind this analysis of post-1945 fictions of destruction is the existence of a collective cultural imaginary, in this case of mass-scale disaster, facilitated by the new possibilities of information technology. If what is imagined can become information that is then transferred by media (and measurable, as stated above), then perhaps the imagination has the potential for secondary-level quantification, and, more importantly for the present task, qualification. An imaginary can be thought of as the landscape of the imagination – the expansive, nebulous region where what is imagined by individuals interacts with what is imagined by others. The imaginary is the ever-changing landscape both formed by and reciprocally forming the many individual imaginations present within a cultural group. The following chapter outlines a theorization of the imaginary as a collective phenomenon, first by presenting several previous instances in philosophy and cultural studies to describe a collective imaginary – some of which have more to do with the theory of the imaginary we will be applying here and others from which this theorization should be distinguished (not opposed to, but separate from). I will then elaborate on the theory of a shared imaginary that is contingent on the modernization of communication and characterized by the reciprocal, kinetic nature of the creative process within a cultural context.
For many theorists of the imaginary, such as Charles Taylor, it is something most often referred to as a “social imaginary.” The social imaginary in this sense has to do with how people “imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations…” (Taylor 171-3). Many of these theories of the social imaginary are primarily focused on practices, behaviors, laws and normative systems: the institutions that order society, especially in and as a result of the political and economic arenas. The latter is true particularly in the case of Marxist theories of the social imaginary, including those of Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson.

Cornelius Castoriadis is likewise primarily concerned with the imaginary as it relates to the institutions of society, particularly in the sense in which the “institution is a socially sanctioned, symbolic network in which a functional component and an imaginary component are combined in variable proportions and relations” (132). In order to better explain the relationship between the symbolic and society, he brings up “the imaginary component of every symbol and of every symbolism.” In The Imaginary Institution of Society, Castoriadis articulates the most common meaning of the term “imaginary”:

…we speak of the ‘imaginary’ when we want to talk about something ‘invented’ – whether this refers to a ‘sheer’ invention (‘a story entirely dreamed up’), or a slippage, a shift of meaning in which available symbols are invested with other significations than their ‘normal’ or canonical significations (‘What are you imagining now?’ says the woman to the man who is chiding her for a smile she exchanged with someone else). In both
cases, it is assumed that the imaginary is separate from the real, whether it claims to take the latter’s place (a lie) or makes no such claim (a novel). Furthermore, “the imaginary has to use the symbolic not only to ‘express’ itself... but to ‘exist’, to pass from the virtual to anything more than this.” Every fantasy, no matter how secret or delirious, is “composed of ‘images’, but these ‘images’ are there to represent something else and so have a symbolic function. But, conversely, symbolism too presupposes an imaginary capacity... to see in a thing what it is not, to see it other than it is” (Castoriadis 127). Such understanding of the multi-layered, mutually-creating nature of the imaginary and the symbolic is essential to any discussion of what is imagined and how it expressed, whether that be for the purposes of the social order and its institutions or the artistic landscape and its articulations (and fabrications).

The **collective imaginary** that I refer to is not so much a theory of how we relate to each other (social structures), but rather how we relate to the world. I am not here contesting previous theories of the social or cultural imaginary, but I am distinguishing my own application of a shared imaginary from the aforementioned systems. The difference is based on its concern with the imagination as pertains to a relationship of both individual and collective entities to the world. Fictionalization is therefore a primary form of agency arising from said imagination, rather than society and its imagination of itself in the world, with political or economic structuralization being the primary work of the imagination. Rather than having the social landscape as its focus (although it is a vital part of the equation), it centers on the imaginative landscapes: the scenarios we imagine and how they are reflected in the fictions we create, in this case particularly tied to our visions of futurity and other aspects of our relationship to temporality. In that sense, the
collective imaginary here described is more about a society’s view of the state of the world, not of itself, at a particular point in time and place. It is more about imagination and its translation into cultural production (and vice versa) than about the formation of political, economic and ideological systems. While the collective imaginary certainly includes and is affected by said systems, it is not directly or necessarily concerned with them. Finally, the collective imaginary is a fluid network of possibilities that is much less structured and systematically organized than the system of comparatively more direct correlations described in Marxist thought.

There are two socio-cultural theories that more closely correspond to my re-articulation of the collective imaginary: the social imaginary described by Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* as a system of cultural activity, and the oft-cited and now widely-recognized theory of “imagined communities” put forward by Benedict Anderson in his book of the same name. Appadurai’s articulation of the imaginary, similarly to those described previously, is concerned with social practice, work, agency and states:

The image, the imagined, the imaginary - these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is somewhere else), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an
organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. This unleashing of the imagination links the play of pastiche (in some settings) to the terror and coercion of states and their competitors. The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order.

(Appadurai 31)

The key aspect of Appadurai’s theory on the “image, the imagined, the imaginary” that makes it more relevant to the collective imaginary I describe is the parsing out of the imagination’s role in social life, which he describes as “a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes.” He separates the imaginary into five areas of “global cultural flows”: mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes and ideoscapes, with the “-scape” suffix pointing to “the fluid, irregular shapes” of the different dimensions (33).

While all of these dimensions feed into the cultural environment, which in turn triggers effects in the collective imaginary (as I will describe in the following pages), there are two “-scapes” of particular import to this discussion of the collective imaginary and the production of fictions of destruction after 1945: technoscapes and mediascapes. The first refers to “the global configuration, also ever fluid, of technology and the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries” (34). Appadurai’s technoscapes are relevant thematically and formally to the narratives I will analyze in the
following chapters. They also have a crucial theoretical function in the formation of a collective imaginary in that they are close allies to what Appadurai calls “mediascapes”:

*Mediascapes* refer both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios), which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media. These images involve many complicated inflections, depending on their mode (documentary or entertainment), their hardware (electronic or pre-electronic), their audiences (local, national, or transnational), and the interests of those who own and control them. What is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide… large and complex repertories of images, narratives, and ethnoscapes to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed.

(35)

In today’s information-saturated environment, mediascapes have a significant and nearly inescapable role in shaping individual, and subsequently communal, imaginaries.

What this means is that many audiences around the world experience the media themselves as a complicated and interconnected repertoire of print, celluloid, electronic screens, and billboards. The lines between the realistic and fictional landscapes they see are blurred, so that the farther away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic,
even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world. (Appadurai 35)

The interactions (both meldings and collisions) between the many individual imaginaries that percolate within social groups—such as families, religious denominations, educational institutions, regions, nations, etc—trigger reactions in a larger landscape of images and narratives. That landscape is constantly shifting, fluidly adapting to the new information provided by the imaginations of individuals back into the collective imaginary that subsequently acts as the cultural environment for further triggering of individual experience, and so on. An approximate metaphor is the circularity of the hydrologic cycle, which describes the complex and continuous movement of water between the earth and its atmosphere, with each part of the process (evaporation, condensation, precipitation, etc.) leading into another, meanwhile triggering changes in physical state.

One possible way to create a theoretical map of the collective imaginary and its oscillation between the individual consciousness and the realm of shared expression is through the linguistic theories of Louis Hjelmslev. He transformed Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of semiotics, which according to Hjelmslev posits that “the sign is an entity generated by the connexion between an expression and a content” (47), moving from the signifier and signified to a four-part division based on two planes (functives of the sign function): the plane of content and the plane of expression, each made up of a substance level and a form level. There is “solidarity between the sign function and its two functives, expression and content. There will never be a sign function without the simultaneous presence of both these functives; and an expression and its content, or a
content and its expression, will never appear together without the sign function’s also being present between them” (Hjelmslev 48). Hjelmslev’s critique of Saussure’s system is based on the latter’s attempt to consider expression and content separately from each other, without considering the sign function (49). As I will now demonstrate, it is Hjelmslev’s focus on the interdependence and oscillation between content and expression that makes his system very useful as a model for understanding the collective imaginary and its role in artistic/cultural production.

First, a look at the content-expression relationship in Hjelmslev’s own words:

Each language lays down its own boundaries within the amorphous “thought-mass” and stresses different factors in it in different arrangements, puts the centers of gravity in different places and gives them different emphases. It is like one and the same handful of sand that is formed in quite different patterns, or like the cloud in the heavens that changes shape in Hamlet’s view from minute to minute. Just as the same sand can be put into different molds, and the same cloud take on ever new shapes, so also the same purport is formed or structured differently in different languages. What determines its form is solely the functions of the language, the sign function and the functions deducible therefrom. Purport remains, each time, substance for a new form, and has no possible existence except through being substance for one form or another. (52)

What brings us closer to a theory of the collective imaginary is his description of the malleability of the “amorphous ‘thought-mass’” and its ability to take on shape, with the form of that shape being contoured by contextual factors.
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe Hjelmslev’s substance and form as a model of “stratification” in with “[e]ach stratum exhibits phenomena constitutive of double articulation. …The first articulation chooses or deducts, from unstable particle-flows, metastable molecular or quasi-molecular units (substances) upon which it imposes a statistical order of connections and successions (forms). The second articulation establishes functional, compact, stable structures (forms), and constructs the molar compounds in which these structures are simultaneously actualized (substances)” (40-41). The complexity of the system of substance and form lies in the fluctuating overlap between the two – the un-forming and re-forming of “matter” between substance and form that resists permanent solidification.

Substances are nothing other than formed matters. Forms imply a code, modes of coding and decoding. Substances as formed matters refer to territorialities and degrees of territorialization and deterritorialization. But each articulation has a code and a territoriality; therefore each possesses both form and substance. For now, all we can say is that each articulation has a corresponding type of segmentarity or multiplicity: one type is supple, more molecular, and merely ordered; the other is more rigid, molar, and organized. Although the first articulation is not lacking in systematic interactions, it is in the second articulation in particular that phenomena constituting an overcoding are produced, phenomena of centering, unification, totalization, integration, hierarchization, and finalization. …The word “structure” may be used to designate the sum of
these relations and relationships, but it is an illusion to believe that structure is the earth's last word. (Deleuze and Guattari 41)

The imposition of structure on unstable, supple “particle forms” is an apt metaphor. While it represents the existence of a process of crystallization into concrete structures out in the world that we can potentially point to, experience, and describe, it also continually brings with it the amorphous substance that it forms and is un-formed back into.

While Hjelmslev’s theory functions primarily within the field of linguistics, it is a productive framework in literary theory for drawing out the nuances of the artistic process, its products, and their relationship to the collective imaginary. Before the act of writing, before something like a deeply-ingrained anxiety about the future makes its way through to a concretized form of expression in the words and sentences of a novel or the script and frames of a film, the creator's mind is already impacted by the mediatic context (along with the rest of the cultural environment)\(^2\). The ripples of that impact form the subconscious patterns that can be called substance of content - a nebulous, unformed jumble that has not yet begun to concretize into a specific, discernible and expressible feeling, desire, image or communication. Like Hjelmslev’s conception of matter, it is “unformed, amorphous, or formless” (Deleuze and Guattari, 531 n. 40).

Eventually, portions of the substance of content begin to coalesce into something that can be discerned—that can produce an effect or be recognized with more specificity.

\(^2\) As Castoriadis posits, the symbolic “cannot draw its signs from just anywhere, nor can it take just any signs whatever.” The individual as well as society, although in different ways, must constitute their symbolic orders from “what is already there.” This is, first, nature – and since nature is not chaos, since natural objects are connected to one another, certain consequences ensue. …Every symbolism is built on the ruins of earlier symbolic edifices and uses their materials – even if it is only to fill the foundations of new temples…” He also acknowledges the fluidity of the symbolic, saying that “[b]y its virtually unlimited natural and historical connections, the signifier always goes beyond a strict attachment to a precise signified and can lead to completely unexpected realms” (121).
This is the part of the process that can be termed form of content, and which overlaps with what Hjelmslev calls substance of expression because it is the source from which the form of expression we share concretely into the world can be gleaned. Once the form of expression is disseminated, it in turn joins the cultural context and proceeds to affect (join or change) the environment, however slightly, and thereby impact other individual substances of content via various mediatic vehicles. The reciprocal relationship of impact between the individual mind and the cultural environment that therefore constructs the collective imaginary is like Hjelmslev’s postulate of linguistics in that “even at the moment when the two planes are most distinct, as the regime of bodies and the regime of signs in an assemblage, they are still in reciprocal presupposition”:

It is by virtue of this type of relations that linguistic and nonlinguistic elements are inseparable from the start, despite their absence of correspondence. The elements of content give the intermingling of bodies clear contours at the same time as the elements of expression give the noncorporeal expressed a power of sentencing or judgment. These elements are all abstract or deterritorialized to different degrees, but in each instance they effect a reterritorialization of the overall assemblage on certain order-words and contours. Indeed, the significance of the doctrine of synthetic judgment is to have demonstrated that there is an a priori link (isomorphism) between Sentence and Figure, form of expression and form of content. (Deleuze and Guattari 108)
The whole of this reciprocal interaction is in part what I refer to as the collective imaginary. It effectively describes the nature of the movements that make up, and collectivize, what becomes a shared imaginary within a societal group.

The interactions described above are constant and shifting, giving the collective imaginary a diaphanous quality that is notoriously difficult to pin down for the purposes of analysis. The quality of the imaginary is not well-formed or circumscribed (concretized), but rather more magmatic. It is unstructured, flowing and simmering under the surface, then coming to the surface most often unpredictably in sudden bursts or slow quiet seeps that solidify into shapes that we can gather up and observe as we attempt to form hypotheses about the massive, ever-changing substance bubbling secretly away in the dark. It is at these moments when substance emerges and concretizes into forms that we can make our attempts at describing their characteristics.

Cultural objects such as literary works, films, television series, advertisements, and so on are some such concretizations that appear during certain historical moments, melded by a confluence of contexts and contingencies. It follows that by inspecting the characteristics of a select group of such concretizations of the collective imaginary we can draw out some of those contexts and contingencies – thereby enabling us to use the observations gathered to form an image of a particular cultural situation. That is how we can circumvent the challenge to analysis posed by the imaginary and attempt to pin down some of its aspects. It is the objective of the chapters that follow to tease out, identify and theorize the emergence of a shared post-atomic imaginary of mass-scale disaster through the analysis of literary texts and other contextually relevant cultural media that can engage with that imaginary.
Innovations in information technology in particular are widely recognized as catalysts for changing the ways we express the imaginary. One of the most well-known elucidations of that process is Benedict Anderson’s application of information technology to the rise of the novel in his work *Imagined Communities*. Anderson describes fundamental changes in “modes of apprehending the world,” more specifically “apprehensions of time” in terms of the appearance of the idea of simultaneity. He describes, employing Walter Benjamin’s ideas of Messianic time, a transformation from the “mediaeval conception of simultaneity-along-time” into “an idea of ‘homogeneous, empty time,’ in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (Anderson 24). Anderson ties the significance of this transformation to the “birth of the imagined community of the nation” in the structure of the novel and the newspaper, “two forms of imagining which first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century.” Particularly relevant to my focus on temporality is Anderson’s description of “a complex gloss upon the word ‘meanwhile’” within a typical novel structure (24-25).

In Anderson’s model separate members of a society are connected without necessarily interacting or even being acquainted, thanks to the awareness of simultaneity of experience. Anderson ties this phenomenon to the formation of the nation as an imagined community, “a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.” He uses Americans as an example, pointing out that while one American will never meet more than a few of his fellow countrymen and “has no idea of what they are up to at any one time,” he nevertheless “has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity” (26).
According to Anderson, a person reading a newspaper did so in a “novelistic” manner, as a type of book filled with plots and characters. Several factors contribute to the newspaper’s creation of an imagined community: “calendrical coincidence,” by which the date of the newspaper “provides the essential connection—the steady onward clocking of homogeneous, empty time” in which “‘the world’ ambles sturdily ahead,” rather than disappearing from existence when absent from the pages of the paper (Anderson 33); the market for the newspaper, by which an individual comes to belong to a “collective body of readers”; the “doubleness” of our actions and the actions of the people in the paper, such as our reading about another person reading; and the ability of the reader to “think of the representative body, not the personal life” (32). Anderson goes on to describe “the development of print-as-commodity” as “the key to the generation of wholly new ideas of simultaneity” through the history of “reproducibility and dissemination” in the publishing industry (37).

If the rise of the newspaper and the novel were major contributors to the creation of imagined communities, which can be said in another way to be characterized by the sharing of a collective imaginary, how much more simultaneity of experience was created by the introduction and development in the 20th century of new media technologies such as the radio, the television and the internet? A collective imaginary of mass-scale disaster and risk is possible because of the increasing range and instantaneity of communications networks that, even more than Anderson’s newspapers, allowed (and often forced) us to share experiences more collectively and simultaneously than we ever had before. Through mass media we have jointly viewed images of war, violence, famine and terror. In many other places around the world it would be hard to find those who have not seen
an image of the nuclear mushroom cloud. The events of World War II, including the Holocaust and the nuclear attacks on Japan, were impactful on a more global level because of the respective scales of their horror and the scale of their potential for even greater destruction. However, the massive shockwaves of the mid-20th century, even more than the also epically destructive nature of World War I, were also due to the level we had then reached in our capacity to communicate the images and narratives of those experiences on a global scale.

By the end of World War II, the Bell Telephone system processed more than 125 million conversations daily. The U.S. Bureau of the Census reported thousands of radio stations and a few television stations that supplemented the previously existing communication media such as newspapers, books, pamphlets, and the postal service (Gleick 5). The magic of this new world of communication was its physical conversion of language into electricity, forming a new set of technological metaphors for words both oral and written – the heard and seen turned into the invisible, then back into the material. As James Gleick writes,

Everyone understood that electricity served as a surrogate for sound, the sound of the human voice, waves in the air entering the telephone mouthpiece and converted into electrical waveforms. This conversion was the essence of the telephone’s advance over the telegraph—the predecessor technology, already seeming so quaint. Telegraphy relied on a different sort of conversion: a code of dots and dashes, not based on sounds at all but on the written alphabet, which was, after all, a code in its turn. Indeed, considering the matter closely, one could see a chain of
abstraction and conversion: the dots and dashes representing letters of the alphabet; the letters representing sounds, and in combination forming words; the words representing some ultimate substrate of meaning…

(Gleick 5)

The languages of dots and dashes and electric currents evolved in the later decades of the 20th century into the plethora of informational languages of computing, transmitted seemingly instantaneously, both materially and wirelessly, to millions of personal and shared media-disseminating devices around the world. These languages carry both the elements of experience and the expressions of the imaginary back and forth across the globe and into the minds of individuals.

The resulting modern media saturation is in part responsible for the impact on the shared perception of threat; I think particularly of the images of the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, crumbling in a billow of smoke. The crumbling towers became another image burned into millions of minds in the United States and around the world. The already traumatic impact of the attacks, particularly on the American people, was heightened by the fact that media channels not only transmitted images of the events after they occurred, but that in the world of continuous coverage millions watched and thus secondarily, collectively experienced the events as they were occurring. For the 9/11 generations, the mantra of reminiscence became, instead of the previous generation’s “I remember where I was when I heard Kenny was shot,” something more like “I remember where I was as I watched the 9/11 attacks happen.”

The advancement of mass communication technology has also expanded the visibility of debates on globally-pertinent issues such as nuclear development or the
environment. Twentieth-century developments in communications and other areas of science and technology paradoxically and simultaneously expanded the possibilities for globalized conflict and an increased global consciousness of humankind and its planetary habitat as an interdependent whole. The literal and symbolic aspects of this emerging consciousness are very effectively represented by the appearance of the first images of Earth as seen from space in the 1960s and 70s.

The images are connected to a phenomenon researchers refer to as the “Overview Effect,” a sense of euphoria some astronauts have described upon seeing our planet from orbit. The term was coined by Frank White in his 1987 book *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution*. Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell describes the Overview Effect as a sensation that “gave him a profound sense of connectedness, with a feeling of bliss and timelessness. He was overwhelmed by the experience. He became profoundly aware that each and every atom in the Universe was connected in some way, and on seeing Earth from space he had an understanding that all the humans, animals and systems were a part of the same thing, a synergistic whole. It
was an *interconnected euphoria*” (O’Neill). The Overview Effect is a phenomenon that scientists and philosophers are still trying to explain and is the subject of a 2013 documentary film called *Overview*.

The documentary opens with a 1948 quote by astronomer Fred Hoyle, prophetically declaring that “Once a photograph of the Earth, taken from outside, is available…a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose.” According to those who study the Overview Effect, that new idea is the perception of global interconnectedness. As White puts it, “the Earth is one system, we’re all part of that system, and…there is a certain unity and coherence to it all.” This “cognitive shift” is not one that simply involves an ecstatic, utopian sense of oneness. What makes it especially valuable to the concept of a collective imaginary of mass-scale risk is the combination of that euphoric synergy with a new sense of threat. As astronaut Ron Garan describes it, “When we look down at the Earth from space…we see this amazing, indescribably beautiful planet. It looks like a living, breathing organism, but it also at the same time looks extremely fragile” (*Overview*).

Astronaut Jeff Hoffman further elaborates on the connection of that fragility to the effects of human action:

There’s this very poetic concept that a lot of people express that there are no boundaries from space…I’ve heard a lot of my astronaut colleagues say that unfortunately, it’s not true. You do see boundaries. They’re mostly the result of human impact. …It’s a long litany of environmental impact that we’ve had on our planet, and that’s something that, when you see it from the cosmic perspective, makes you really
appreciate the concept of Spaceship Earth and that we’re all here together.

(Overview)

What Frank White and others grasped regarding global perspective is its importance as a vital shift in human self-reference particular to this era: “This view of the Earth from space—the whole Earth perspective—I think is the true symbol of this age, and I believe that what’s gonna happen is [that] there’s going to be a greater and greater interest in communicating this idea—because after all, it’s key to our survival. We have to start acting as one species with one destiny. We are not going to survive if we don’t do that.” Astronaut Edgar Mitchell, one of the first to experience the Overview Effect firsthand, points to a crucial connection of the global perspective to a consequent reflection in our narratives. He believes that we have to “come up with a new story, a new picture, a new way to approach this and to shift our behaviors in such a way that it leads to a sustainable approach to our civilization—as opposed to a destructive approach” (Overview).

We can see the collective imaginary as a site for the emergence of those stories and pictures that express the working-through of that sense of community and fragility already long present in abstract thought but so newly real and tangible in the modern technological era. In her work on the emergence of a “sense of planet” in connection with the development of modern environmental movements, Ursula K. Heise describes the blend of utopianism and threat in the shaping of an “environmental imagination of the global”:

…the formation of this new social movement also occurred at a moment of looming global disaster from the dual threat of nuclear annihilation and environmental collapse. As environmentalism gradually established itself
in this configuration of geopolitics, new science, and advanced
technologies, it was initially fueled by powerful visions of the global, from
the Gaia hypothesis to Spaceship Earth and popular slogans such as
“Think globally, act locally.” But the utopian political and cultural
aspirations that seemed naturally connected to this holistic view of the
planet found themselves from the beginning in a complex conjunction
with darker visions of global collapse or conspiracy on the one hand and
with the call to return to local environments and communities as a way of
overcoming the modern alienation from nature on the other. (Heise 20-21)

The oscillations between progress and threat, optimism and pessimism, euphoric
connectedness and social fracturing, and hope and despair in the modern society of risk
(which I will address in greater detail in Chapter Three) are crucial elements of the
collective imaginary of disaster that reveal themselves through fictions of destruction and
survival.

As this dissertation will show, the fictionalization of disaster is both a part of the
process that shapes the collective imaginary of threat we are here concerned with and also
a field of evidence that can, and does, reveal some of its characteristics. Media theorist
Friedrich Kittler describes the media context of 1900 by way of the typewriter.\(^3\) If the
typewriter is both medium and metaphor for the materiality of writerly production at the
start of the 20th century, then perhaps the inherent metaphor of cloud computing is an apt
one for the increasingly globalized dispersal of information and the rising visuality and
virtuality of cultural production at the beginning of the 21st. Rather than the intangible

---

\(^3\) See Kittler, Friedrich A. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. 1986. Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and
voice behind the chair of the writer (substance of content), one can imagine the cloud
over the creator's head—a cluster of images, metaphors, words, etc. that are always there
before the act of production, the form of content and/or expression. Like its literal
counterpart, this cloud of cultural influence is nebulous, ever-shifting and changeable.
Like the aforementioned chart of the hydrologic cycle, the cloud of the collective
imaginary gives forth and receives in a continuous exchange.

In the following chapters I will attempt to grasp the illusive shapes of that cloud
by capturing, analyzing and displaying its concretized products; in this case, the
particularities of post-1945 disaster fiction that reveal a significant shift in the way we
experience our place in space and time and how we perceive our potential to survive both
our fraught history and our attempts to harness the future.
CHAPTER TWO

The Broken Road to the Future: The Destruction of a Metaphor of Progress

“When you walk through the streets…you must remember to take only one step at a time. Otherwise, falling is inevitable” (Auster 5).

Despite the best efforts of speculative fiction and its attempts to harness the complexities of scientific inquiry into the true nature of time (think television series such as the many voyages of Dr. Who, J.J. Abram's experimental Fringe, or the more mainstream film The Curious Case of Benjamin Button based on the short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald), most of us (particularly in the Western world) still perceive our experience of time as more-than-less linear: a trajectory moving ‘forward’ from a steadily solidifying past into a relatively unknown but somewhat predictable future (a mundane normality in this case reflected in the less speculative genres of office and romantic comedies). Life is a road you are on with paths into tomorrow that diverge from their inescapable trajectory only by occasional forks deemed monumental in their importance as anomalies or, less desirably, terminated by one’s equally inescapable death. In the case of the more transcendentally-minded, even death is merely another type of fork, after which follows an even longer forward-moving march of time into eternal after-life.

It is understandable that we would make great efforts to infuse these paths with optimistic potential and that we would treasure belief systems that give the temporal roads we walk greater meaning and their distant horizons a shimmer of hope. The promise of a brighter tomorrow is one of great emotional and intellectual value to societies that for millennia have measured their temporal existence by calendars and
timekeepers, the rise and fall of power structures, the decay of their shelters and the steady change of their people’s aging bodies. It is not only a promise—but a challenge.

That challenge was taken up by some of the early authors of what we consider modern science fiction, writing in the glow of the technological growth of the Second Industrial Revolution (also called the Technological Revolution). This period from the latter half of the 19th century into the 20th, following the initial Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, saw the development of pivotal technological advances such as new energy sources, communications technologies, advances in health sciences and significant improvement in socioeconomic conditions. American writer Edward Bellamy was witness to that age of promise and growth in his country; the infectious excitement of innovation and improved living standards found its way into his best-known novel, a utopian projection into the future entitled Looking Backward: 2000-1887. Bellamy sends his late-19th-century protagonist to the year 2000 via a hypnotic sleep gone awry. Julian West awakens into a world that stands gloriously as the payoff of many years of technological and social progress that delivered ideal working and living conditions, a steady increase of brotherhood and nearly complete reduction of suffering and violence. Boston stands as a “great city” in which each quarter features “large open squares filled with trees, along which statues glistened and fountains flashed in the late-afternoon sun” (43).

Bellamy’s vision of harmony rests on the “simple and obvious explanation” of the “reaction of a changed environment upon human nature,” an environment made possible by a continuous improvement of social systems with the aid of advancements in

---

4 The transitions and contexts of these periods of technological innovation are well documented in part by David S. Landes in his work The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969. Print.
organizational structures and technology. “It means merely that a form of society which was founded on the pseudo-self-interest of selfishness, and appealed solely to the antisocial and brutal side of human nature, has been replaced by institutions based on the true self-interest of a rational unselfishness, and appealing to the social and generous instincts of men” (Bellamy 185).

Bellamy forms his ideal society on the optimistic belief in “what the divines and philosophers of the old world never would have believed, that human nature in its essential qualities is good, not bad, that men by their natural intention and structure are generous, not selfish, pitiful, nor cruel, sympathetic, not arrogant, godlike in aspirations, instinct with divinest impulses of tenderness and self-sacrifice, images of God indeed, not the travesties upon him they had seemed.” Humans were not inherently destructive, it seemed to Bellamy in 1887, but rather products of the intense pressure of “conditions of life which might have perverted angels….” Once these conditions were improved, humanity, “like a bent tree…had sprung back to its normal uprightness” (191). After laying out the philosophical foundation of his utopia in a lengthy sermon, Bellamy concludes the monologue with a triumphant declaration: “With a tear for the dark past, turn we then to the dazzling future, and, veiling our eyes, press forward. The long and weary winter of the race is ended. Its summer has begun. Humanity has burst the chrysalis. The heavens are before it” (194).

Today, more than a decade after that golden year of Bellamy’s, it would be difficult for most inhabitants of today’s world not to view the author’s vision as innocent or naïve. It takes context to understand the fact that a great number of readers in Bellamy’s time bought into his projection; *Looking Backward* was the third most popular
book at the turn of the 20th century, superseded only by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Ben-Hur* (Fromm v). The utopian story was not merely a bestseller; it inspired a surge in utopian writing, was the impetus for the creation of over 160 “Bellamy Clubs” advancing the novel’s ideals, and even had enough impact to be credited with influencing the rise of a major political movement, the Populist Party (v-vi). Many people living during the Second Industrial Revolution could believe that the road of development they trod would lead inevitably to the triumph of innovation and brotherly love. Or, as Erich Fromm puts it, “Americans at the end of the nineteenth century were willing to believe in, and capable of believing in, a society that would fulfill the promises and hopes that are at the root of our whole Western civilization” (vi). How could they imagine the road traversing from their time to ours, one we now look back on with the pain and horror of regret and disbelief? And after seeing the true nature of that road, how can we look back on a novel like Bellamy’s and not wince at least a little (in shame?) at its wholehearted commitment to a 20th century path of progress that led to glory?

While widespread, the utopian promise of the Industrial and Technological Revolutions was not universal. Bellamy’s science fiction contemporaries, while also certainly writing their own exciting visions of a bright technological future, tempered their *oeuvres* with a shadow of suspicion that arose from doubt in Bellamy’s central premise—the inherent goodness of humanity and the consequent likelihood that advancements would be put to good use in the service of harmony. In his space travel novel *De la Terre à la Lune*, Jules Verne imagines instead a consortium of greedy, warmongering technological moguls who compete in developing weapons with the
greatest level of casualties. H.G. Wells concludes *The Time Machine* with a future that reveals not a gleaming city but instead a desolate, ruined wasteland.

Over the century and a half since *Looking Backward* went to print, a long road of violence and the continued failure of technological and social progress to provide widespread well-being and peace have made us more likely to buy into Welles’ wasteland than Bellamy’s Boston. It is impossible for us to un-know the possibilities for destruction to which we have put our innovations. Verne’s parodic Gun Club is nothing next to the results of The Manhattan Project. The past decades of popular culture show a proliferation not of utopian visions, but rather the success of dystopia after dystopia—many if not most of those dark fictions centered on warnings about the harmful ends to which the recklessness of progress leads.

Think, for example, of the 1997 film *Gattaca*, which reveals a near-future in which the advancement of genetics has created a society separated even more acutely into super- and sub-humans. Or the whole host of fictions that project a bleak, deadly result to the development of machine and robotics technologies, including iconic stories like Isaac Asimov’s *I, Robot*, Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (and the film version, *Blade Runner*) and “The Minority Report” (also made into a film), the *Terminator* films, or the hit television series *Battlestar Galactica* (the 21st-century version). Other fictions decry the impact of progress on the environment and our own existence in the world, such as the film *Children of Men* (based on the novel by P.D. James in which humanity has become infertile) and a growing list of disaster stories on page and screen that portray the effects of climate change, animal experimentation and
biochemical manipulation, such as Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy or the films *12 Monkeys, The Day After Tomorrow,* and others in the same vein.

What is at work in the relationship between shifting historical contexts and the changing fictional trends that accompany them? In his essay “Feigning in Fiction,” Wolfgang Iser writes about the pragmatic function of fictions, which are “inextricably tied to their use” (217). A pragmatic function can be described, in other words, as being what a piece of literature does or is used for. One of the foundational acts of fictionalization is world-creation: the painstaking construction by the author of an alternate reality to our own. Once unraveled onto the page via the pen or key-strokes of the writer, the fictional reality is let loose from the bounds of intentionality (208) and into the arena of action. Each time the text is touched by the mind of a reader, it unfurls itself within that mind, catalyzing with the firings of individual thought and experience. The mind of the reader in turn continually touches and is touched by the sundry tendrils of the cultural milieu. The fictionalizing act “encapsulates extratextual realities into the text, turns the elements chosen into contexts for each other, and sets them up for observation against those elements it has excluded, thus bringing about a two-way review: of the present through the absent, and vice versa” (208). The fictional reality, then, acts upon the reader and thereby enters the “real,” thus joining the cultural environment and contributing to what we are calling a collective imaginary.

Escapism is lauded frequently and fervently by a great number of readers as a primary attribute of literature, particularly when it comes to fiction in its sundry degrees of separation from our “real” worlds. This reader response is not to be ignored or passed off as trite, as it touches vitally upon the very nature of fictionalization and its weaving of
illusions, placing the real on a cutting board for manipulation, inspection and refabrication. The imagination that we often think of as a separation of the mind from the real thus remains intricately intermingled with that realm of reality. It is the oscillation between the fictionalizing separation and the contact with the real that creates a site for the work of the text - for what it does.

But let us return for the moment to the idea of escape. This approach to readership can perhaps begin to explain, in a rudimentary way, the utopian desires sought by some in the work of art. Within that framework, we enter the fictional reality because it is in some manner superior to our own. What the escapist desire does not explain, at least not in a straightforward way, is the pull of artists and art consumers toward the dystopian. Or, specifically in the case of disaster fiction: Why do we want to escape to a world of destruction that in many frightening ways shatters the comforts of our own? Why are many of us drawn to bleak, dark dismantlings that take us to places filled with the ruins of our dreams and ambitions? Of course these are questions more broadly answered with theories about the nature of dystopian fiction generally. There is a strange beauty in disaster—our awestruck sighs at skyscrapers felled by massive cresting waves (such as in films like The Day After Tomorrow), mushrooming clouds of orange explosions, or highways cracked open by earthquakes and twisters. For now, however, I wish to focus on what narrative fiction does.

Disaster narratives restructure and reorganize the world much like fiction generally, but they do so doubly by concretizing this fictionalizing act into a literalized aesthetic experience of world destruction. By creating worlds in order to destroy them, these narratives dismantle the real in a way that allows us to take up the rubble and so
examine the ruins of modernity. It is through the breaking down and analyzing of modernity that fiction uncovers our anxieties and uncertainties about its nature, compelling us to take a look at the inner workings of the real world we have created. In this sense, disaster fiction can be thought of as paradigmatic of the fictionalizing act.

The following pages are an analysis of one major recurring example in disaster narratives of destruction as a fictionalizing act: the broken road. The fractured roadway is a narrative device that, along with perpetuating the powerful, poignant, beautifully tragic imagery of disaster, works figuratively to break down the long-established cultural metaphor of the road as a path of progress. Certainly there is a strong precedent for the road as a literary device. Most memorably, roads in literature have functioned as sites for encounter, adventure, community and enlightenment. We can go as far back as Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* to find a road that facilitates a series of encounters between disparate individuals: “a company of...all sorts of people, who had met by chance; / and all of them were pilgrims / who were riding toward Canterbury” (3). Portraying a mass pilgrimage allowed the author to portray a wide range of characters (and consequently various styles) that would otherwise be very difficult to bring together in the scope of their daily lives. The picture Chaucer draws in the Prologue, then fleshes out in the stories to follow, portrays a scene of community—culminating at a site of blessing and reward. The tone is often lively and humorous, reflecting the spirit of their communal quest.

Centuries later Walt Whitman begins his “Song of the Open Road” in a similarly jovial tone: “Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road, / Healthy, free, the world before me, / The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.” The poet’s
opening declaration is one of optimistic abandon, of faith in the wealth of possibility and freedom waiting on the horizon before him. He charges down the road, shouting a motivational “Allons!” to his fellows, but only those at their best: “No diseas’d person, no rum-drinker or venereal taint is permitted here.” The traveler sees the world he walks upon likewise in its best light, an energetic, vibrant earth that “never tires,” a “Nature” that—although “rude and incomprehensible at first”—reveals “divine things more beautiful than words can tell.” The traveler is joined by other “great Companions… on the road—they are the swift and majestic men—they are the greatest women…

Journeyers over consecutive seasons, over the years, the curious years each emerging from that which preceded it,

Journeyers as with companions, namely their own diverse phases,

Forth-steppers from the latent unrealized baby-days,

Journeyers gaily with their own youth, journeyers with their bearded and well-grain’d manhood,

Journeyers with the womanhood, ample, unsurpass’d, content,

Journeyers with their own sublime old age of manhood or womanhood,

Old age, calm, expanded, broad with the haughty breadth of the universe,

Old age; flowing free with the delicious near-by freedom of death.

(Whitman)

Even death holds delight in the utopian bliss of Whitman’s open road, on which travelers can encounter such a splendid array of disparate characters who—like Chaucer’s—hail democratically from many ages, occupations and social places. “Forever alive, forever forward, /…They go! They go!” The poet invites even the reader onto this promising
path, giving you his own self in exchange for yours: “will you come travel with me? /
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?”

Even the more mischievous literary appearances of the road, including those with an underlying motif of tragedy and hardship, create opportunities for adventure and encounter that are often also marked by humor and jubilation. Roland Greene discusses the dependence of a much earlier genre, the picaresque, “on the geographical figure of the road.” Greene brings up an argument made by Colin Moore which posits that “the picaresque fiction is predicated on a basic communication situation that [Moore] calls ‘an encounter with a stranger,’ and that this condition in turn determines the nature of time and space in such a fiction. That is, each episode is a ‘one-time’ event, and the landscape of the fiction is a ribbon of road on which the narrator and the reader cannot stop or go backward” (Greene). While I will not elaborate at this time on the particular similarities and contrasts, it bears mentioning that this genre, which flourished in the 16\textsuperscript{th}-18\textsuperscript{th} centuries, bears a greater resonance with the post-1945 disaster fictions I analyze here because of its incorporation of the misadventures of anti-heroes (albeit with relatively lower stakes and greater playfulness). Another contemporary American example of this type of travel narrative is Jack Kerouac’s \textit{On the Road}, which I wish to comparatively analyze in the future. In narratives of this ilk the unlikely hero’s journey may be fraught with failure, ostracism and tragedy, but the series of encounters on their narrative paths also convey, like Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road,” a sense of adventure and blissful abandon into a world of possibility.

Fictions of destruction also often portray the road as a site of encounter. However, those encounters are not primarily opportunities for community but rather are
predominantly sites for conflict and danger both physical and ethical. In Pat Frank’s nuclear survival novel *Alas, Babylon*, written in the wake of the 1945 atomic attacks, it does not take long for the roads to start becoming hazardous; outlaws, outcasts, escaped convicts and the like become bolder in the absence of the normal law enforcement presence.

There is at least some remaining will and ability to preserve order in Frank’s post-nuclear American town, as well as the soon-justified hope that the dangers of their roads must only be held at bay until the government regroups and comes to the rescue. By time a second surge of post-apocalyptic fiction emerges in the first decade of the 21st century, the level of fear and horror has risen and the faith in the response of societal structures has plummeted within those fictional narratives—perhaps in keeping with another shift in the global climate in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. After the modern era of terrorism (and the battles against it) goes into full swing, joining the continuing struggle to contain potential nuclear threats in the massive visibility of global communication and media saturation, it is not so surprising (especially in the U.S., where 9/11 had the most immediate and significant shock effect), that there has been a renewed interest in survivalism and the fictionalization of mass-scale disaster. Furthermore, those fictions have become darker, more vicious and less likely to provide hope in better days to come.

For example, the road that is the namesake of Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 bleak post-apocalyptic novel has a paradoxical position in the frail lives of the father and son who are its subject. They depend on the road as a tenuous source of direction and last connection to the ruins of the modern world. However, they must stay on its fringes,
ready to run from other survivors who are similarly attracted to that last trace of society, but with no trace within themselves of that society’s previous ethical restraints. They are “roadrats”: thieves, cannibals and merciless thugs who lay traps or brazenly attack travelers weaker than themselves. The road is a primary visual and narrative motif in the similarly gray-toned 2010 post-disaster film *The Book of Eli*, in which the prophet-like protagonist must face a string of life-threatening encounters along the road of his quest, including conflicts with cannibals, rapists, thieves who lay traps for travelers with soft hearts, and a town full of ruffians led by a violent despot.

In the ongoing comic book and cable television series by Robert Kirkman (and illustrated by Tony Moore and Charlie Adlard), most roads are populated by zombies or “walkers” that wander endlessly and ravenously through the ruined, abandoned vehicles that block any easy route for escape. Even greater danger comes from those who are very much alive: gangs of ruthless attackers reveling unhindered by the now-unenforced rules of society, as well as larger communities of survivors ready to defend and expand their territories at any cost. All three of these post-9/11 narratives, which cross not only medium but also the typical lines drawn between so-called high art and popular fiction, saw distribution success in large part because of they have capitalized on themes and aesthetic elements (including dark, ashen color schemes, survivalist elements in action and costume, and the motif of the broken road) that have become paradigmatic of the post-apocalyptic genre.

The difficulties and delays (including the ultimate hindrance, death) found on post-catastrophic roads are part of the larger motif that prominently and predominantly characterizes the dystopian narratives emerging in droves from the mid-20th century into
today. This aesthetic and formal motif reinforces and represents a challenge to the
dominance of the deeply-ingrained perception of time as moving inexorably not only
forward from past into future, but *progress-ively* forward to an improved future for
humankind. Just as the audiences of Bellamy’s time flocked to consume fictional
projections of their utopian futures, audiences today buy in time and time again to
projections of our many possible dooms.

To more accurately examine the dystopian turn that the broken road represents,
we first take a small detour to a famous utopian idyll. In a study of Thomas More’s
*Utopia*, Roland Greene focuses on “The Hiddenness of the Open Road” in the ideal
island community (Fig. 1).

---

Fig. 1. Woodcut map of Thomas More’s *Utopia*,
1518 edition (Holbein).
Greene recalls the “making of the island by King Utopus,” which “involved a deliberate rupture from the mainland that presumably interrupted some road…”

On the landscape of the new island, the cities are…furnished with streets “well laid out both for traffic and for protection against the winds” (More qtd. Greene). But where is a road in the sense that many early modern fictions will represent it, as a passage between discrete places, from one state of life to another? It is not that there is no provision for movement from one city to another, or from the city to the country; the narrative Hythlodaeus observes that people move from one zone to the next, not least when the population of one city exceeds its fixed limits and some citizens move apart to establish another municipality. Cities, rural places, people in motion are all present in principle—but no roads are mentioned or imagined. (Greene)

Greene writes that “[t]he absence of a road in Utopia is the symptom of a preoccupation with neutralizing the kind of experience that roads entail: contingent, unpredictable, linear.” The missing roads are the migratory ones: precisely the kinds of roads that became a mainstay of dystopian post-disaster narratives in the last half-century.

The reason behind the lack of roads in Utopia may very well be that once you have reached your ideal destination, there is no need for a road to take you elsewhere. As in a Hegelian resolution of history, the end of the road has been reached; once the highest possible standard has come to being at the end of the path, there is no longer a need for the journey. If Utopia is at the end of the road, then it is fitting that many dystopian fictions are structured around a road without end. The bigger catastrophe of the post-
apocalypse is perhaps not the horrors left behind, but rather that characters must continue to endure those physically and psychologically perilous encounters that follow each other unceasingly down a broken path, figuratively and literally, whose final destination is concealed (and perhaps even non-existent). The theme of endlessness appears in many of these fictions through recurring imagery of timelessness and the lack of a clear goal or destination both in the narrative and its form.

One of the key characteristics of *The Road*, for example, is its near lack of temporality. McCarthy accomplishes this through the repetitiveness of a plodding, contemplative plot that mimics the painfully slow steps of the steadily weakening characters, as well as through more overt indications of the absence of the obsessive timekeeping so common in modern society:

“Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease” (3).

“Perhaps tomorrow. Tomorrow came and went” (33).

“What time of year? What age the child?” (261).

Time has clearly passed since the point at which disaster struck, as indicated by the growth of the child in that time from birth to whatever young age he might be. The boy is speculatively somewhere around 7-10 years old, but as the final quote above indicates any exact age is pointedly excluded. Narratively speaking, time necessarily moves to accommodate the activities of the characters. However, McCarthy offers few or no clues as to the time over which the narrative takes place. The temporal landscape of the story is further complicated by the periodic interruption of flashbacks and dreams—memories and visions that further construct the hazy limbo of atemporality.
The timelessness of the narrative is reinforced by the absence of a definitive endpoint or destination to the father and son’s journey. Several passages suggest they are heading toward a possible location in the south, but they are undercut by a looming reality: the likely futility of their goals. McCarthy emphasizes the lack of direction through environmental aspects, such as the father’s speech going out “into a blackness without depth or dimension” (67), as well as to more direct references to the doubtfulness of their chosen path: “Where are we going? We’re going south” (61) is followed later by the father’s admission that “[h]e knew that he was placing hopes where he’d no reason to. He hoped it would be brighter where for all he knew the world grew darker daily” (213).

There is a similar nomadic structure to *The Walking Dead*, in which survivors run from place to place, each time hoping they have reached a place to stop moving and settle down in safety—but each time having to escape once more onto the road (often after losing a member or two of their group in the process). Figure 2 shows one of many life-threatening escapes led by group leader Rick Grimes in the cable television version of Kirkman’s zombie tale, this time from a Centers for Disease Control facility they believed would provide both answers to their plight and a safe haven in which to escape the dangers of the open road. Both turn out to be false hopes and they instead have to head onto the endless road once again (“TS-19”).
Finally, the unending road of disaster fictions is manifested through the lack of endings in many of the narratives. As I have myself witnessed, the ambiguous ending of *The Road* is often a topic of contention among readers divided between those who believe in a new hope for the boy and others who see only greater impending suffering and darkness. While clues can be found for either interpretation, McCarthy takes away our view of the boy’s trajectory before we can see a resolution. He leaves the reader only with the final word, “mystery” (287); the tale hangs open with no indication of whether the boy will live an hour, a year or a lifetime, or how much suffering (or hope) that remaining time will contain.

While McCarthy’s novel resists a definitive resolution at its end, Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead* denies resolution through its format. Because of its nature as a currently ongoing, extremely lengthy and successful serial comic and spectacularly successful television series, the narrative can continue as long as circumstances allow. That means that as long as there is one more issue or one more episode, the characters will continue to suffer on their path of survival and the readers will trudge (or flee) along with them. We have yet to see (and may not see for a long time to come) whether Kirkman chooses to bring the ordeal to a satisfactory end or joins McCarthy in leaving the characters mid-crisis, with the readers left to interpret their possible futures.

There is a similar sequential pattern in the *Resident Evil* video game and movie franchises, both of which have turned out several installments and promise more to come. Each of these post-apocalyptic zombie contagion films has so far featured a series of battles between the main character (a female superhero named Alice who is empowered by the very contagion she is solely equipped to fight) with recurring and increasingly
monstrous new opponents. Each victory over those adversaries is then curbed by the introduction of a narrative opening rather than a final ending—leaving room for yet another installment and denying Alice and the survivors she protects the peace they so desperately need in order to rebuild human society. For example, the plot of the film *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007) is driven by a journal that promises a possible safe haven appropriately yet vaguely called Arcadia, toward which the small group of survivors, aided by Alice, escape in a salvaged helicopter. As the Moses to their Promised Land, Alice is denied utopia and must instead remain to continue the fight. However, at the beginning of the next installment when she tries to join them and escape the horrors she has survived, Alice discovers not a safe landing for her companions, but rather the wreckage of the helicopter and evidence of the destruction of their hopes for peace.

The open-endedness of these extreme survival situations is a highly exaggerated and affective version of the necessarily blind future at the end of any story that comes to an end, except in that they refuse to provide the reader with the comfort usually provided to soothe the jarring loss of their immersion in the fiction: a resolution to the suffering that narrative conflict entails. In all of the above examples, the possibility of a positive end to the story, although ultimately available for the speculations of the reader, is put in doubt by the repeated horrors that drive the plot. The only possible ends to the road of suffering in these fictions are death (for the characters) or (for the reader) the end of the story.

There are possible exceptions to be found to the pattern of the unending road, as there are in most recurring patterns. Two examples include the endings to the films *Children of Men* and *The Book of Eli*, both of which feature plots in which characters
reach the destination of their quests—ends to their roads that provide a seemingly utopian gesture to the otherwise bleak worlds of the narratives. In *Children of Men*, the main character is able, through great hardship and ultimately the sacrifice of himself, to get the woman and child who represent humanity’s hope to the “promised land” of the story, a lonely buoy off the coast where a ship belonging to the fabled “Human Project” appears through the fog in the final scene, optimistically displaying the name *Tomorrow* on its bow. In *The Book of Eli*, Eli and his travelling companion also endure through the troubles of the road and Eli’s corresponding self-sacrifice, to reach a concrete destination also off a coast: the island of Alcatraz. The iconic symbol of transgression has become a site of redemption, where Eli deposits the words of the Book from his memory into the growing collection of written knowledge that a group of scholar-survivors is compiling for building a new future.

The redemptive ending of *The Book of Eli* is not so surprising when one considers the religious overtones throughout the movie, not least of which is the Book itself: precious cargo filled with words rumored to hold the power to bring humanity together into a new future. The book is a transparent stand-in for the Christian Bible, with the text’s power of leadership a strong reference to the power of the Word made flesh—the teachings of Jesus Christ included in the New Testament. Furthermore, the title of the film harkens back to those of many of the books of the Judeo-Christian holy texts (think the Book of Isaiah, the Book of Ezekiel, or the Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, or, apocalyptically speaking, the Book of Revelation). Most importantly

---

5 We could also bring to the table other sacred prophetic texts such as The Book of Mormon, or the term “People of the Book,” which is a reference from the Qu’ran designating “people who possess a book, a revealed scripture,” and usually referring in the Islamic context to non-Muslim, monotheistic religions possessing a sacred text, primarily Judaism and Christianity (Peters).
for this discussion, the insertion of the protagonist’s name into that title structure marks him prominently, along with other features such as nearly super-human strength, a seemingly heaven-sent ability to stay alive, as well as one of the most widespread markers of a holy man—blindness—as a prophetic figure called to push forward on the road on his quest to protect the Word, whatever comes.

The creators of the film attempt to undercut the dominance of Christian themes at the conclusion by placing the Book of Eli on a shelf populated previously by a whole range of sacred texts from other belief systems, implying the existence of other “Eli’s,” other prophets who have followed the road to the Alcatraz library. But the ending nevertheless appears to hold to the redemptive, ultimately optimistic future that follows destruction in the concluding chapters of the Bible. In this instance, the future of mankind is portrayed to be the preservation of knowledge, including the spiritual kind. Even so, the end of the road for Eli (likewise brought about by death) is not the end of the road for his successor, Solara. Though her name references light (which in turn references redemption), when she steps back onto the road she tellingly takes Eli’s machete with her—a necessary, violent talisman as she leaves the haven of knowledge for the continuing reality of the ruined world outside.

In the case of *Children of Men*, the optimism of the ship’s name and the previously stated purpose of the Human Project group is tempered by the viewers’ inability to see any proof of the philanthropic nature of its members or the future of the mother and baby, now left alone to face whatever may come next. The future of the pair (and thereby the human race) is shrouded by fog such as that from which *Tomorrow* appears. Rather than marking it as a more optimistic exception to an ending such as that
in *The Road*, the tentative redemptiveness of the film’s ending resembles the ambiguity of McCarthy’s novel. The family of survivors seems to present a new opportunity for life for the boy in the wake of his father’s death, just as the Human Project does for Kee and her baby after her protector’s demise. However, in both the creators stop short of showing the reader or viewer a happy ending.

We do not know what happens next. While we may want to believe the gesture toward a possibility of hope, survival and love, ultimately an improvement of the characters’ lot, one does not have to search deeply to doubt that such a betterment of fates is likely, or even possible. There is no assurance of the goodwill of the new protectors; even if they do have the best interest of their wards in mind, there is even less guarantee of the goodwill of the world. They have not been transported, in fact, to utopia. They continue to inhabit a resolutely dystopian world that will almost assuredly continue to provide them with horrors and privations along their way. The narratives have revealed the possibility of hope, yes, but not a utopia isolated from the rest of the doomed world. In these futures, hope must exist together with despair, despite despair—if at all.

To return to our pattern, however, that despair which is the effect of ceaselessness in disaster narratives appears also in the narrative tension between endless movement and permanent immobility. Take, for example, the following scene from *The Road*:

The days sloughed past uncounted and uncalendared. Along the interstate in the distance long lines of charred and rusting cars. The raw rims of the wheels sitting in a stiff gray sludge of melted rubber, in blackened rings of wire. The incinerate corpses shrunk to the size of a child and propped on the bare springs of the seats. Ten thousand dreams ensepulchred within
their crozled hearts. They went on. Treading the dead world under like rats on a wheel. (McCarthy 273)

The power of this passage lies in its contrasting images of movement and stasis. The “long lines of charred and rusting cars” are a staple of disaster fiction on the page and the screen, such as in these scenes in both versions of *The Walking Dead*:

![Image of streets blocked with traffic](Image)

This oft-recurring image of streets blocked with traffic are another version of the broken road that even more vividly illustrates the image as a metaphor for the interruption and destruction of modernity. That message is further propelled in Figures 3 and 4 by the contrast of the horse Rick rides into Atlanta, a now antiquated form of transportation that is now less obsolete and more efficient than modern vehicles and highways.

In the scene from *The Road*, the cars melted into the roadway along with the corpses inside them show the stagnation of a dead world, but one that is paradoxically also continually dying—a macabre motion toward death that is illustrated in the scene by the slow passing of the days and the weary steps of the father and son. They are caught in the endless march of decay and horror “like rats on a wheel,” a well-traveled image that
evokes continued movement, but a circular, hopeless one devoid of hope or resolution. A fitting picture to represent its corresponding incarnation in the structure of the narrative.

The recurrence of the above imagery of endlessness in fictions of destruction is similarly paradoxical when considered alongside the primary image that launched this chapter—the impassable road. These broken or blocked avenues frequently make memorable appearances, especially in visually-dominant post-apocalyptic works such as films and video games (Fig. 5).

In the rich ruinous environment of *Fallout 3*, part of the popular role-playing disaster game series, the player's progress in the game is constantly hindered by environmental obstacles (Fig. 6). In addition to avoiding threats posed by marauders, violent creatures and irradiated...
areas, one must constantly navigate through, under, over or around destroyed pathways, including collapsed buildings, broken bridges, blocked subway tunnels, and city roads littered with land mines.

The environmental imagery is paired with another, perhaps even more significant common formal element of these narratives: the interruption. I am referring here to a narrative pattern that is very common in the structure of disaster fiction, in which the action of the plot is instigated by a sudden moment of destruction that interrupts the normal flow of the characters’ everyday lives.

[NORMALCY]

↓

{INTERRUPTION}

↓

<AFTERMATH>

The above diagram shows the simple pattern as it recurs across narratives. The characters, who are also stand-ins for the rest of the mass number of people (and you and I, vicariously) who will experience the event, are shown in quotidian activities, often mundane or repetitive in nature. In the following examples, this phase is set apart by square brackets. Suddenly (and “suddenly” is a key evocative word here), that normality is interrupted abruptly by an unusual shocking event. This phase, marked in curly brackets, is the narrative location of the disaster.
There are some works in which the disaster has already happened, some of which I will address shortly. A highly evocative and representational example of the sudden halt of normalcy is the introductory montage to the 1994 television miniseries adapted from Stephen King’s 1978 novel *The Stand*. Like the interplay of motion and stasis in *The Road* described above, the upbeat tempo of the background music, Blue Oyster Cult’s “Don’t Fear the Reaper,” creates a striking contrast to the sudden stasis of the scientists who have fallen dead at their usual posts and heightens the effect of interruption.

Following the interruption of the tasks of everyday life is the final phase in the diagram, the aftermath. It is the longest and most significant portion of the narrative in post-apocalyptic fiction. This period following the interruption (in angle brackets) is the time of survival, in which the characters develop through a series of actions (or inactions), ethically challenging decisions and separation into roles that determine their place in the new world. I will discuss this phase at length in the final chapter.

My first example comes from the 1959 novel by Pat Frank, *Alas, Babylon*. It is a Nuclear Age story that directly addresses the fears that permeated the world in the years immediately following the atomic attacks on Japan. It is set under the cloud of the growing nuclear threat in the dawn of the Cold War. In the opening pages Franks builds up to the disaster with maneuvering between politicians and military leaders regarding
the possibility of a nuclear attack on the United States. However, that setup is surrounded by a lengthy establishment of the everyday, with characters following their usual routines regardless of the risk from abroad.

In fact, *Alas, Babylon* is somewhat unusual beside its post-apocalyptic counterparts in that Frank devotes a more substantial section of the novel to the first, “normal” phase of the pattern. This perhaps reflects the desire after the end of the war to return to some sort of normalcy—which the events of the plot eventually show to be a futile attempt to return to innocence by those whose eyes have been opened to the risks of scientific development dangerously in league with weapons development in a global climate of suspicion and conflict. The post-war decades were marked by discussions of culpability and the distribution of civil defense materials such as pamphlets and videos in schools, homes and businesses.

Ultimately the prolonged period of normalcy in the novel (albeit one with an undercurrent of tension) comes to an end when it is interrupted by the feared nuclear attack:

[ “Florence awoke at six-thirty, as always, on a Friday in early December.”] (Frank 3)

…

On Friday night, Florence and Alice had split a bottle of sherry, an unaccustomed dissipation, and stayed up long past midnight, exchanging confidences, opinions and gossip. { As a result, Florence had neglected to set her alarm, and they had overslept. The explosions far to the south had shaken them awake, but it was not until some time later, when they had
seen the glow in the sky, that Alice had thought to turn on the radio, and they first realized what was happening. } (Frank 96)

…

“Who's going to do any reading today?” she asked. “Why bother with the library?”

< “Maybe a good many people will be reading,” Alice said, “once they find out that Civil Defense pamphlets are stocked in the library. Not that it's likely to be much help to them now, but perhaps it'll help some.”>

(97)

From this point on, the novel focuses on a small group of people surviving together in the isolation after the attack: securing provisions, ensuring their own safety and attempting to hold together some kind of social structure in their town.

While the plot of Frank’s novel is temporally straightforward, it does contain an interesting element that is worthy of note. The most obvious interruption point is certainly the launch of the nuclear attacks signaled in the passage above by explosions and the glow in the sky. However, this main crisis turn is preceded by the break of the routine with the “unaccustomed dissipation,” the late night and resulting late morning, all departures from the women’s daily schedule. The same type of foreshadowing interruption occurs in another post-apocalyptic novel from the same era, George R. Stewart’s Earth Abides (1949).

The story opens with an introductory quote from a 1947 issue of Chemical and Engineering News, explaining the possibility for mass casualties around the world should a “killing type of virus strain… suddenly arise…(emphasis mine)” (Stewart 1). The first
chapter then begins with snippets of news, marked as separate from the narrative by italics. They describe a national emergency:

…and the government of the United States of America is herewith suspended, except in the District of Columbia, as of the emergency. ...

Here is an announcement which has just come in from the Bay Area Emergency Council. The West Oakland Hospitalization Center has been abandoned. Its functions, including burials at sea, are now concentrated at the Berkeley Center. That is all...

The existence of a mass disaster has been established, but is followed by the true start of the story: the introduction of the protagonist, a naturalist doing solitary research out in the field who meets with his own unexpected crisis.

[ Just as he pulled himself up to the rock ledge, ] { he heard a sudden rattle, and felt a prick of fangs (emphasis mine). } (Stewart 3)

The narrative order of the interruptions is reversed from ascending in scale from minor to massive, as in the previous example, to descending from the larger establishing crisis to the individual dilemma in Earth Abides.

Note also the recurrence of the word “sudden” in the snakebite passage (bolded), which also appears in the introductory quote (“suddenly,” bolded above) and signals the entrance of the interruption as a break in the normal passing of time. From that “sudden” moment, the linear advancement of time as previously charted takes a decisive turn in a different direction, from which spring a number of different possible paths depending on the decisions made and actions taken by the characters in the aftermath.
Automatically he jerked back his right hand; turning his head, he saw the snake, coiled and menacing. ...< he raised his hand to his lips and sucked hard at the base of the index finger, where a little drop of blood was oozing out.

“Don’t waste time by killing the snake!” he remembered.

He slid down from the ledge, still sucking. At the bottom he saw the hammer lying where he had left it. For a moment he thought he would go on and leave it there. That seemed like panic; so he stopped and picked it up with his left hand, and went on down the rough trail. > (Stewart 3)

Fortunately for Stewart’s protagonist, his training as a field expert has given him practical and psychological skills he will need to deal with both the snake bite and the larger crisis that he will soon discover when he ventures back into the world that has changed drastically without his knowledge.

We can also find the dual interruption pattern in more recent works, such as the currently ongoing horror comic series created by Robert Kirkman, *The Walking Dead*, and the cable television series adapted from the comic.

[The first issue begins with a day in the life of a sheriff, Rick Grimes, and his partner and best friend Shane. They are engaged in the chase of a fugitive, one of the many dangerous duties of a lawman.]
{Suddenly, Rick is shot by the fugitive and left in a coma on the brink of death.} This is the first interruption, which while major is still only on the small scale of individuals.

He awakens from the coma to find that {while he was unconscious, the world has been taken over by a plague that turns the dead into ravenous zombies.} This more critical and massive interruption has taken place off-screen, as it were, beyond the protagonist’s scope of awareness just as in *Earth Abides*. <Rick must immediately deal with the aftermath of the situation, as he has awoken into a world in which he not only faces physical threats from attacks and privation, but in which all previous rules of law,
morality and society (all hallmarks of his normal occupation) have disappeared, leaving only survival as a rule (Kirkman, *Compendium* n.p.). I describe Rick’s survival journey and his role as a leader in greater detail in my final chapter on survivalism.

While the narrative pattern in *The Walking Dead* and the other examples above perhaps most often appears in the same sequence as the temporal order of events, from normalcy, to interruption, to aftermath, other examples of the pattern vary the sequential order in the narrative. Such is the case in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. The novel begins *in media res*, in a world that has already been ruined. There is little indication about the nature of the disaster that has left the man and boy wandering wretchedly through the ash-gray wasteland. The only clues to the events that have led up to the present moment of the narrative appear in flashbacks from the father’s memory. It is in one of these recollections that the interruption pattern makes its appearance, albeit in a different order.

{The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions.} He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didn’t answer. He went into the bathroom and {threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass.} <He dropped to one knee and raised the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go.> [She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? she said. What is happening?]

I don’t know.
[Why are you taking a bath?]

<I'm not.> (McCarthy 52-53)

The sequence above begins with the interruption, the imagery of which seems to evoke some kind of explosive attack, presumably (but not definitively) nuclear. The attempt to turn on the powerless light switch links an action of the everyday with the intrusion of disaster, emphasizing the more obvious indication of the interruption of linear time, the freezing of the clocks (a frequently occurring image of interruption and/or the halting of the passage of time across many genres). The man is right away marked as the actor and survivor of the story, as he instantly and instinctively reacts to the threat. He engages a mentality of survival and prepares for the aftermath by filling the bathtub with water.

The place of normalcy in this pattern is at the end of the scene, as his pregnant wife shows up unaware of the situation, still in the mode of the everyday as she inquires about baths in her nightwear. Her question (“Why are you taking a bath?”) and the man’s response (“I’m not.”) provide a concise but vivid contrast illustrating the merciless break of their normal life sequence as it charges forward in a different direction even while she lags behind. The mixing up of the narrative pattern reflects the detachment of the characters’ existence from the previous temporal norm, which in turn is a symptom of the unraveling of the regulating structures of modernity.

The interruption pattern these examples illustrate, along with the other aesthetic and formal elements of the broken road that we have discussed, can be interpreted as both influenced by and perpetuating a collective imaginary characterized by the expectation of an imminent break in the path of modernization. It is a road of technological development down which large portions of humankind have been running for centuries, but which
especially in the past century has reached breakneck speed that has left little time for reflection on the advances that have often proven to be otherwise. At the pace which we continue to frantically develop, there is little chance that we will be able to come to a halt—even if we do increasingly see the oncoming dangers approaching quickly in the horizon.

The dystopian road motif we find in the works discussed above (and many others like them) morphed from its narrative predecessors in a manner that signals several possible crises in the rhetoric of progress. The suspicion-ridden, even deadly encounters on the broken road point to a loss of faith in the possibility of community that was so ardently felt in Bellamy’s utopian novel and Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road.” The endlessness of its horrors and refusal to reveal its endpoint emphasize a vision of progress that is riddled with pitfalls and leads not to utopian, but to an increasingly more likely destruction. The interruption caused by the road’s fissures forecasts the impending (or currently arriving) fall of modernity—a world we created to strengthen our position but have lately been finding to be as fragile as a house of cards. As Ursula K. LeGuin writes in “A Non-Euclidian View of California as a Cold Place to Be” (1982), the Utopia we aim for is always in its essence “pure model; goal.” The evidence in our fictions points to an increasing fear that the ideal future we imagined to be further down the road of progress—that Utopia—may in fact be “uninhabitable. As soon as we reach it, it ceases to be utopia.” It is a “sad but ineluctable fact” (81).

Our inability to stop the inertia of progress in the face of both guilt and threat (the burdens of the past and the future) makes the interruption of modernity not only a fear, but perhaps simultaneously a fantasy. It is a desire that harkens back to the fantasy of the
frontier. Fictions of destruction, in laying waste to the complex, frenetic world of modernity, force open a space for many different paths. Especially in the predominantly American disaster narratives, there is an element of the desire present in the genre of the Western. The wasteland—ultimate sign of the destruction of infrastructure, of modern society—is both a place of danger and a site that provides the potential to start anew.

One can think of a large valley, clear and open in an untouched state. One day people start crossing the valley from one side to the other. Eventually they grow tired of the time and distance to traverse the expanse; in their impatience, they build a road to make their journey more efficient. For a while they are delighted with the newfound ease of their trips from one end to the other. They build better and better vehicles to zip faster and faster down their road. They construct buildings along the way for shops that provide roadside comforts. More and more people make their way back and forth, eager to partake of the road’s promises of a speedy, pleasurable journey. However, as time passes the road begins to buckle under the steady burden of its load. Small cracks appear, which eventually become gaps. Faster than the people can fill them in, the gaps yawn wider and become potholes. Accidents become a common occurrence as the people’s shiny new vehicles—light, agile things built for speed and pleasure—break to pieces as they shake and drop into the fractured surface. The buildings that aren’t turned into repair shops decay along with the path that gave them life, turning from providers of comfort to dark places where predators lurk, waiting to pounce on those who are waylaid on their slow, bumpy journeys across the valley. The road, once a bustling avenue, becomes more and more deserted as fewer travelers dare risk its dangers. The people start to yearn for the old days—the time of the open valley whose wide expanse they steadily traversed. They
become especially wistful when they realize that even the slower pace of those previous journeys was faster than the painful, oft-interrupted tedium of their trips along the hole-riddled road; that is, if they even made it across safely at all.

Like the people of the valley, the road of our progress has brought hardships along with its comforts. The greater our awareness of accumulating threats both to and caused by our way of life, in addition to the weight of our regret for the great failures we have not been able to prevent, the more appealing and exciting it can be to imagine ourselves starting over. In this sense disaster futures are paradoxically both utopian and dystopian. Because of its power in clearing away what is diseased and decayed, death is both the horror and the release. The wasteland is both a ‘resetting’ to a past condition and, consequently, a chance for new future in which to do things differently.

In a lecture at Stanford University, historian James Clifford referred to this phenomenon as “the future return of the past, but done anew with the pain of learned lessons.” It is a manner of “slowing down or moving back in order to move ahead” (Feb 5 2013). He refers in his work to Ursula K. LeGuin’s novel *Always Coming Home*, an epic development of a fictional culture indigenous to a place akin to Northern California wine country. LeGuin’s novel reads as a fantasy of a naturalistic past that lives with rather than dominates the world. Its fragmented stories and anthropological descriptions give shape to a world more like the untamed frontier before the westward push: “The mind can imagine that shadow of a few leaves falling in the wilderness; the mind is a wonderful thing. But what about all the shadows of all the other leaves on all the other branches on all the other scrub oaks on all the other ridges of all the wilderness? If you could imagine those even for a moment, what good would it do? Infinite good” (*Always* 241).
The wholesomeness of the fantasy lies in a change in pace and a shift in gaze, away from the frantic push into what comes next. The wilderness is a place unlike the open road leading straight into the horizon: “The roots of the Valley are in wildness, in dreaming, in dying, in eternity. The deer trails there, the footpaths and the wagon tracks, they pick their way around the roots of things. They don’t go straight. It can take a lifetime to go thirty miles, and come back” (LeGuin, *Always 52*). The desire for the ruins of post-apocalyptic narratives shares a powerful kinship with the fantasy of a return to nature that is at the heart of *Always Coming Home*, as it is in a plethora of other environmental works of that hinge on the idea that the rest of the earth can only survive if we leave it.
“The Doom in the Gloom”: such was the title of a 2013 episode of the television crime show *Bones*, depicting a brilliant forensic anthropologist who solves crimes alongside a gutsy FBI agent. The show is a pretty straightforward detective drama, occasionally featuring (as this genre often does) ripped-from-the-headlines storylines. The focus of this particular episode was a group of survivalist “doomsday preppers,” notably also the title of a National Geographic reality series which “explores the lives of otherwise ordinary Americans who are preparing for the end of the world as we know it. Unique in their beliefs, motivations, and strategies, preppers will go to whatever lengths they can to make sure they are prepared for any of life’s uncertainties” (“Overview”). The attitude toward preppers in the episode of *Bones* is primarily dismissive and condescending, with even the psychologist on the team joining the FBI agent in terming them unsympathetically as “wack jobs.” Hodgins, the show’s self-confessed conspiracy nut known for his fascination with fringe cultural movements, uncharacteristically proclaims: “Thank God I am a conspiracy theorist and not a doomsday hysteric” (“Doom”).
The harshness of their assessment and their refusal to enter into their habitually more empathetic and analytical exploration of their suspects’ motivating circumstances is tellingly atypical. There is an underlying nervous defensiveness to their emphatic efforts to distance themselves from the preppers by proving their own contrasting reasonableness. The reactionary responses of the characters belie their own reluctance to admit to similar fears regarding the possibility of catastrophic future scenarios. Their reductive dismissal of the sanity of doomsday preppers is later undercut by the characters’ comments and actions. For example, in response to Hodgins’ declaration about not being a “doomsday hysteric,” Bones (the forensic anthropologist whose main trait is absolute adherence to the rational) matter-of-factly replies: “Well, it’s not hysteria. In the long run human beings are scheduled for extinction.” When Hodgins sardonically counters by saying, “Yeah, when the sun expands into a red giant in three billion years,” Bones points out that “we already have enough weapons to annihilate all life on the planet. You have tremendous faith in a violent species such as ours to think that we will have the self-control not to use them” (“Doom”). The episode ends with a domestic scene in which the FBI agent who called the survivalists “wack jobs” begins analyzing his own family’s preparedness and voicing strategies to stock up for survival.

We live in an age in which a variety of factors have made us more, even hyper-aware of the potential threats to our ways of life and our very existence. Certainly humans have always lived in a world of risk and danger. Moreover, apocalyptic visions have existed for thousands of years. However, several factors developed over the past century or so that have shifted the way we think about—and therefore the way we fear—
potential disaster, as well as moved our imagination of apocalypse out of a primarily spiritual realm into more secular channels.

Significant among those possible factors is the advent of nuclear technology, particularly in its weaponized application, and the development of other weapons of mass-scale destruction. The pervasive cultural effect of atomic weaponization is visible in Bones’ statement about human extinction. The character’s comments reiterate a very common, oft-expressed fear of the nuclear age in which we still reside. The explosion of the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki made the level of our capacity for destruction very real to people around the world, setting off in turn an era of fear during the Cold War to follow (fear that to varying degrees continues into today). These events immediately followed the mass violence of the World Wars. World War II and the Holocaust in particular brought us a terrible awareness of what we were capable as humans of inflicting on each other. While great efforts have been taken in the aftermath of the first half of the 20th century to prevent the recurrence of similar horrors, we have since seen other genocides, other wars, and more mass violence.

Another relevant factor has been the increased global discourse regarding the effect our technological and scientific development has had and will continue to have on the world in which we live. This time, the issue is not what we are capable of doing to each other, but what we are capable of doing, even unknowingly, to the rest of the earth and its non-human inhabitants. From overpopulation, disease, nuclear meltdowns and species endangerment to climate change and dwindling resources—people around the world have been hearing about and discussing what our attempts to ensure a good future have potentially done to threaten it. Regardless of our opinions on those topics, they still
form part of our cultural experience and add further to the list of possible ways we are collectively at risk.

The scale of these and other risk factors we now consider as possible future scenarios is, firstly, much larger than the threats feared by those who lived centuries before us. While there are examples of diseases that killed off large portions of populations around the world, such as the bubonic plague or the Spanish influenza, the ease and frequency of global travel has vastly increased the spatial potential for the spread of disease and decreased the time needed to do so. The fear of nuclear weapons lies in the potential of a nuclear war that could, within a matter of hours, lay waste to vast portions of the planet.

Secondly, as discussed in the first chapter, the same globalization that has increasingly connected the world over the past century has also increased the dispersal of information around the world—including the knowledge of possible threats. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash analyze the resulting zeitgeist of risk in their book *Reflexive Modernization*:

Along with the threat and the general perception of it, a highly legitimate interest in preventing and eliminating it arises. The ecological crisis produces and cultivates a cultural Red Cross consciousness. It transforms everyday, trivial, unimportant things into tests of courage in which heroism can be exhibited. Far from intensifying and confirming the general pointlessness of modernity, ecological threats create a substantive semantic horizon of avoidance, prevention and helping. This is a moral climate and milieu that intensifies with the size of the threat, in which the
dramatic roles of heroes and villains achieve a new everyday meaning. Sisyphus legends spring up. Even negative fatalism—‘nothing works anymore, it’s all too late’—is ultimately only a variant of that. This is precisely the background against which the role of Cassandra can become a vocation or a career.

The ecological issue, the perception of the world in the co-ordinate system of ecological-industrial self-imperilment, turn morality, religion, fundamentalism, hopelessness, tragedy, suicide and death—always intermingled with the opposite, salvation or help—into a universal drama.

(Beck, Giddens, and Lash 51)

The nature of risk society as a “universal drama” accelerates its incorporation into the imaginative environment. More than ever before, we communicate knowledge of risk and perceive that our fates are shared. Those fears travel back and forth between the cultural environment and the individual consciousness, resulting in a plethora of materializations in popular culture, politics and social movements. The collective imaginary of doom and disaster has grown to saturate modern cultures, carrying that frightening question with it: Can humankind become obsolete?

If the answer is yes, then what can (or should) we do about it? At the end of the previous chapter I introduced a couple of possibilities that arise in post-1945 narratives: first, the possibility that the planet would be better off without us. Secondly, that if in the future we can “go back” to a state previous to our rampant technological development, we could have a second chance to build a better, more responsible and ethical future from the ruins of modernity. Ursula K. LeGuin, one of the foremost authors of environmental
narratives, describes it this way in a 1982 essay: “It seems that the utopian imagination is trapped, like capitalism and industrialism and the human population, in a one-way future consisting only of growth. All I’m trying to do is figure how to put a pig on the tracks. Go backward. Turn and return” (LeGuin, “Non-Euclidian” 85). As I discussed in Chapter Two, what LeGuin suggests is an interruption: placing an obstacle on the rails of progress and then turning back as the only way to properly move forward.

She puts this idea into practice in several of her fictional worlds, including her 1972 novella *The Word for World is Forest*. LeGuin tells the tale of a lush forested world inhabited by gentle beings sharing distant kinship with humans, but who live in harmony with their world. Human colonizers arrive and, in keeping with what we so loathe but seem unable to change about ourselves, bring death and destruction where they seek to introduce enlightenment and expansion. The Athshean natives of the planet in question eventually step outside their non-violent natures to revolt in defense of their world. But however triumphant their resistance may seem, LeGuin’s story does not provide a resolution supportive of the hope, however fleeting, that there can truly ever be a return to what has been lost. Once the Athsheans have engaged in violence, no matter the motivation, a major part of their world is gone. Her protagonist explains it best in the closing pages:

“Sometimes a god comes…He brings a new way to do a thing, or a new thing to be done. A new kind of singing, or a new kind of death. He brings this across the bridge between the dream-time and the world-time. When he has done this, it is done. You cannot take things that exist in the world and try to drive them back into the dream, to hold them inside the
dream with walls and pretenses. That is insanity. What is, is. There is no use pretending, now, that we do not know how to kill one another.”

(LeGuin, *Word for World* 188-89)

Works like LeGuin’s seem to show us that here on this planet we believe ourselves to be that god—the one who brings new and wondrous things, but like Pandora’s box also releases terror and death.

Whether or not there is a true possibility of going backward, or if the road into our future really is irrevocably moving forward without regard of our desires or regrets, many disaster narratives, such as Margaret Atwood’s 21st-century MaddAddam novels or George R. Stewart’s post-war novel *Earth Abides*, put out the idea that the earth would not only go on without us, eventually finding a way to recover and replenish, but that it would probably be better off having less (or none) of our attempts at progress. This kind of thinking marks an emerging shift in our self-reference as pertains to our position in the world: no longer an invincible force capable of molding the future to our will and desires, but a rather more tenuous and definitely not all-knowing part of a larger causal ecosystem that expands beyond our control.

We are perhaps more willing after the past century to believe, as Stewart’s novel proposes, that we are more irrelevant and expendable than we ever imagined. It is a humbling vision of what would probably happen if we were hit by a massive disaster and our presence was razed from the face of the earth:

*High overhead, moon and planets and stars swung in their long smooth curves. They had no eyes, and they saw not; yet from the time when man’s*
fancy first formed within him, he has imagined that they looked down upon the earth.

And if so we may still imagine, and if they looked down upon the earth that night, what did they see?

Then we must say that they saw no change. Though smoke from stacks and chimneys and campfires no longer rose to dim the atmosphere, yet still smoke rose from volcanos and from forest fires. Seen even from the moon, the planet that night must have shown only with its accustomed splendor—no brighter, no dimmer. (Stewart 17)

This passage illustrates the fall of human dominance present in many areas of contemporary discourse and evokes the idea with which I ended the last chapter: that the world might be better off without us and our progress. The breaking of our beloved road of progress is a shattering of our certainty in the future and therefore a frightening challenge to our ability to choose a course of action in the present. How do we take another step forward, if the way back has disappeared and the light on the horizon is now drenched in shadow?

Beck, Giddens and Lash write about the effect that the rise of a new era of modernization, characterized by the hyperawareness of imminent threat, can have on the possibility for agency. They describe the phenomenon they call “risk society” in terms related to the realization of obsolescence I describe above:

Anyone who conceives of modernization as a process of autonomized innovation must count on even industrial society becoming obsolete. The other side of the obsolescence of the industrial society is the
emergence of the risk society. This concept designates a developmental phase of modern society in which the social, political, economic and individual risks increasingly tend to escape the institutions for monitoring and protection in industrial society. (5)

Post-catastrophic fictions from Walter A. Miller’s iconic *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) to more recent works like Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Wind-Up Girl* (2009) are based on the likelihood of a future in which technological and scientific advancements grow beyond our control institutionally, materially and ethically. That loss results in global destruction that completely reconfigures the human position on the planet. In *Leibowitz*, the danger lies in technology that can lead to massively destructive developments like nuclear weapons. In *Windup Girl*, Bacigalupi describes the conflicts and potential dangers of biological engineering and agricultural manipulation.

As in Martin Heidegger’s *The Question Concerning Technology*, the authors of many disaster narratives hone in on the idea that great danger lies in our failure to continually take an interrogative position toward developing technologies. When we do so, we risk bypassing important realizations about the direction in which such developments are leading. What Beck, Lash and Giddens describe when explaining risk

---

*I refer here to Heidegger’s position that “[t]he threat to man does not come in the first instance from…the apparatus of technology,” but rather lies in the possibility that “it could be denied to [man] to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth” (Heidegger 28). He later describes the role of human reflection on technology as watchfulness:

Thus the coming to presence of technology harbors in itself what we least suspect, the possible arising of the saving power.

Everything, then, depends upon this: that we ponder this arising and that, recollecting, we watch over it. …

The coming to presence of technology threatens revealing, threatens it with the possibility that all revealing will be consumed in ordering and that everything will present itself only in the unconcealedness of standing-reserve. Human activity can never directly counter this danger. Human achievement alone can never banish it. But human reflection can ponder the fact that all saving power must be of a higher essence than what is endangered, though at the same time kindred to it. (32-34)*
society is a situation that arises from an increase in such questioning, as well as the increasingly unavoidable awareness of threat that comes from greater dissemination of knowledge.

Two phases can be distinguished here: first, a stage in which the effects and self-threats are systematically produced but do not become public issues or the centre of political conflicts. Here the self-concept of industrial society still predominates, both multiplying and ‘legitimating’ the threats produced by decision-making as ‘residual risks’ (the ‘residual risk society’).

Second, a completely different situation arises when the dangers of industrial society begin to dominate public, political and private debates and conflicts. Here the institutions of industrialized society become the producers and legitimators of threats they cannot control. What happens here is that certain features of industrial society become socially and politically problematic. One the one hand, society still makes decisions and takes actions according to the pattern of the old industrial society, but, on the other, the interest organizations, the judicial system and politics are clouded over by debates and conflicts that stem from the dynamism of risk society. (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 5)

I would add, however, that not only do those features of industrial society become problematic socially and politically, but that another dimension of risk society is its infiltration of the social on the level of the imaginary—then subsequently through the channels of that collective imaginary into the individual experience of the world.
As a phenomenon contingent on both the social and the political (which are not separate but joint), the collective imaginary has its own contextually-triggered dynamism that continually reacts to and feeds into the social and political spheres. It is this mutually-affective network interaction between the socio-political environment and the shared imaginary that potentially leaves traces that we can see in cultural products such as literature, film, television, advertisements, gaming, etc. These products, or in our specific concern—these narratives—are not merely reflections of something going on in the ‘real’ world, or places where the concerns of that world leak out here or there. Yes, narratives can be those things. But fictions are not just passive products of an active reality. They are themselves dynamic entities that, upon their creation and materialization, enter into that ‘real’ world and have their own real effect upon it. One of the fundamental concepts surrounding the development of risk society is the nature of what Beck, Gibbons and Lash refer to as *reflexive modernization*. They make an important distinction: “This concept does not imply (as the adjective ‘reflexive’ might suggest) *reflection*, but (first) *self-confrontation*” (5). I propose that the expressed materializations, or products, of the collective imaginary are a powerful part of that process of self-confrontation.

The proliferation of disaster and post-apocalyptic fiction across the world of cultural production appears to have increased the genre’s dominance over the media landscape from the aftermath of the 1945 nuclear attacks and into the 21st century. The recurrence and popularity of these narratives of destruction reveal aspects of a still-existent cultural obsession with fictionalizing our own collective death. By telling and retelling the story of the end of the world we are able to repeatedly ‘re-live’ an
apocalypse that has never happened but that many of us fear (to varying degrees).

Authors, directors and advertisers have been harnessing this obsession with global death successfully and through many angles. Post-1945 disaster narratives posit scenarios based not only on nuclear-specific threats, but also on the destructive power of pandemics, overpopulation, hunger, climate change, asteroids, aliens, zombies and a long list of other possible catastrophes.

Richard Horne satirically collects these visions of the death of humankind in A is for Armageddon (2009), an encyclopedic “catalogue of disasters that may culminate in the end of the world as we know it” presented as a “The Periodic Catastrophic” (a disaster chart spoofing the Periodic Table of the Elements) and dedicated “In loving memory of the human race.” Horne’s catalogue of disaster describes scenarios “from natural occurrences to man-made disasters and universal catastrophes” placed into categories like “Acts of God,” “It Was Like That When I Got Here,” “Technic-Hell,” “Universally Doomed,” “Don’t Mess With Nature” and others. Horne, previously the author of the very popular and “very optimistic book” 101 Things To Do Before You Die, uses humor in this new tome to capture the paradoxical combination of fear and excitement that characterizes the 21st-century collective imaginary of disaster (1-2).

Horne describes the real-world circumstances that surrounded his writing of the book:

Since I began work on the project, biblical-style natural disasters have occurred, tensions between nuclear countries have resurfaced, satellites have begun colliding and falling from space, economies have crunched, crumbled and collapsed, species have disappeared, a potential
pig pandemic caused pandemonium, the terrifying climate of fear through terrorism has hotted up while our actual climate has heated up further towards an irreparable tipping point.

So whatever you believe in, whether you put your faith in an unseen omnipresent god or faith in science that states the Universe became something from nothing, we can all believe that it may be the beginning of the end of the world as we know it. (Horne 1)

What follows his introduction is a frighteningly diverse, yet humorously presented plethora of events that could result in the extinction of the human race, from religiously-based Armageddon to tectonic activity, a pollination crisis, animal zoonosis, warming seas, World War Three, nanotechnology and many, many others. The work is a perceptive illustration of the idea that as members of a risk society now less able to remain blissfully ignorant of the possible, mass-scale threats on the horizon, fictions of destruction give us a safe vantage point from which to work through the situations we fear and ask the difficult questions concerning our future. Where are we headed? Can we change our path? If we can’t, how can we survive? If we do, where should we go from there?

In the decades immediately following the atomic explosions, nuclear technology loomed darkly within the collective imaginary as a cloud of uncertainty and suspicion. Knowledge of such mass-scale risk disseminated in the Cold War’s atmosphere of global political power-posturing and paranoia introduced a pervasive, underlying threat of destruction hard to understand but impossible to ignore. The decades of the Cold War are the real-world example of the apocalypse that never was (but we continue to fear). In
Survival City: Adventures Among the Ruins of Atomic America Tom Vanderbilt describes Cold War nuclear weapons development as “the most expensive war that was never fought” (14). In the case of the United States, the postwar zeitgeist of nuclear threat resulted in a rush of disaster preparedness initiatives, including civil defense materials disseminated to households, schools and other institutions in the form of pamphlets, videos and other media. As Vanderbilt explains,

It was a war of light and shadow, illusion and reality, truth and counter-truth. War was not declared, nor was peace assumed, but the country remained in what was termed a “Defense Condition” (DEFCON), like a patient relying on the reports from strange machines to know his condition. Battlefields were everywhere and nowhere, an abstract space on wall-size screens in situation rooms, prophesied in emanating ripple-damage estimates on aerial photographs of cities, filtered down to backyards where homeowners studied government-supplied plans for bomb shelters. Attack was instantaneous, with no spatial component: The command to “Duck, and Cover!”7 turned a school desk or a roadside curb into a portable shelter, while government pamphlets such as Four Wheels to Survival hinted at the need for constant protection from an invisible threat: “Shelter is an unexpected bonus you get from your car. More importantly, the car provides a small moveable house.”

7 The “Duck, and Cover!” command Vanderbilt references was notably disseminated to the American public in the postwar years in part through a video called Duck and Cover, produced in 1950 and featuring a cartoon character named “Bert the Turtle” (Walker, “Duck and Cover”).
The country was on a war footing and simultaneously awash in peacetime prosperity. Both conditions were dependent upon each other, a contradictory existence that played itself out in everyday life. (15-16)

That “peacetime prosperity” was perhaps what provided the landscape of mental leisure in which ruminations on the looming presence of doom could proliferate in everyday life and, consequently through the highways and byways of the collective imaginary, in fiction.

So how does one respond to those threats we see in “abstract space” and exist “everywhere and nowhere,” whether presented in nuclear threat assessments in situation rooms or in charts showing ecological risk projections of overpopulation, species destruction or climate change? Perhaps it is not so surprising that one of the most iconic reactions to such abstract, changeable threat was the building of thickly solid, spatially-restrained structures designed to remain unchanged by outside forces. Bunkers (or fallout shelters, as they are also commonly known) and the bright yellow and black signs that announce them are a mainstay of the nuclear age aesthetic and a dominant mechanism for coping with the new environment of threat in the postwar years and the Cold War that...
followed (Fig. 1). In response to a description of my research on this topic, even my dentist provided her own anecdotal account of the pervasiveness of nuclear threat and the belief in fallout shelters as one of the only reassuring strategies for survival. When she was a girl in the sixties, she told me, she believed that her father did not love her family enough because he had not built them a fallout shelter for their house.

The humorously-delivered judgment of her father’s commitment to their survival reveals the latent memory of a very serious dynamic of the postwar years, which Philip K. Dick touchingly explores in his short story “Foster, You’re Dead” (1955). Written a mere decade after the atomic bombs, the story tells the tale of a young boy in near-future 1971 who is distressed by his father’s refusal to give in to the rhetoric of nuclear threat and provide the family with a bomb shelter, or even buy a permit for the community shelter. Dick describes the boy’s environment as one of pervasive nuclear war preparation: “A mechanical news-machine shouted at him excitedly as he passed. War, death, amazing new weapons developed at home and abroad. He hunched his shoulders and continued on, past the little concrete shells that served as houses, each exactly alike, sturdy reinforced pillboxes” (“Foster” 162). The anxiety-filled boy has waking nightmares about his impending doom, caught without money for the public shelter, “mute and terrified, while people pushed excitedly past him; and the shrill of the sirens thundered everywhere” (163).

Mike Foster is a boy who fantasizes about “An elaborate pulsing blob of machinery and support struts, beams and walls and sealed locks,” a “STAR-STUDDED,” solid space to protect him from that merciless monster, radiation. “If we had a shelter like that,” Mike Foster tells the shelter salesman, “It’d be there when we needed it…
Nobody’s safe on the surface… We have to be down below. And there’s no place I can
go” (165). Even his gym class is geared toward disaster, with breathing exercises
designed to help them survive gas attacks. It’s Foster’s gym teacher who really hits the
boy’s fear closest to its core: “‘Foster,’ the coach said angrily, ‘you’re dead. …You’ve
got to do better, if you expect to survive.’ …But he didn’t expect to survive” (Dick 166).

It is precisely that certainty in the imminence of death that in part drives the shift
in the dominant rhetoric of futurity after 1945 and shapes its effect on a collective
imaginary of mass-scale disaster. In this brief story Dick reveals a significant
reconfiguration toward a more pessimistic view of the future and its root in the realization
of our powerlessness in the face of such large-scale, ungraspable risk:

Mike Foster wandered aimlessly along the dark street, among the
crowds of shoppers hurrying home. He saw nothing; people pushed
against him but he was unaware of them. Lights, laughing people, the
honking of car horns, the clang of signals. He was blank, his mind empty
and dead. He walked automatically, without consciousness or feeling.

To his right a garish neon sign winked and glowed in the
deepening night shadows. A huge sign, bright and colorful

PEACE ON EARTH	GOOD WILL TO MEN
PUBLIC SHELTER	ADMISSION 50¢

(179)

In this passage Dick successfully captures the paradoxical blend of peacefulness and
threat of the postwar years.
Although the Cold War craze for building underground shelters eventually died down, the resulting plethora of cement caverns still lies waiting under the surface. Vanderbilt points out that rather than being a political relic of the past, the era of nuclear threat is still latent today: “The Cold War was—and is—everywhere in America, if one knows where to look for it. Underground, behind closed doors, classified, off the map, already crumbling beyond recognition, or right in plain view, it has left an imprint as widespread yet discreet as the tracings of radioactive particles that blew out of the Nevada Test Site in the 1950s” (Vanderbilt 19). His description carries a striking affinity to process of spreading, tracing and imprinting that contribute to the formation of something like a collective imaginary of the nuclear age, complete with “images of poured-concrete bunkers, steely gray doors, red phones on desks, enormous tables around which are gathered nervous men, sentries standing under cones of light, a wall of mainframe computers with whirring tape-spools and blinking lights, radiation symbols, the ghostly green clock-hand sweep of a radar” (17). From television shows like Lost, Jericho and 24 to video games like the Fallout and Bioshock series, one doesn’t have to look far in popular culture today to find evidence of the nuclear age rhetoric and aesthetic.

After a period of hibernation from the public eye in the last portion of the twentieth century, fallout shelters have seen a reawakening in the post-9/11 era. The spatial immediacy and sudden trauma of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., along with the “war on terror,” nuclear technology conflicts, environmental debates and economic meltdowns in the years since appear to have triggered a renewed interest among Americans in disaster preparation and self-
sufficiency. While the most common form of prep involves smaller steps like stocking water, non-perishable food and medical supplies in pantries and storage rooms or purchasing solar-powered energy sources or generators, for others the cultural resurgence of “prepping” and survivalism has resulted in more drastic measures. More serious preppers construct and stock underground shelters, even stockpiling weapons in some cases. Some of those first postwar bunkers have been shaken from their slumber by entrepreneurs who have been reopening and refurbishing them. Others are constructing underground bunker systems and then marketing them as “luxury” shelters that patrons can depend on for a comfortable habitat to ride out whatever comes.\(^8\)

Bunkers can be seen as a materialization of the zeitgeist of global risk, but also as a symbol of an experience of temporality particular to that zeitgeist. The fallout shelter is a melding of the desires for a past and a future and as such is a logical companion to the fantasy of a return to the past in order to advance into the future, described earlier in this chapter and at the end of the previous. As Vanderbilt puts it, “amid the technological utopianism of the postwar period, [the fallout shelter] symbolized a return to one of man’s most primitive habitats, the cave” (16). The solidity of the bunker provides a kind of timeless interior that protects what- or whomever is inside. Its design correlates to its

---

\(^8\) For example, the Vivos Group out of Del Mar, California, is commercially constructing networks of underground fallout shelters built to accommodate thousands of people through “most catastrophes, including a pole shift, super volcano eruptions, solar flares, earthquakes, asteroids, tsunamis, nuclear attack, bio terrorism, chemical warfare and even widespread social anarchy” (Vivos, “Home”). In addition to providing an underground “biosphere” for human survivors at a cost, Vivos expresses plans to act as a “modern day Noah’s Ark” by stocking a “Cryovault program” to “help preserve the biodiversity of the planet,” such as with a “depository of DNA and reproductive cells” (Vivos, “Preserve”). This latter program gestures toward other initiatives around the world to prepare for possible catastrophic events not unlike the central disaster of Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl*, a global food crisis stemming from an epidemic that razes the world’s plant life and biodiversity. One such program was opened in February 2008 under the “snow and ice in a forbidding part of Norway.” Termed the “Doomsday Vault” (and previously known as the Svaldbard Global Seed Vault), the secure structure “serves as the master backup to the world’s other seed vaults. Its stores stand ready to start replenishing the world’s food supply in the event of natural disaster, water shortages, global warming or war” (Stump).
functionality: preserving the past, protecting the future and prolonging the present. They are an architectural gesture to harness atemporality—its non-perishable contents evidence of the intention to very literally “stand the test of time.”

In the following pages we will delve into several narratives that feature actual bunkers and/or situations and formal devices that function as symbolic shelters. I will first focus on two particular positions of the past in these narratives: a nostalgic past represented often by the ephemera preserved and later uncovered in shelters and a practical past represented by the desire or ability to preserve and later salvage what is past for a pragmatic application in the present. The difference is one of directionality—backward-facing and forward-facing. The nostalgic past is a way to escape the seemingly insurmountable obstacles of the present and the immobilizing risk of the future, while the practical past is a tool with which one can attempt to cull what one can from the ashes of history in order to have agency in the molding of the future. I will connect both modes of the past to ability of individuals to function in the present and both imagine and move forward into a possible future.

Nostalgia is a primary distinguishing quality of post-apocalyptic fictional environments. Its presence is perhaps most sensually potent in the mood aesthetics of media that incorporate visual and auditory elements within their narrative structure. In films like Blade Runner, the Mad Max series or television series like the cult classic Firefly, creators portray the future as an uncanny dystopian fantasy that laces progressive technology with elements reminiscent of the past—such as aesthetic incorporations of the Western genre and orientalism. These references to commonly romanticized times since dissected for the problematic realities under the façades of adventure, romance and
beauty are perhaps appropriate to the near-future aesthetic of the post-apocalyptic genre precisely because of their conflict-weighted baggage. However, on the surface the creation of such nostalgia reads primarily like a desire for what we once thought cowboys and explorers were: for their bravado, their strength in the face of the unknown, their relish for adventure and perhaps most of all their ability to act without the hyperanalysis of causality (that paralyzing feature of reflexive modernization).

Another recurring nostalgic reference gestures toward the opposite; instead of the sense of adventure in a frontier-loving past, this aesthetic engages ironically with the 1950s as an era of false innocence—the paradoxical era of golden postwar peacefulness embraced all the more fervently as a lid on the bevy of realizations and anxieties bubbling dangerously under the surface. French filmmaker Paul Doucet establishes the nostalgic aesthetic from the first scene of his post-nuclear war short film *Bunker*. The title screen appears over the immediately recognizable sound of a vinyl recording, in this case playing “Si tu n’étais pas là,” a song recorded in 1934 by Fréhel—a French singer whose voice has been repeatedly mistaken for Edith Piaf’s by viewers of Doucet’s short. The mistake is understandable, since the assumption is reinforced in the opening scene by a vintage poster on the wall featuring Edith Piaf with the title “Joue La Petite Lili à l’A.B.C.” (Fig. 2). The poster advertises Piaf’s 1951 role in playwright Marcel Achard’s *La Petite Lili* (Burke 150). The folding creases across the face of the poster signal the act of preservation, which in turn signals age and wear.

The poster is one of three objects (Fig. 2) arranged by Doucet to effect the mood of nostalgia: first, a spinning phonograph, panning out to the poster on a cold concrete wall behind it, with further widening of the shot revealing an aging rocking horse
standing guard in front of Piaf’s blissfully romantic gaze, hands clutched together to her cheek in a pose of rapture.

It is a trifecta of post-apocalyptic nostalgia; the nod to the dawn of audio technology, the romance of Piaf and Fréhel’s music and acting and the childhood innocence of the rocking horse, brought together in the murky shadows of a dark, chilling underground bunker. The triptych is amplified by a series of other post-nuclear audio-visual mainstays: a newspaper speculating about a third world war, a grainy black-and-white image of a mushroom cloud under the title “Holocauste nucléaire,” photographs of emaciated radiation victims and the ultimate aural indicator of the genre playing throughout: the scratchy sound of a Geiger counter (Bunker).

In the comment board of the short film’s Vimeo posting, Paul Doucet himself acknowledges the influence of another great example of the post-apocalyptic nuclear-age aesthetic: the Fallout role-playing video game series. The game visuals flaunt other now-recognizable elements of the genre such as the ones described above, in addition to wardrobe elements like gas masks, worn leather clothing and prolific belts and straps.
bearing supplies and weapons.

More immediate to the topic at hand, however, is its similar embrace of 1950s nostalgia. For example, from the introductory narrative of *Fallout 3*, the player is immersed with images reminiscent of mid-20th century popular culture. The cheery nostalgic style (Fig. 3) is consistent throughout the instructional, meta-narrative portions of gameplay and provides a striking contrast with the dark post-apocalyptic wasteland players must navigate on their journey.

The logic behind the nostalgic aesthetic of *Fallout 3* lies in the opening of the narrative, when the player finds her or himself in the role of person born into a sophisticated underground bunker, seemingly as large as a small city. The people went into the vault in order to survive the fallout of a nuclear war that takes place in previous installations of the game series. While the time period of the game’s nuclear apocalypse is not the 1950s, but rather a date late in the 21st century, the designers embrace the imagery of the Cold War and the exaggerated innocence of the decades immediately following World War II. The player is immersed in these utopian images as s/he “grows up” during the training portion of the game. The character reads a children’s book cheerfully titled *You’re Special*, in which the laudatory term is actually an acronym for

![Fig. 3. A Vault Dweller’s Survival Guide released to promote *Fallout 3* adopts its ironically optimistic style (“Wasteland”).](image-url)
attributes needed to survive the game’s obstacles: Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility and Luck (Fallout 3).

The idea behind the simple, hyperbolically joyful drawings of men, women and children that populate the vault community’s instruction materials and technology reinforces the bunker’s temporal phenomenon: for the inhabitants, time has in some sense stood still since their entrance into the vault. The ravaged, radiation-soaked world has continued outside their doors, and even though time has passed through generations of vault dwellers, they have continued to blissfully inhabit the historical context at which they entered as if in an eternal present. The character must reject the world of the vault to progress into the terrain outside its walls, which although treacherous is deemed preferable to living in a stupor of ignorance, controlled with a façade of contentment and safety by corrupt leaders.

Once outside, the player continues to engage with the ephemera of the past. But instead of a tool of psychological control through nostalgia, the items the player must gather out in the irradiated world are there for the practical purposes of providing sustenance, currency, medical support, protection and weaponry. Both in its narrative elements, its aesthetic design and its first-person role-playing game structure, Fallout 3 is an immersive post-apocalyptic experience that surrounds players with a complex layering of the symbolism, temporal paradoxes and ideological dilemmas that I discuss throughout these chapters. Like in the narratives I will analyze in the pages to follow, Fallout 3 capitalizes on the suspicion of nostalgia for the past combined with a willingness to excavate it for its pragmatic uses in the present.
The theme of the past’s ephemerality, allure, danger and potential, so effectively captured by the temporally-charged symbolism of the bunker, recurs in many post-1945 fictions of destruction, including Paul Auster’s 1987 dystopian novel *In the Country of Last Things*. Unlike many of the stories that include actual fallout shelters within their plot structure, the disaster that strikes this world is not the sudden shock of nuclear war. While the author keeps the cause relatively vague, the catastrophe in Auster’s novel seems to be a “collapse” (155) of the vital infrastructures of modern society due to political strife and resulting in the slow, painful disintegration of the city’s structures and inhabitants together into a decaying pile of waste and rubble. The chief antagonist of the novel is not radiation, but starvation. The city itself is the bunker-like presence in the narrative: a place which the protagonist and many others like her entered seeking asylum from the chaos but which they now can no longer escape. The city is a vast decaying storing-house of the world now gone, victim to the wear of time, yet somehow stuck in a recurring present of suffering and denied the hope of moving forward into a different future.

The static decline of Auster’s city exemplifies the paradox of a future that can seem simultaneously dead or unreachable and also inevitably approaching with each passing moment, swallowing up the present and churning it into the waste of past-ness.

These are the last things… One by one they disappear and never come back. …It is all happening too fast now, and I cannot keep up.

…These are the last things. A house is there one day, and the next day it is gone. A street you walked down yesterday is no longer there today.

…Close your eyes for a moment, turn around to look at something else,
and the thing that was before you is now suddenly gone. Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you. And you mustn’t waste your time looking for them. Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it. (1-2)

Auster’s ruined city is a world that turns around the scavenging of the past. The ephemera of the pre-disaster world is now the stuff used to survive the darkness of the new. Inhabitants cull the waste in the street for bits and pieces they can use keep warm, build shelters or minutely increase their quality of life. For example, newspapers are bought for personal insulation and a “face-saving technique” for “disguising thinness” (Auster 23). Furthermore, digging around the ruins for items of nostalgic or pragmatic value to others is one of the most common ways to earn enough money to stay alive.

The surviving stuff of the past is also the fuel that keeps the father and son alive in Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel The Road. Their life, future, and therefore the structure of the novel revolve around the necessity to find provisions that they can put to pragmatic use in the present. Some of the brightest moments of the novel take place in a bunker the pair discovers while at the brink of death. The shelter is stocked appropriately for survival—it is a rich Xanadu of food, blankets, clothing, lamps and other goods they so painfully lack on their miserable journey. In sudden contrast to their extreme privation, the bunker seems like a mirage (because a miracle is no longer something to believe in). Upon seeing the provisions, the father holds “his forehead in his hand” and exclaims “Oh my God” (McCarthy 138). To someone who has nothing, the limited offerings of this time capsule of a lost world are as large as the universe: “I found everything,” the father declares. “Everything” (139). The boy can hardly believe this “richness of a vanished world. Why is this here? the boy said. Is it real?” (139).
The father cannot help but treat his son to the small luxuries of the past, kept safe from the ravages of time within the hidden cement walls. They savor canned fruits as if they were rich pastries. The father slowly eats a bar of chocolate while the boy sleeps on a bunk. They urinate in a toilet that the boy does not even know how to use. The father cooks a meal of the old world: biscuits, butter, milk, ham, scrambled eggs, baked beans, coffee. He gives his son a warm bath—a ritual of parenthood they have probably never experienced together.

Although the father gives in to his desire to give the son the rare, revitalizing feeling of his former world’s comforts, he nevertheless recognizes the bunker’s dual nature: a site that holds past items for practical use and a trap that could ensnare him with the comfort of nostalgia. Both father and son know that the tempting atemporal space inside the bunker, with its glow of light and warmth, is as ephemeral to them as it is solid in the ground. Like the road, the bunker holds pragmatic value but also great danger as a magnet drawing other dangers to them. Without argument (but not without regret) they leave their “tiny paradise.” Once outside this place so separate from the outside world, the father and son walk immediately back out in the horrors of reality: “They passed a metal trashdump where someone had once tried to burn bodies. The charred meat and bones under the damp ash might have been anonymous save for the shapes of the skulls” (McCarthy 150).

In Auster’s novel nostalgia is equally suspect; the narrator portrays it as an illness leading slowly but inexorably toward death. In an urban environmental crawling with starvation, sickness and violence, the worst danger is the past—and the desire for it that shackles its victims with memories and desire for what is lost. Habits are “deadly,” and
the only way to survive is absolutely presentness. As Anna warns, “The essential thing is not to become inured. …Even if it is for the hundredth time, you must encounter each thing as if you have never known it before. No matter how many times, it must always be the first time” (Auster 7). Even hope, that great betrayer, is preferable to the rosy pull of what is past. Succumbing to its solace is the ultimate sign of despair: “when hope disappears, when you find that you have given up hoping even for the possibility of hope, you tend to fill the empty spaces with dreams, little childlike thoughts and stories to keep yourself going” (9). Nostalgia for the past is part of the “language of ghosts”:

In general, people hold to the belief that however bad things were yesterday, they were better than things are today. What they were like two days ago was even better than yesterday. The farther you go back, the more beautiful and desirable the world becomes. You drag yourself from sleep each morning to face something that is always worse than what you faced the day before, but by talking of the world that existed before you went to sleep, you can delude yourself into thinking that the present day is simply an apparition, no more or less real than the memories of all the other days you carry around inside you. (10)

Anna’s description resonates with a portrayal of the danger of nostalgia in Philip K. Dick’s 1963 short story “The Days of Perky Pat,” in which a group of nuclear war survivors go about their lives in the wasteland that was once Northern California. The young boys in the community continually show an initiative for action and full engagement with their new environment—hunting, foraging and otherwise fending for
themselves. The adults, on the other hand, depend on sporadic handouts from beneficent aliens and are completely immersed in a childish role playing game called “Perky Pat.”

The game is completely based on nostalgia for their former lives and involves constructing elaborate miniature sets for the everyday activities of a male and female doll (going to the grocery store, for example). The children express their disdain of the parents’ activities, imagining the anger of their Martian benefactors if they knew “this utterly wasteful, stupid purpose to which their goods were being put” (Dick, “Perky Pat” 270). In the next chapter I will elaborate further on the significance of this dynamic in terms of the relationship to action and the future. For now, however, the game is an apt illustration of the futility of (in this case, literally) dwelling in the past.

In *The Road*, some of the father’s moments of hope come in dreams “so rich in color” but also dangerous: “How else would death call you? Waking in the cold dawn it all turned to ash instantly. Like certain ancient frescoes entombed for centuries suddenly exposed to the day” (McCarthy 21). He fears the instances of pleasure and hope that lurk in dreams or memory because they pull him away from the reality in which he must protect his son. As with the people in Auster’s decaying city, one of the greatest threats to survival in *The Road* is going too deep into the oblivion of memory and dreaming and thus joining the rest of the disappearing world:

He’d had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone
already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality.

Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out
forever. (88)

The father knows, as Anna does in Auster’s novel, that like victims fading into the hazy
embrace of hypothermia, “The ghost people always die in their sleep” (Auster 11). The
father must instead gain strength from moments of illumination that arise from the
contemplation of the present reality in front of him, mostly when gazing upon his son.

Memory is a heavy burden—especially when it bears the weight of horror. The
burden of things that cannot be unseen and terrible realizations that cannot be un-known
is one distressingly familiar to the generations marked by the physical and psychological
violence of the twentieth century. How can the mind, let alone the world, be ridded of the
sickly traces of atrocity and a guilt so large it can spread across space and time, with no
respect for national boundaries or generational gaps? This is the dark form of memory
Auster harnesses within the boundaries of his inescapable city:

Whatever you see has the potential to wound you, to make you less
than you are, as if merely by seeing a thing some part of yourself were
taken away from you. …what happens when you find yourself looking at a
dead child, at a little girl lying in the street without any clothes on, her
head crushed and covered with blood? …It is not a simple matter, you see,
to state flatly and without equivocation: “I am looking at a dead child.”
Your mind seems to balk at forming the words, you somehow cannot
bring yourself to do it. For the thing before your eyes is not something you
can very easily separate from yourself. That is what I mean by being
wounded: you cannot merely see, for each thing somehow belongs to you, is part of the story unfolding inside you. It would be good, I suppose, to make yourself so hard that nothing could affect you anymore. …There are those who manage to do this here, who find the strength to turn themselves into monsters, but you would be surprised to know how few they are. Or, to put it another way: we have all become monsters, but there is almost no one without some remnant inside him of life as it once was. (Auster 19-20)

So far time has not healed the wounds of the past century—wounds carried not only by individuals but by large portions of the human race.

That weight of the past, which time has yet to dissipate and which is tied cruelly to the risks of the future, results in a paralyzing inability to act in the present. As Auster’s Anna observes,

That is perhaps the greatest problem of all. Life as we know it has ended, and yet no one is able to grasp what has taken its place. Those of us who were brought up somewhere else, or who are old enough to remember a world different from this one, find it an enormous struggle just to keep up from one day to the next. I am not talking only of hardships. Faced with the most ordinary occurrence, you no longer know how to act, and because you cannot act, you find yourself unable to think. …All around you one change follows another, each day produces a new upheaval, old assumptions are so much air and emptiness. …On the one hand, you want to survive, to adapt, to make the best of things as they are. But, on the other hand, to accomplish this seems to entail killing off all those things
that once made you think of yourself as human. …In order to live, you must make yourself die. (20)

To some, the answer to bringing humanity into a new, more positive future lies in seeking redemption from the guilt of generations of destruction. Like the Crawlers in Auster’s novel, a sect obsessed with seeking penance, it is not hard to believe “that conditions will go on worsening until we demonstrate—in an utterly persuasive manner—how ashamed we are of how we lived in the past” (27).

Among several problems with this belief is the lack of consensus on who exactly can say when the “penance has been deemed sufficient.” Auster portrays this dilemma satirically through the “long theoretically debates” of the sect’s members: “Some say a month of rain, others say a month of fair weather, and still others say they will not know until it is revealed to them in their hearts” (27). The value of the past here lies in the weight of culpability. If we ponder deeply enough on our guilt, we can be sure that we will not repeat the same actions again in the future. But however much we want to, and must, believe that if given the opportunity (say by a world-wide catastrophe that leaves us at tabula rasa) we would redeem ourselves and do better next time, works such as Walter A. Miller’s science fiction classic A Canticle for Leibowitz (1960) ultimately portray a human race incapable of escaping its deadly historical cycle of innovation that leads to violence and then destruction.

In keeping with its immersive and temporally expansive discussion of the relationship between history, the ethical decisions of the present and the struggle to control the path toward the future, Miller’s novel centers around literal and symbolic bunkers. The story is set several hundred years after the twentieth century, over a span of
several thousand years, when the world is a war-torn wasteland. In the aftermath of nuclear apocalypse (or “Flame Deluge” – a term that references the biblical diluvian narrative), the stewardship over human society is divided between a few political factions and the religious authority of the surviving Roman Catholic church. The narrative follows several generations of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz, a fictional faction of monks living in the former southwestern United States whose work centers on the preservation, curation and restriction of scientific knowledge.

The beginning phase of the novel, “Fiat Homo” (Let There be Man), is set in the Dark Ages following the Flame Deluge. A novice monk of the Order of Leibowitz finds a hidden fallout shelter in the desert while on a solitary vigil. The bunker contains a cache of ephemera that includes handwritten notes and other documents. Brother Francis discovers that these “relics” (as the monks call the remnants of the past that to Miller’s readers may be humorously banal, such as shopping lists and engineering diagrams) are in fact written by their holy Saint Leibowitz. We eventually discover that the saint was formerly Isaac Edward Leibowitz, a Jewish military engineer who did not perish in the nuclear war. Survivors of the deluge became vehemently opposed to the advanced of knowledge, now having evidential proof that (as we discussed in the previous chapter) the road of learning leads to destruction. Leibowitz became a Catholic and established the Order of Leibowitz for its continuing mission of acquiring and preserving former knowledge, saving it for an unidentified future time when humanity would be ready to responsibly and ethically reacquire it.

In *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, along with other works such as Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, McCarthy’s *The Road*, Auster’s *The Country of Last Things*, or the
2010 film *The Book of Eli*, the ephemera of the past is not only material in nature. Knowledge and language are also relics of a world being quickly lost to a history believed to be best forgotten. In *Oryx and Crake*, the protagonist is the chosen human guide of a new species meant to improve upon the nearly extinct human race. He struggles with the loss of old knowledge and language that is quickly disappearing from his own mind. As material items slowly decay but continue to linger, Snowman (as he calls himself) grows frustrated with the severed connections between referent and reference. When these new beings find objects from the past and ask him to explain their function and nature, “What can he tell them? There’s no way of explaining to them what these curious items are, or were. … ‘These are things from before’” (Atwood, *Oryx* 7).

Crake, the creator of the new beings, believed that much of the downfall of humankind lay in abstract thinking—and therefore instructed his steward to avoid teaching them words that could not be directly related to material items (a directive that does not address the level of abstraction inherent in language). The caretaker even had to abandon his name (Jimmy) because of the rule “that no name could be chosen without a physical equivalent.” The name he takes, Snowman, is a wry statement on the disappearance of abstract knowledge as it refers to “The Abominable Snowman—existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards…stealthy, elusive, known only through rumours…” (8).

The ephemerality of language is similarly visible in Auster’s novel, such as in the scene in which Anna asks someone about the possibility of traveling by airplane. The other person responds, “What’s an airplane?” Though clearly in the same generation which also lived in the pre-disaster world (in which airplanes presumably existed), the
reference is already being lost to disuse. Upon Anna’s explanation of an airplane as a “machine that flies through the air and carries people from one place to another,” the man replies: “That’s ridiculous. …There’s no such thing. It’s impossible.” “Don’t you remember?” Anna asks, to which he states “I don’t know what you’re talking about… You could get into trouble for spreading that kind of nonsense. The government doesn’t like it when people make up stories. It’s bad for morale” (Auster 87).

The knowledge (and language) of the past have a position in many disaster narratives that oscillates between a potential source of rejuvenation and the possibility of renewed destruction. Nevertheless, this nearly forgotten knowledge retains a certain allure and even sacredness that encourages preservation. Like the libraries of In the Country of Last Things or The Book of Eli, the monastery in A Canticle for Leibowitz becomes a kind of bunker itself: a shelter for ephemeral knowledge from the passage of time in the turbulent, hostile world outside the solid walls of the church. However, as thousands of years pass within the narrative of Leibowitz the solidity and timelessness of the monastery comes into question. In the section evocatively titled “Fiat Lux” (Let There Be Light), monks and other outside scholars are beginning to step outside the roles of preservers of ancient knowledge and beginning to apply the lessons in the relics to new discoveries. This renaissance of innovation causes major rifts within the Order between those who see potential for good in the controlled, benevolent renewal of technological development and those ardently opposed to any application of ancient knowledge, which they still believe to be a sure vehicle to a new doom for humankind.

In the final section entitled “Fiat Voluntas Tua” (Let Thy Will Be Done), the fears of the cautionary monks are proven justified. The world has once again turned technology
to self-destruction and weapons of mass destruction are once again being amassed, this time with even more extensive possibilities for extermination (thanks to additional advancements in space travel). Miller’s message is ultimately one of the recurring follies of human history. The story concludes with the monastery now a small island in a new era of nuclear chaos and radiation sickness. One of the final conflicts among the Order of Leibowitz regards the ethics of euthanasia, with regard to a clinic operating near the monastery that instead of absolution from sin offers the suffering victims of radiation the comfort of death. This concluding debate of the novel, the final scenes in which a small number of monks escape the exploding nuclear holocaust in a starship, followed by a haunting montage of the destructive effects of human violence on the ecological balance of the earth, together paint an image that suggests, like LeGuin’s aforementioned *The World for World is Forest*, that a future of peace and ecological harmony can only exist without humankind and its irrevocable burden of violence.

The message is certainly a pessimistic one, but understandable (and prophetic, in Miller’s case) when one considers the international failure to respond to the mass violence of the first half of the twentieth century by adhering to the recurring cry of “never again!” Genocide has since been perpetrated several times around the world, the environmental degradation of the earth advances daily despite our efforts to keep it at bay, nuclear weapons are still hoarded, developed and used as threats despite movements for disarmament, and we still struggle with ethical questions over the development of science and technology that marches on in a trajectory that we hope will lead to progress and not destruction. As in the world of Miller’s *Leibowitz*, your assessment of the fate to which our path of development leads largely depends on how much trust you can place in
the capacity of the human species for good over its capacity for destruction. The former is a bet that, after the past century, fewer people are willing to place.

Philip K. Dick also portrays this distrust of humanity and possibility of an inherent violence in our nature in “The Defenders” (1953). This short story also features a bunker, but one which turns out to be a reversal of the trope. The elaborate underground shelter functions not as a structure to protect the surviving humans from the outside world, but to protect the world from the destructive energy of humans. Dick tells the tale in which the human survivors of a nuclear war are now living in “undersurface” networks of bunkers, “with an artificial sun and artificial food” (68). They must live undersurface because the war still rages, rendering the world above the surface unlivable due to levels of radiation and toxicity. The warring nations of the world wage their conflict from underground via robotic surrogates who regularly report on above-ground conditions and the events of the war on the surface. The turn in the plot comes when some of the humans discover that the war is actually fake—the world outside is in fact recovering and the war is long over. This elaborate hoax is perpetuated by their robotic creations in order to channel the humans’ destructive energy and keep them underground until they are deemed ready to discard the impulse toward conflict and embark on a road of peace.

Somewhat surprisingly, Dick’s story seems to end on an optimistic note (although one that retrospectively can be read as possibly ironic) in which hope is near: “…now the end is in sight: a world without war. But even that is only the beginning of a new stage of history. …it will be unimaginably great” (85). As I will more extensively discuss in the next chapter, post-disaster narratives also reveal aspects of today’s risk society in that
they oscillate between hope and despair for our future. The attempt to counter despair
with bravado, for example, is behind the dark humor of Horne’s *A is for Apocalypse*:

For billions of years, our Earth has been subjected to various forms
of abuse. It has been beaten and bruised, stone and scorched,
disemboweled and dismembered. But Earth has lived to tell the tale,
unlike many of the species that have inhabited it.

And while Earth may continue to survive multiple assassination
attempts, the human race will not. No one knows exactly when or how our
lineage is due to end but our end is definitely nigh, and once we’ve gone,
the Earth will still be here waiting for the next infestation to take control
of its surface. So as we are all destined to die anyway, let’s laugh in the
face of extinction and hope that Death has forgotten to pencil in Judgment
Day on his To Do list. (Horne 4)

In another version of the positive/negative oscillation, the brief but therefore powerful
illuminations of hope are based on our capacity to sometimes react to the “doom and
gloom” of reflexive modernization not with petrified stasis, but with actions in the
present that could affect the world lying before us—even in small ways that may or may
not be enough to save us. The importance of this type of action is not really how much it
actually affects the future, but rather its effect on the survival of the present.

In Auster’s novel protagonist Anna survives in large part because she keeps
putting one foot in front of the other. Her letter, which is the form of the novel, expresses
her refusal to join those who refuse to face another day and instead choose to lay down
and die. Anna forages through the ruins of society so that with every usable scrap she
discovers she increases her own ratio of hope to despair. “At a certain point, things disintegrate into muck, or dust, or scraps, and what you have is something new, some particle or agglomeration of matter than cannot be identified. It is a clump, a mote, a fragment of the world that has no place: a cipher of it-ness.” There is power in the ability to decrypt this cipher and create something new: “to zero in on these little islands of intactness, to imagine them joined to other such islands, and those islands to still others, and thus to create new archipelagoes of matter.” The trick of using the past is to discard what is useless in the survival of the present or the construction of the future, avoiding the nostalgic in favor of the pragmatic. “You must salvage the salvageable and learn to ignore the rest” (Auster 36).

From the ruins of destruction can come new possibilities for innovative action. As Anna writes, “Utter despair can exist side by side with the most dazzling invention; entropy and efflorescence merge.” When danger lurks and supplies are minimal, survivors like the father in the road learn how mend vehicles, construct shelters and make their own bullets. “It all has to do with a new way of thinking. Scarcity bends your mind toward novel solutions, and you discover yourself willing to entertain ideas that never would have occurred to you before” (29). That “new way of thinking” is the driving concept behind some social movements that have sprouted up from the turbulent, broken ground of modern risk societies. Do-it-yourself (DIY) and self-sufficiency movements, among them communities of modern homesteaders, survivalists and “Makers” from a

---

9 The term “Makers” refers to individuals taking part in a recently growing DIY community often referred to as the Maker Movement: “people who create, build, design, tinker, modify, hack, invent, or simply make something.” The Maker community is motivated by the idea “that the people who invent and build and make things have the power to change the world” (McCue). Notable among the movement are Maker Faires in cities around the U.S. and the world, associated with MAKE Magazine (which targets “a devoted audience of tech-savvy, DIY enthusiasts who are shaping the future with their innovative projects and ideas” [“MAKE Magazine”]).
vast array of social and political associations find common ground in their desire to acquire agency over their own lives, however modestly.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, people have responded to the threat of frighteningly imminent possibilities for societal collapse—including pathological, environmental or economic disasters that could shut down the highly technologized, dependence-inducing infrastructures that direct even the smallest aspects of our everyday lives. The revelations of reflexive modernization can open our eyes to the fragility of the social, industrial and technological frameworks that have grown beyond our individual understanding. Faced with the potentially paralyzing consequences of the collapse of those frameworks, some react by seeking solace in nostalgia and others by clinging to ignorance.

Some, however, see freedom and a rejuvenation of individual agency in that insecurity. The impulse to act through creation is at the heart of Hannah Arendt’s philosophy of action, which rests on the necessary connection between creation, expression (“Speech”) and action:

Through [speech and action] men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but qua men. This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human. …A life without speech or action…is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men. (Arendt 176)
If action, particularly through speech and the bringing-forth of something new into the world, is an attribute essential to the human as such, then one can posit that action is a necessary element in the survival of the human.

It can certainly be debated whether or not the actions of the aforementioned champions of self-sufficiency and invention ultimately represent a real acquisition of power over the future or instead constitute a small, futile effort to paddle within a forward-charging tide of modernization too large to escape or affect. However, a philosophy of action such as Arendt’s appears to suggest that there is genuine power in an individual’s willingness to create, express and otherwise actively impose her or his presence upon the world. That it is, in fact, “wrong to do nothing (Auster 42). In this line of thinking, it is possible to believe that choosing to make our own mark upon the present can have an impact on the likelihood of our survival into the future.

“Let everything fall away, and then let’s see what there is.

Perhaps that is the most interesting question of all:

to see what happens when there is nothing,

and whether or not we will survive that too” (Auster 29).
CHAPTER FOUR

Survivor’s Guide to Hope and Despair

The last mile is the longest mile –
‘Tis then we weaken;
We lose the strength to run the race,
We doubt Hope’s beacon.

Shall we turn back from this dark Road,
Footsore and weary,
When deep Despair has drained our Faith,
And all seems dreary?

………………………………………….

Shall Enemies erase our Life,
Our Message bury?
And shall they quench in war and strife
The Torch we carry?

Take heart, oh dusty Travellers:
Though you may falter,
Though you be felled along the way,
You’ll reach the Altar. … (Atwood, Year 405-06)
If there is one question we have always and will most likely continue to ask ourselves, it is the question regarding what it means to be human. Whether it’s René Descartes’ mind-body separation, Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of Being, Hannah Arendt’s theory on the human condition, Katherine Hayles’s more recent work on post-humanism, or a plethora of other multi-perspectival analyses, theorizations and philosophies of the human, the question concerning humanity appears to be tied to the question concerning survival. Survival of the body, survival of consciousness, survival of the whole, survival of our groundedness on the Earth, survival of our social constructs, survival of the environment necessary to human survival, and survival of the so-called essential attributes that redeem us as a species worthy of existence – attributes often deduced from those very same questions concerning the human.

An immersion into the fictions of disaster is necessarily a plunge into the survival experience. This crucial aspect of narratives of destruction is a highly effective conduit for the exploration of those questions concerning humanity that became particularly pressing since World War II. As I describe in Chapter Two, post-disaster fictions of survival, including speculative texts that can be categorized as “post-apocalyptic” fiction, offer a specific brand of narrative world-construction that begins with world-shattering. The resulting conditions do provide, as I discussed, a possibility to start anew without the complexities of modernity that resonates with the fantasy of the frontier. However, we have also seen that wasteland worlds are not exactly a utopian site for a fresh start. They are populated with characters pushed to the ultimate breaking points of the human body and psyche, under circumstances of the extreme, no-holds-barred dismantling of social structure that leads to overt challenges of assumptions regarding basic morality. Survival
situations put under strenuous pressure what we believe to be the redeeming elements of our humanity, that which we call “humane.”

The survivor figures' reactions to stringent circumstances in these stories, while being complex and varied, share many characteristics and dilemmas. Those similarities allow us to loosely categorize some of the main character paths post-disaster into two possibilities: stasis and action. These two possible reactions are directly related to the discussion in Chapter Three of the role of risk and uncertainty in the development of modernization into the current era, particularly in reference to the description of a “risk society” in *Reflexive Modernization* by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash.

“Stasis” refers to the paralysis that can descend either on the individual or collective level after a disaster. The uncertainty and threat of the future coupled with the weight of the responsibilities of the past and the feelings of culpability or blame can culminate in an incapability to take action in the present. In some cases, an extreme fear of stepping forward into the future only allows the character one possible action: suicide. In other cases characters choose an existence that rejects any action other than that which contributes to basic, day-to-day survival, thereby refusing to undertake any path that would entail an active approach to the formation of the future. In Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Year of the Flood*, people who enter into such a state are considered, as with overworked soil, to be “fallow.” While I will bring up this idea of “fallowness” again briefly, the instances of those characters are not as common and will thus not be a major part of this analysis.

The second possible reaction to the post-disaster world is action. This approach faces the risks of the future not with paralysis, but rather with the resolve to do whatever
is possible in the present to direct the circumstances that shape that future. I discussed some of these possibilities in Chapter Three. For example, actions to affect the future can involve taking the events of the past (by examining history) and using them as tools to avoid the recurrence of the same outcomes. Another action-based approach is best exemplified by the activities of “survivalism”: a concern with the acquisition of skills that center around outdoor survival, emergency training, self-sufficiency and hyper-awareness of risk, all in active preparation for a plethora of possible future scenarios.

As I mentioned in the closing pages of Chapter Three, survivalism strongly resonates (and thus has a significant community cross-over) with DIY (do-it-yourself) and Maker lifestyles and communities. The tenets of self-sufficiency, conservation and environmental responsibility, creativity, and innovation followed by these movements have a powerful connection to the philosophy of Action developed by Hannah Arendt in her work *The Human Condition*, which ties action to a person’s engagement in expression and the extent to which they introduce something new into the world. Not surprisingly, members of the above-mentioned communities are often readers and writers of fictions of destruction (and survival), including post-apocalyptic science fiction.

Many environmental, physiological, psychological and interpersonal variables contribute to survivors' positions in or between states of stasis or action. One very productive and revealing way to examine the interplay of those factors and their role in the construction of survival fictions is to look at the survivor experience as one that oscillates variably between hope and despair. While at first glance one might see clear-cut distinctions between characters, plots and resolutions that embrace hope and those that embrace despair, deeper analysis shows a much more interlaced relationship between
optimism and pessimism in these stories – the proportions of which affect the tone, character development, narrative development, formal choices and ultimately the message conveyed.

As I have throughout this dissertation, in this chapter I will be focusing on disaster narratives written in North America and primarily the United States. The cultural manifestations of disaster I describe are, while in some cases applicable to other fictions from around the world, particularly relevant to the cultural context and concerns of their geographical birthplace. While understanding that there are exceptions to every pattern, I have encountered an intriguing difference among that group of disaster fictions between those published in the period between 1945-1989 and those after 2001. Contrary to what one might expect based on proximity to the horrors of the catalyzing events in the mid-20th century, those written in the first period (the interval between WWII and the end of the Cold War) lean more toward an optimistic view of the future, while those written since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. show a tendency toward a decidedly darker outlook on futurity.

Because of this trend and its implications regarding the interplay of hope and despair in disaster fiction, I will be discussing texts in this chapter that shed a particularly strong light on that specific dynamic in survival situations. These include George R. Stewart’s 1949 novel *Earth Abides*, which tells the story of Northern California survivors of a disease that ravages the world; Pat Frank’s 1959 nuclear conflict novel *Alas, Babylon*; Philip K. Dick’s 1963 short story “The Days of Perky Pat,” also set in the San Francisco Bay Area but among the ruins of nuclear war, Cormac McCarthy’s tale of a father and son’s grueling post-catastrophic survival journey in *The Road* (2006); the first

I will preface my narrative analysis by outlining some of the primary questions presented by the survivalist mode in disaster narratives, in doing so connecting many of the concerns of the previous chapters to a concluding whole in this final installment. I will then elaborate on the primary theme of this chapter: the spectrum between stasis and action and its relationship to an oscillation between hope and despair that is paradigmatic of the survivalist mode in disaster fiction (and often in literature more generally, though that will not be the focus here). I will illustrate that thematic preoccupation through a narrative typology of three character groups that recur in disaster fiction: suicides, leaders, and “superchildren.”

**The Questions Concerning Survival**

In *Alas, Babylon* Pat Frank engages the pervasive nuclear fears of the time by narrating a nuclear attack on the United States. The first page of a 1960 paperback edition asks the following intrepid questions:
This series of questions asked before the opening pages of Frank's “great novel of the end of the world—and the day after” (as the cover advertises) have been reiterated in a plethora of forms since the fall of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, transposing the long fascination with survival into a landscape of nuclear wastelands, Geiger counters and underground bunkers. From modernism to postmodernism, science fiction to creative non-fiction, governmental contingency documents to children's tales, authors and other artists around the world have been trying to tap into the roots of what has become an obsession in mass culture with the end(s) of the world. I include the plural to emphasize the ever-churning press of futurity that is tasked with spitting out hundreds of possible scenarios of destruction, as discussed in Chapter Three and evidenced by books such as the 2010 tongue-in-cheek disaster scenario encyclopedia A is for Armageddon.
For now we return to those opening questions to Frank's novel, which highlight anxieties, emotions and attitudes surrounding the imaginary of disaster after 1945. First, we have the attempt to draw the individual into a collective questioning of self-sufficiency: “COULD YOU SURVIVE” (Frank n.p.). The address is both to the readers collectively, forming a community of survivalists who by exploring these questions through the novel may presumably be more aware and prepared for its scenario, and to you personally, in the sense that (a) survival often entails a situation of each person for him/herself or (b) in many scenarios there is a strong possibility of being the sole survivor (thus joining disaster survivors to the ranks of well-known shipwreck victims and castaways). The survivor roles I will discuss in this chapter hinge not only on their position as individuals but in almost every case on their relationship to other survivors. The issues of survival between the individual and a community, even in the case of lone survivors (which I will explore in a future study), are what provide the groundwork for these narratives to address deep-seated questions about the social structures of modernity.

Second, we have an outline of what has become standard operating procedure for setting up a disaster story: a sudden absence of basic vital resources coupled with an inability to replenish them due to the toxicity of the outside environment. Survival belongs to the paranoid (who hoarded supplies in anticipation of disaster, Noah-like, despite the sneers of naysayers) and the resourceful (the hunters and gatherers who can use a combination of street smarts and moral flexibility in order to forage for the items necessary to survival). This aspect reflects the increasing awareness of risk and the pragmatic import of the ability to take action under conditions of loss and threat rather than being immobilized by them.
Third, in keeping with this dichotomy, we are asked to imagine two possible reactions to disaster: paralysis versus ingenuity, or for our purposes, stasis versus action. In the face of destruction, do we look at the ruins and freeze, immobile? Do we plunge into the continuous rehashing of a lost past? Or do we see an opportunity for building a new, better future? These possibilities are at the heart of the oscillation between despair and hope in fictions of destruction and form the organizing structure of this chapter.

Finally, the blurb from the *Chicago Tribune* points out two ways of harnessing the pragmatic possibilities of fictionalization. The phrasing of the review implies an aggressive element in the fictionalizing act: the control of the reader. First, we “are made to live in the very presence of dreadful happenings.” The reader is forced into a position of victimhood in which s/he must ‘live through’ a disaster scenario as if she is herself experiencing something “dreadful” that is “happening” (active) to her. Secondly, we are made to “understand what a nuclear catastrophe would do to America.” Our new, fictional position of witnessing forces us to work through a nuclear catastrophe and intimately, thoroughly “understand” the consequences, implications and practical considerations of nuclear war (Frank n.p.). The vicariously participatory opportunity disaster narratives offer is pivotal to the strength of their impact within the collective imaginary and to their capacity to reveal the characteristics of that imaginary. I will return to this point at the end of the chapter.

The issues described above can be broken down into four common inquiries that also apply to disaster fiction: *Where? Why? Who or What? and How?* Where is the survival scenario taking place, spatially and/or temporally? Who or what is trying to
survive? Why are they in a position of survival (or not) - what has happened? How are they going to survive?

Where is perhaps the most important of the four questions, as it can serve as a gateway to the others. The survivor's position in a place and in history to some extent pre-determines the possibilities for action and the materials available for ingenuity. In her book on Canadian literature, Survival, Margaret Atwood writes that “Where is here?” is the kind of question “a man asks when he finds himself in unknown territory,” leading to questions such as: “Where is this place in relation to other places? How do I find my way around in it?” The survivor must “take stock of what ‘here’ has to offer in the way of support for human life,” whether they are “other people ‘here’ already, natives who are co-operative, indifferent or hostile” or “animals, to be tamed, killed and eaten, or be avoided.” If it turns out that there is “too large a gap between our hero's expectations and his environment he may develop culture shock or commit suicide” (Atwood, Survival 25). As Atwood adroitly and compactly explains, the “where” is the most basic staging ground for the potential interactions that will necessitate ethical and pragmatic decision-making. I address aspects of the Where of survival in Chapters Two (roads, wastelands) and Three (bunkers).

Agency, however, ultimately lies in the realm of the actor: the Who of the survival scenario. The interest of survival narratives most often lies in our investment in the precarious situation of a person or persons who may die with one wrong step. We agonize with the strange (anti)heroes of the post-apocalypse, tentatively cheering them on when they live another day, nodding in relief at their small kindnesses and steadfast moments of humanity while trying to set aside their recent barbarisms as necessary evils. As
stipulated by the second half of the question, the *Who or What?* of survival extends beyond the individual. The survival at stake may be of a nation, of a culture, of an ideal, of a language, of a lifestyle, or of a moral order. As we have seen in previous chapters, the survival at stake is often that of the idea of modernity as a beacon of progress and enlightenment, or of the belief in the goodness and particular “humanity” of human beings, in contrast to the “savagery” of the animal or those labeled as sub- or in-human.

The next question, *Why* the “who or what” is in the position of survival, refers back to the envisioned scenarios discussed in Chapter Three. In survival stories, the feared disaster has, indeed, taken place. Some stories, such as Frank's *Alas, Babylon*, make the cause of the catastrophe clear. The title of the novel refers to the biblically-inspired code between two brothers created as a forewarning of imminent nuclear attack, one which Randy, the protagonist, receives in a telegram near the beginning of the tale. The citizens of the soothingly-named Fort Repose know why their power is out, why their routines are in chaos, and why highwaymen are free to roam their once-safe streets. In other narratives, however, the cause is either not known by the characters, who may continue to ask why as they struggle through the daily serving of uncertainties, or the cause and the extent of the characters’ knowledge of the cause is not made clear to the reader, as is the case with Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. The novel’s only clues to the type of disaster are the many descriptions of charred landscape, burning fires, and one vague account of the event that evokes hints of a nuclear cause, including a “shear of light and then a series of low concussions,” followed by a “dull rose glow” (52).

The cause of the disaster, like the location of the characters, determines a set of variables that they will encounter: will they have to devise a way to deal with fallout, or
seal themselves away in their homes, as in H.G. Oesterheld’s Argentine disaster comic *El Eternauta*? Will they have to take action to prevent the further deterioration of their environment? Does the cause imply further threat? Interestingly, the lack of knowledge about the cause likewise drives the actors and the plot. The characters' entire existence may be consumed with the quest to answer the ever-elusive *Why*, such as in the television series *Jericho*, in which significant attention is devoted to finding out who carried out tandem nuclear attacks on U.S. cities. Part of the series’ drama of risk is based on the unexpected nearness of the answer: homegrown terrorism. Failure to discover the cause to a narrative’s disaster may cover the psyche of the survivors with an additional aura of constant, overarching risk, beyond that of daily survival. Constant threat can lead to a state of paralysis, in which the survivor is afraid to act or even emerge for fear of the unknown.

Finally, *How* the survivors go about staying alive is the ultimate test of some of the principles and ideals which we hold most dear. Will the protagonist hold on to his or her so-called humanity? Is there such as a thing as an essential human character? What must be overcome, and how are we to overcome it? Here the excitement for the reader lies in the titillating projection of one's self into the hypotheticals of danger, which can prove to be illuminating or terrifying. The survivalist narrative provides the reader with a safe ground for the exploration of some of the most frightening questions about the human soul, the price of our comforts, the lengths we would go to for those we love, the limits of our ideologies, or whether humans even deserve to survive (as discussed at length in Chapter Three). The primary question behind the others is this: To survive or not to survive, and at what cost?
The four major questions regarding survival, particularly the Where and Why, have already made their appearance in preceding chapters. They will continue to influence the analysis of this final chapter, which will turn to focus on the Who or What? and How? of survival as a means to get at the particularities of hope and despair in post-disaster situations. To reflect my specific interest in the contrasting positions of stasis and action and their connection to hope and despair, I will now describe three types of characters (out of several other possible types not covered here) that best display these propensities: one group pulled more strongly (though not exclusively) toward the side of stasis and despair and two that gesture more actively toward the possibility of hope. No case is simply one or the other, but rather a vacillation between pessimism and optimism that shifts with the changing circumstances of the characters.

First our attention will turn to characters that refuse to engage with the future and instead commit suicide. Second, I will examine a major character type in disaster fiction: the leader. This character has, through varying circumstances, taken on responsibility not only of his or her own forward motion, but that of a community of others (of varying size). Finally, a third group of interest is one I am terming the “survivor superchild” in reference to this character type’s resonance with the superchild myth described in the work of Jean-Marie Apostolidès. This final group best exemplifies the exhilaration and liberation present (often paradoxically or improbably) in many fictions of destruction, a gesture toward the possibility of redemption and rebirth that acknowledges even the frailest glimmer of hope and keeps it alive. These are the characters who, in the words of McCarthy, are “carrying the fire” (83).
Between Hope and Despair: Toward a Typology of Survival

Suicide, in literary terms, is most often an absolute ending. Suicide removes characters from the forward trajectory of the plot, erasing them from existence in the future. In most cases it signals a complete loss of hope, or a single hope in the oblivion of death. Suicide appears in many survival narratives across genres; here we will focus on a couple of examples from Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead*. All of these examples are minor characters who tend to be counter-examples to the more highly valued will to live of the heroic, tenacious few who have the ability to see a future to move towards, no matter how dimly it appears. Suicides are not often portrayed as heroes, which is what most of us would like to think we would be. As Artie’s therapist tells him in the Holocaust survival comic *Maus*, “Life takes the side of life” (Spiegelman 45).

Life involves action, whether by its bearer or by external agents. In disaster narratives, the biological and psychological demands of staying alive take on an often impossible weight. When that burden is coupled with the inability to envision a positive future (and even more so when supplemented by the heavy burden of guilt or melancholia from the past), the individual can lose the drive to perform the actions that maintain a now unwelcome life. The desire for death is a desire for the ultimate abolition of hope. Desire itself is a hope, but in this case a finite one that yearns for an end to the betrayals of hope. In this sense death becomes a kind of utopian end to the road of despair discussed in Chapter Two. Action holds hope within itself. It carries the belief in something to come from that action and in a future in which that something will come.
The desire for death can thus be seen as a desire to be free from the risk (and hope) of action.

The endgame of suicide is stasis, but one bought paradoxically at the cost of a culminating action. While the father in *The Road* still takes the side of life, despite the terror surrounding the parents and their young son, the mother argues for death as the final and only morally justifiable action they have available to them. In the mother’s mind, killing each other and their son—choosing to abstain permanently from the world they find themselves in—is the only possible way to ensure that their son will not have to face further suffering. In a situation in which the uncertainty of the future is overwhelming, death is the only action that appears to provide a sure bet. In this line of reasoning, the mother believes that suicide is “the right thing to do.” Even worse than the uncertainties are what she believes to be the certainties: “Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won’t face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen. But I can’t. I can’t” (McCarthy 56).

The experience of disaster can force onto a person the awareness of what is possible. Feeling destruction close in around you, brushing against your skin and burrowing into your bones, can turn what is at risk in the distant future into what can occur at any moment. Under the constant strain of such an existence, to some death becomes “a new lover” or object of desire. The mother has ceased to see any glimmer shining through the darkness of the oppressive future. To her, “there is no stand to take,” no reason to keep marching forward. There are only reasons for not moving, ever again: “As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart” (57).
In the ashen, sunless world McCarthy creates, survival is not empowering or exhilarating. Survival is a parade of horror, hunger, fear and exhaustion. While the father wants to embrace resilience, strength, resoluteness, and most of all—life, the mother challenges the dominant survivor model, rejecting its romanticism in the face of McCarthy's trademark realism: “Survivors? she said. ...What in God’s name are you talking about? We’re not survivors. We’re the walking dead in a horror film” (55). It is fitting that she categorizes their plight in the context of fiction of the undead, particularly since the tone and position of *The Road* as regards human nature in the face of disaster is echoed in Robert Kirkman's comic series, *The Walking Dead*.

The series is a parade of the horrors the mother did not want to face in *The Road*. Life in the zombie-riddled world requires not merely action, but often terrible actions of which the actors would have never previously thought themselves capable. Like in most disaster fiction, biological needs are hard to meet in the comic. The characters have to forage, scrounge, trade and steal their provisions and frequently live in a state of inescapable hunger or illness. Interestingly, the characters singled out for suicide in *The Walking Dead* seek death less to end physical torment and more as a result of psychological distress caused by fractured relationships with other survivors. One example appears early on. Kirkman also chooses a mother for the role, but one whom he portrays as obsessing less about the future pain of her daughter as with her need for the emotional support of a romantic partner.
After enduring the many hardships of survival, it’s the discovery of her partner’s affair with a new group member that sends Carol over the edge. Her attempt to end her life is thwarted by the appearance of the group leader (Fig. 1), but Carol’s mental break from the realities of her environment continues to reveal itself. The disturbing presence of her young daughter at the scene of the attempt, wide-eyed with terror, brutally displays her lost regard for the emotional well-being of her child. As the survival narrative moves forward, her erratic presence interrupts the story periodically as she throws herself into the arms of any strong figure in the group, whether male or female.

Through Carol’s desperate search for a romantic partner and her inability to survive on her own, Kirkman portrays her as a weak female character (as opposed to other women such as Lori or Andrea) whose emotional hunger appears to rise from her need for a stronger individual to take over as her protector. Each rejection sends her further into psychological breakdown, until she chooses the one lover who won’t refuse her: death—this time personified in the disturbingly erotic embrace of a captive walker (Fig. 2). Carol’s death by zombie is by her own agency. She is not attacked by a walker in the wild, but rather offers herself up to the captive monster, thus completing the surrender of her sanity, killing her old self and joining the undead. Her final words to the walker in Issue 41 reinforce the possibility that her failure to survive stems from a
combination of social disengagement and her inability to escape a cycle of judgment for her weakness.

You’re probably not going to like it here, y’know. They’re nice enough people, at first they’re great… but they’re so goddam judgmental. One slip-up… and that’s it for you.

Really. I tried to kill myself. I did. It didn’t work, obviously. But I tried. They won’t let me forget it. Since then, I can see it in their eyes—they’ve lost respect for me. All of them. Even my best friend. She tries to be nice but I can tell she’s just patronizing me. …Everyone thinks I’m crazy. …I think I’ll just talk to you from now on. You listen, you don’t seem to judge me. (Kirkman, *Compendium* n.p.)

A twist unique to the zombie genre of Kirkman’s comic is that Carol’s suicide gives birth to a new horrific being without even the agency to end its own suffering; in Issue 42 one of the other group members, Andrea, puts a final end to Carol (or at least her physical body) when she reawakens as a walker.

It is interesting that after her suicide by zombie, the walker Carol is finished off by a character who in the television series has a history with the issue of suicide. In the show Andrea is robbed of an opportunity to willingly die in an explosion (“TS-19”) by a
gruff but relentlessly life-affirming character named Dale. She resents Dale’s intervention for several episodes, defending agency in one’s own death as one of the only human rights remaining. Andrea eventually comes to begrudgingly turn herself from potential suicide into self-sufficient survivor, but her defense of suicide reappears when she assists in the escape of another character on suicide watch. Andrea’s arguments reveal that while she now has the will to live, she believes that Beth, like all of them, “has to choose to live on her own.” Beth ends up only half-heartedly attempting suicide, and when she is found still alive and apologetic, Andrea defends her actions by pointing out the change: “She wants to live” (“18 Miles Out”).

In the case of Andrea and Beth, the television characters’ ultimate rejections of life-ending actions are seemingly vehicles for a new strength going forward. Beth goes on to be a gentle but firmly encouraging presence in the group. As Kirkman himself explains, Andrea’s near suicide is merely the “beginning of the evolution to the character that she is in the comic book—the fearless sharpshooter that she became” (Goldberg). Andrea becomes a fierce, relentless survivor who goes to great lengths to protect herself and others (no matter how flawed her attempts may be). As usual, however, the life-affirming appearance of hope eventually oscillates back to the grip of despair. After many struggles and several triumphs and failures as a survivor, Andrea eventually faces the option of suicide once again. This time her decision to take her own life comes at the end of a desperate struggle to stay alive that ends with her lying zombie-bitten and at the brink of a death that will turn her into a walker herself. She shoots herself in the head both to protect the others from the creature she would become and to do so under her own agency (“Welcome to the Tombs”).
It could be argued that every person still alive in these post-apocalypse horror scenarios is opting against suicide every day. However, there are a select few who more overtly reject that option and instead take actions to preserve life (theirs and that of others), even if only for an uncertain future. This is true in the case of the (initially) solitary survivor in George R. Stewart’s *Earth Abides*, a self-sufficient, pragmatic researcher who, facing the possible end of human civilization, feels the need to list the reasons he can survive when so many others did not:

1. Have will to live. Want to see what will happen in world without man, and how. Geographer.
2. *Always was* solitary. Don’t have to talk to other people.
3. Have appendix out.
5. Did not suffer devastating experience of living through it all, seeing family, other people, die. Thus escaped world of shock. (Stewart 38)

The final point is crucial, separating him from the other disaster survivors we’ve looked at so far. His remote research kept him from experiencing the worst of the disaster firsthand. As other disaster fictions show, the shock of witnessing the deaths of loved ones (or unwillingness to do so) is one of the primary motivations for suicide. Additionally (and in contrast to Carol), Ish believes himself free of the psychological need for companionship, a strength which he feels puts him even above the prototypical survivor, Robinson Crusoe (37). But also like Robinson Crusoe, he eventually finds himself the leader of his own ‘kingdom’ of survivors.
In life and in fiction, disasters bring out and distill certain features in individuals. According to centuries of survival narratives, they also have a way of paring down the usual kaleidoscope of positions inhabited by each person in their society (daughter, teacher, father, lover, artist, doctor) and forcing these individuals into more streamlined, simplified roles to match the more stringent, sparse circumstances. Fictions of destruction and survival, in their concern with culture and society, understandably pay particular attention to characters in positions of leadership. The many leaders that appear in these narratives can, for the purposes of analysis, be grouped into categories of association. The three categories I have chosen to focus on here include the Leader of Conviction, who is often a prophet-like figure, the Incidental Leader, who survives and leads seemingly only by coincidence or luck, and the Skilled Leader, who is often the survivalist of the group.

There are three primary leaders I would like to highlight from Atwood's second MaddAddam book, *The Year of the Flood*: Adam One, Toby and Zeb. All three are members of the top leadership tier in the hierarchy of the religious-environmental sect called God’s Gardeners, bearing the titles of “Adams” and “Eves,” followed by numbers that designate roles within the sect (45). In keeping with these designations, each of these characters represents a different type of survivor leader and therefore a different approach to or reason for the maintenance of hope. Adam One is the ultimate leader, rhetorician and spiritual guide of the Gardeners. As primarily a Leader of Conviction, he articulates the ideology which sets apart the aims of the group, gives them vision and purpose, and provides context and reason to the disaster along with the hope of a redemptive end to the destruction. Toby, a later arrival to the group, joined not of her own will, but rather because they rescued her from an abusive, homicidal street thug (43). She is an Incidental
Leader, with commitment to the group that is not one of fervent religious or ideological conviction, but rather one of safety, gratitude and custom that eventually grows into a different sort of commitment to the cause. Zeb is the rogue, the one willing to face danger. And perhaps most importantly, Zeb is the survivalist. He instructs the Gardeners on survival skills, including self-defense, foraging and hunting, that they will need to survive the impending “Waterless Flood,” an apocalyptic event for which the Gardeners spend the majority of their time preparing. Zeb, in his blasé, confident way, is the one willing to do the dirty work—to infiltrate the belly of the beast, to don the vestments of the corrupt city and do what is necessary to keep the Gardeners safe, hidden, and well-stocked.

Out of those three characters, the cornerstone position that brings together all of the believers into the fulfillment of these goals is Adam One, the Leader of Conviction who fills a similar role as a prophet. As such, Adam One is vital to the survival of God’s Gardeners and is both the voice that holds them together in Spirit and the mind that strategizes the pragmatic matters of their survival as an oasis in the midst of a hostile environment. He is also crucial, however, as a narrative tool that holds a key place in the structure of the novel. The narrative is told through two alternating perspectives, that of Toby and that of Ren, a young former female member of the sect later turned stripper. The novel jumps temporally between the time before the apocalyptic plague unleashed by Crake (chronicled in the first novel, *Oryx and Crake*) and the time of survival afterward. The place in time is marked periodically by two mechanisms: a year number, with Year Twenty-Five noted to be “The Year of the Flood” (the year of the pandemic), and a Feast Day referring to the 365 feast days celebrated by the Gardeners. Furthermore, and most
notably here, each section titled by a Feast Day begins with a sermon given by Adam One to expound the lessons of the occasion within the rhetorical framework of the sect. He closes the sermon by inviting the Gardeners to sing one of the many hymns Atwood includes in the novel, such as the one that opens this chapter. Adam One's remarks, along with the theme of the Feast Day and the lyrics of the hymn, set the tone for the section of narrative to come—foreshadowing the obstacles to be faced by the characters or the paths they can choose to follow.

Adam One is the forecaster of doom, but also the beacon of hope. His sermons to the group describe the horrors of the world and the cleansing disaster to come, but they end with a life-affirming call to joy and praise: “Let us sing.” Like other prophets, Adam One's teachings carry on with or without his presence. As the pandemic wipes out the majority of human life around the world, God’s Gardeners are likewise separated and scattered. Their hope as survivors, both as individuals and for a possible reuniting of their community, largely depends on the ideological and pragmatic lessons imparted to them by Adam One and the other Adams and Eves under his guidance.

Even after the devastating plague unleashed by Crake, Adam One does not waver from the interpretation of the world he has been passing on continuously to the Gardeners. In his post-plague sermon titled “Of Persecution,” he speaks of the martyrdom – the near extinction – of the human species, in the context of other species that have “been wiped from the face of God’s Planet” as a result of mankind’s presence on the earth.

What is it about our own Species that leaves us so vulnerable to the impulse to violence? Why are we so addicted to the shedding of blood?
Whenever we are tempted to become puffed up, and to see ourselves as superior to all other Animals, we should reflect on our own brutal history.

Take comfort in the thought that this history will soon be swept away by the Waterless Flood. Nothing will remain of the Exfernal World but decaying wood and rusting metal implements; and over these the Kudzu and other vines will climb; and Birds and Animals will nest in them, as we are told in the Human Words of God: “They shall be left together unto the Fowls of the mountains, and to the Beasts of the Earth; and the Fowls shall summer upon them, and all the Beasts of the Earth shall winter upon them.” For all works of Man will be as words written on water. (Atwood, *Year 312*)

His reason for maintaining the flame of hope is that it is hope not for humanity as a privileged, superior part of the world order, but rather hope for the survival of the world as a whole—the survival of Nature. Humankind’s hope (or doom) depends on their ability (or inability) to live within the ecosystem, not above it.

Furthermore, as shown by the day-to-day activities of the Gardeners, Adam One leads them not only to belief but to action, combining ideology, speech and acts in a manner that exemplifies the definition of Action that Arendt so strongly proposes. It is this powerful combination of the spiritual and the pragmatic that keeps the Gardeners alive amid a sea of death. Adam One does not choose between the metaphysical and the material. He guides his small portion of the scattered Gardeners in word and deed, leading them from hiding place to hiding place, retaining all the while the refrain of
optimism: “with Grace we will prevail. We cannot sing, for fear of being overheard, but: Let us whisper” (Atwood, Year 313).

Toby, on the other hand, does not share the steadfast faith of Adam One. She is wary of hope, of being lured by the “siren mirage” of possibility. Toby recognizes the dangerous side to hope I discussed in Chapter Three as a back door to despair. As she thinks to herself while trying to survive on her own after the pandemic, “she wouldn’t be the first person in history to have been destroyed by the overly optimistic projections of her own mind” (165). While Adam One manages to balance the practical with the spiritual, Toby’s method of survival – and thus her method of leadership – focuses primarily on the pragmatic. Even her ‘conversion’ to the Gardeners was a matter of necessity and circumstance, not ideology or choice (43). As an Incidental Leader Toby represents the glimmer of hope that lies in the will for self-preservation. She does not necessarily know why, or for what, but she will stay alive. Unlike Adam One, Atwood portrays Toby as a character closer to the average person; she is not the prophet, but rather the everywoman. She is vulnerable and occasionally slips down the dark path to despair.

Toby survives the Waterless Flood because she was sealed away under an alias in a high-tech spa where she continues to live, using the skills she learned as an Eve with the Gardeners to make her solitary live sustainable. At times, however, Toby gives in to pressures of isolation, to the memory of those who are now absent and to the loneliness of having to cover of the mirrors after “being startled by her own shape as it flitted from one frame to the next.” She recognizes in herself the slow descent into Fallowness that she has witnessed in others: “Who lives here?’ she says out loud. Not me, she thinks.
This thing I’m doing can hardly be called living. Instead I’m lying dormant, like a bacterium in a glacier. Getting time over with. That’s all” (Atwood, *Year 95*).

Unlike the Fallow, however, Toby’s static state is only so on the surface. Underneath, she bubbles with emotion, questioning and potential action.

She spends the rest of the morning sitting in a kind of stupor.

Once, this would have been meditation, but she can hardly call it that now. Paralyzing rage can still take hold of her, it seems: impossible to know when it will strike. It begins as disbelief and ends in sorrow, but in between those two phases her whole body shakes with anger. Anger at whom, at what? Why has she been saved alive? Out of the countless millions. Why not someone younger, someone with more optimism and fresher cells? She ought to trust that she’s here for a reason – to bear witness, to transmit a message, to salvage at least something from the general wreck. She ought to trust, but she can’t. (95)

Like a great many survivors, Toby’s despair rises in part from her inability to discern the reason for her survival and her related underestimation of the value of her own life in a greater context (or in comparison to other, seemingly more worthy lives). She doesn’t share the certainty in her own strengths that allows Ish to write his list of reasons for survival in *Earth Abides*.

Unlike many other survivors, though, Toby does not give in to that despair. The hope that lies in her strong impulse to keep trudging along, regardless of reason or environment, allows her to stand up and keep moving: “It’s wrong to give so much time over to mourning, she tells herself. Mourning and brooding. There’s nothing to be
accomplished by it” (Atwood, Year 96). Ultimately Toby’s brand of hope is tied to her discomfort with the metaphysical, which allows her to focus on the material concerns that stave off spiritual despair. She keeps up with the mnemonic rituals of the sect, such as keeping track of the Feast Days, from habit and as a way to keep her up her mental acuity—not primarily from a sense of devotion or nostalgia. The timekeeping practice is in keeping with Adam One’s warnings about entering too deeply into metaphysical states: “On your Meditations, do not travel so far on your inner journeys that you enter the Timeless before it is time. In your Fallow states, do not descend to a level that is too deep for any resurgence, or the Night will come in which all hours are the same to you, and then there will be no Hope” (163). As I describe in the examples from Chapter Two, a loss of the sense of time is an indicator of a lost trajectory and, ultimately, the fall into despair.

Despite Toby’s reluctance to nurture the glimmer of hope in a reunion with her former Gardener companions, including Zeb, circumstances continue to encourage that hope when her old companions slowly reappear, starting with the younger Gardeners who look to her leadership again for survival. As is typical for Toby’s life experience, that requited hope comes intermingled with violence and loss. In her role as an Incidental Leader thrust into circumstances she does not seek, Toby deals with the challenges of the present with hardness, pragmatism and efficiency because she must. Young Ren describes Toby as an unlikely source of security, a certain refuge in times of trouble: “You wouldn’t think it would be Toby – she was so tough and hard – but if you’re drowning, a soft squasy thing is no good to hold on to. You need something solid” (8).
Another survivor leader that likewise fills the role of unlikely hero and Incidental Leader is the jaded, retired activist Theo Faron in the 2006 film *Children of Men*, adapted from P.D. James’ 1992 novel. The story is set in 2027, a dystopian near-future marked by worldwide infertility that threatens to bring humankind to the brink of extinction. Emotionally destroyed by the death of his son in an influenza pandemic decades earlier, Theo’s demeanor at the beginning of the film matches the gray shades and decaying city landscapes that pervade the cinematography. He appears to move apathetically and unfeelingly through the horrors of his surroundings, only reacting with urgency when physically rocked by a nearby explosion. Theo’s losses have turned him into the opposite of an activist; he is suspicious of faith, cynical about ideology, and ultimately uninterested in the unveiling of the future.

Nevertheless, Theo is chosen by his estranged wife Julian—who reacted to the loss of their child with increased activism—to help her lead a rescue operation that could have stakes as high as the survival of the human species. At first Theo is not told of the significance of his task, only that he must use his contacts to acquire transit papers for a refugee (Kee) who must then be accompanied to the coast. He agrees to the mission only in exchange for a large sum of money. The subsequent events of the story, however, remove Julian (the briefly-present Leader of Conviction) from the equation and leave the blundering Theo as Kee’s only hope.

The character of Theo is anything but hopeful. He is attacked by despair and loss at every turn. He is anything but convicted. Theo’s chief survival mechanism is the rejection of any sort of faith or trust. He begins the film in a role closer to that of the Fallow: mired in the past, unwilling to engage with what surrounds him in the present,
simply drifting into the future without agency or desire. The primary motivation of this kind of disengagement is the avoidance of crushing fear, loneliness and doubt. If Theo is sure about anything, it’s that the future will bring about more pain. He can only prepare for it by dulling himself against the outside world.

Somehow this unlikely protagonist, step by agonizing step, is able to navigate with his charges through the dangers that his new responsibility brings with it. Eventually Kee reveals that she is the first pregnant woman in decades: a young, rough, ragged girl who carries within her the glimmer of hope whose impending delivery represents a hope of rebirth for humankind. While his gruff, cynical demeanor remains, somehow Theo is able to shake himself into action, stumbling through crisis after crisis, including the birth of the baby, until he and Kee are able to reach the place of hope—a ship of scientists who call themselves “The Human Project.” Like Toby, Theo is the type of person who manages to survive, and to secure the survival of others, merely by plodding forward stubbornly and refusing to die. To the end he is afraid to hope, yet paradoxically pushes into the future even to the point of martyrdom, dying for a cause in which he was never sure he believed. Like Theo, Toby is not exactly the picture of glowing optimism, but she is likewise the representation of quiet motion: she is the survivor that never trusts in an end to the race but nevertheless continues resolutely down the path into a fearful, uncertain future.

If Toby is an unlikely source of leadership and survivalism, Zeb is the first to come to mind. Among the Gardener leaders, Zeb is the cool parent, the fun one, the one the children call the “Mad Adam” (a moniker he later transfers to the secret online presence of his environmental activism group, MaddAddam). All of the Adams and Eves
have particular skills meant to aid in their survival of and after the Waterless Flood, but Zeb is a survivalist by trade. He is the one to trust, because he is the one known for doing what needs to be done without hesitation or guilt. Zeb projects fearlessness near the point of recklessness. He teaches the survival skills that no one relishes teaching or learning, but that ultimately address the line between life and death: for example, Urban Bloodshed Limitation, which really is a class on combat and self-defense for the occasions on which the otherwise staunchly non-violent Gardeners may need to deal with physical threats.

Zeb is the quintessential, consummate survivalist: the one who is closest to his best self when he is in dire, extreme circumstances. He doesn’t face crises because he must—he seeks them out with relish and vanquishes them with expertise and aplomb. In going through a list of possible rescuers while trapped in her locked room at the strip club after the plague, Ren thinks to herself that Zeb would “try to rescue [her] because it would be a challenge” (Atwood, Year 58).

As the two most dominant leaders in the sect, Adam One and Zeb have several characteristics in common. Zeb does not only inspire confidence; he, like The Prophet, is the type of leader who inspires worship (66), particularly from those who do not possess a wealth of survival skills themselves. The weakest survivors flock to the Skilled Leader, for good or evil, fervently and in droves. Having Zeb on your side is “like having your own private tiger: tame to you, savage to everyone else” (74). Furthermore, the lessons that Ren and Toby call to mind most often, including the creeds they repeat to themselves, come almost exclusively from the words of Adam One or Zeb. The powerful resonance of their presence continues to affect the choices and subsequent actions of their companions, even when they are nowhere to be found.
Paradoxically, both the success and the severing of their joint leadership really spring from their differences. Like Adam One, Zeb takes an active, primarily optimistic approach toward the future. It is not, however, based principally on theoretical projections or faith in the unveiling of ideology. He charges into the future armed with knowledge, courage, strength, faith in his own instincts, humor to combat despair and a refusal to be daunted by possible threat or risk. The Skilled Leader is not trapped by the past because he leaves the past behind, taking only the lessons he has learned that can serve him to address problems in the present or that he can store away in readiness for any future contingency.

Zeb projects the image of strength and leadership both physically and socially. As Ren describes, one could tell Zeb was one of the leading Adams, a leader among leaders; it was a fact you could infer from “the way the others looked up to him.” While Adam One comes off as a sage, gentle and comforting, Zeb’s appearance is frightening yet attractive: “He was large and solid, with a biker’s beard and long hair…and a leathery face, and eyebrows like a barbed-wire fence. He looked as if he ought to have a silver tooth and a tattoo, but he didn’t. He was strong as a bouncer, and he had the same menacing but genial expression, as if he’d break your neck if necessary, but not for fun” (Atwood, Year 64). One of Zeb’s strongest skills as a leader, however, is charisma. He is a favorite among the Gardener children, an ideal infiltrator when a con is needed to help the Gardeners navigate their dangerous existence within the boundaries of the “Exfernal” world. Zeb knows how to fight, but he also knows how to deal with hardship by joking it away.
The ability to break up looming clouds of despair with humor is one of the trademarks of Zeb’s persona as a leader and possibly his greatest tool against the paralyzing fear or doubt that lead others to struggle against taking action when the present is mired with debilitating circumstances. In fact, the humorous ditty for which others most remember Zeb is an ever-changing variation lightly deriding the perils of apathy. In one version of the song from Toby’s recollections, Zeb strolls along, singing:

Nobody gives a snot,

Nobody gives a snot,

That is why we’re on the fucking spot,

Cause nobody gives a snot! (Atwood, Year 242)

Zeb’s lighthearted approach to turmoil, while a proven, effective method of emotional survival and a key reason for his popularity as an Adam, is not just a harmless diversion. As the story progresses, Zeb’s irony-laced humor reveals an underlying element of danger, a “[l]urking insubordination” that foreshadows a rift in the Gardeners rooted precisely in the differing leadership positions of Adam One and Zeb.

The importance of Zeb’s use of humor lies in part in its role as a way of maintaining some distance from the weight of doctrine. The depth of his faith in the Gardener beliefs is never entirely clear, but despite (or perhaps because of) his ability to hold himself somewhat apart from the sect’s ideology he is one of its most actively effective protectors and evangelists in the outside world. Instead of dwelling on the intricacies of ideology, Zeb acts on it. He chooses the path that makes sense to him and follows it without being paralyzed by the possible consequences. While Adam One is
also a strong proponent of acting on one’s belief system, the difference between his form of action and Zeb’s is one of method and degree.

In line with his daring, the more violent nature of his skill-set and his willingness to interact more directly with the outside world, Zeb ultimately clashes with Adam One for proposing more radical means to secure the Gardener’s position in the “Exfern World”. If Adam One in the voice that fulfills the Speech requirement of Arendt’s Action, Zeb is the body that carries it out. For example, Zeb acts as if he is the expendable one of the two; he braves the security risks of traveling through the dangerous “pleebland” neighborhoods to attend the biannual Gardener conventions. This practice reveals the tenuousness of their shared leadership:

In theory the Gardener fellowship had no overall head, but in practice its leader was Adam One, revered founder and guru. The soft hammer of his word carried a lot of weight at the Gardener conventions, and since he was rarely there to use that hammer himself, Zeb wielded it for him. Which must be a temptation: what if Zeb were to jettison Adam One’s decrees and substitute his own? By such methods had regimes been changed and emperors toppled. (Atwood, Year 243)

Ultimately Zeb disagrees with Adam One’s staunch commitment to absolute pacifism, thus splintering the group into two factions. The group following Zeb turns into the more militant MaddAddam, an activist cell managed through the well-hidden back door of an online game called Extinctathon (and featured prominently in Oryx and Crake). Adam One believes that hope lies in the inevitable redemption of the world. The Gardeners’ task is to wait on the culling and rebirth, preparing themselves to ride it out and take part
in the earth’s rehabilitation. Zeb believes instead in the creation, or the construction of one’s own hope – in taking action to bring the world to task and force the arrival of the change that they await.

While the potential of the more forceful, more immediate actions of a Skilled Leader such as Zeb are very effective in catapulting the leader and his followers into the future, without pausing for long in the contemplation of the present, the fate of MaddAddam in the novel shows the method’s accompanying weakness. Because of his inherent magnetism and the power of his forward trajectory, he is the ideal vehicle for the carrying out of Crake’s ultimate vision. By the time Zeb realizes that his own subversive efforts to unite fellow activists have been hijacked into a larger, more sinister plan that he did not foresee, it is too late to stop MaddAddam’s momentum. The well-meaning former Gardeners are drafted into Crake’s research team and absorbed into the very mechanism that eventually births the Waterless Flood for which they had so long prepared. Zeb and the other MaddAddam members were trying to “destroy the infrastructure” of their society through small acts of “bioform resistance” so that “the planet could repair itself. Before it was too late and everything went extinct.” However, “Zeb didn’t believe in killing people, not as such. He just wanted them to stop wasting everything and fucking up” (Atwood, Year 333). The MaddAddam group and the Zeb character in Atwood’s novel might be exhilarating, attractive examples of action, but she ultimately seems to be using them to show that ruthlessly confronting the flaws of the present and charging headlong into the future comes with its own wealth of pitfalls.

Through Zeb, Toby and Adam One, Atwood creates a multidimensional picture of leadership attributes that appear frequently in fictions of destruction. Separating those
characteristics into three separate characters allows us to more easily get at the relationship between the leadership role in survival situations and the modern dilemmas of temporality and risk. However, other leader characters in disaster narratives are not always so easily categorized. One very interesting and recently very popular example is Rick Grimes, the former sheriff from Robert Kirkman’s comic book series *The Walking Dead* and the cable television series of the same name. At different points throughout the post-apocalyptic zombie survival story Rick displays characteristics of all three of the leaders I describe above.

At first glance, it may appear that Rick is a perfect example of a Skilled Leader. As a law enforcement figure, he possesses the skills necessary to survive himself and to ensure the survival of others. Rick is able to use a wide range of weapons, improvise solutions to threatening situations, strategize defensive and offensive positions against attackers, and seek out appropriate means of shelter and provision. Like Zeb, his strengths are both physical and social. Rick clings to the trappings of his former role by continuing to wear his sheriff’s uniform. While purely ornamental in the post-disaster world, which appears to be free of any social infrastructure or government, the uniform emphasizes his most important skill: the ability to convey and exert authority. Rick’s appearance conveys the opposite of Zeb’s. He is not a renegade, or an outlaw, but rather a lawman and a conformer. They do, however, share the paradoxical air of danger and gentleness that comes with the blending of strength and charisma.

The place where Rick most significantly departs from the mold of Skilled Leader represented by Zeb is his recurring self-doubt, an agonizing weight that only grows with every experience he and his group survive. The self-questioning that prevents Rick from
reaching Zeb’s free-spirited reckless drive to act comes at least in part from the place where the former’s leadership position overlaps instead with that of the Leader of Conviction and the Incidental Leader. Like Adam One, Rick is a Leader of Conviction in the sense that he fills the role of moral compass for his group of survivors. He is not a spiritual figure, but as a former sheriff he does stand in place of the now-defunct societal mechanism for the enforcement of ethical norms. Adam One shepherds his followers through a world of corruption and chaos, but his environment is a paradise compared to the never-ending brutality of the reality Rick and his group face daily. Like McCarthy’s novel, Kirkman’s comic goes to the extreme reaches of despair, immersing the reader in a mire of brutality, violence, betrayal and the perversion of what we may think is our essential ‘humanity’.

The balance of despair and hope in the zombie narrative is certainly tilted toward the former. The Walking Dead, like The Road, is a prime example of the dark, terror-filled mode in which several post-9/11 disaster fictions operate. It contrasts, for example, with the somewhat more generous portrayal of human behavior in Stewart’s 1949 novel, Earth Abides. For example, in the opening pages Ish learns the details of mankind’s response to the disaster in a discarded newspaper:

Civilization, the human race—at least, it seemed to have gone down gallantly. Many people were reported as escaping from the cities, but those remaining had suffered, as far as he could make out from the newspaper a week old, no disgraceful panic. Civilization had retreated, but it had carried its wounded along, and had faced the foe. Doctors and nurses had stayed at their posts, and thousands more had enlisted as
helpers. Whole areas of cities had been designated as hospital zones and points of concentration. All ordinary business had ceased, but food was still handled on an emergency basis. Even with a third of the population dead, telephone service along with water, light, and power still remained in most cities. (Stewart 15)

Stewart paints what is certainly a picture of admirable poise in the face of absolute catastrophe. At the dawn of the atomic threat, writing under the cloud of nuclear disaster civil defense preparations in the United States, Stewart chooses a scenario in which “civilization” steps up to the challenge of disaster. The technological and social structures of society are resilient to (and after) the end and humankind goes out “gallantly,” without “disgraceful panic” (15).

More than a half-century later, Kirkman’s civilization is anything but civilized in the face of terror. He writes with the not uncommon view that in the face of chaos, death and possible extinction, people will, in general, not respond gallantly. In The Walking Dead, conventions and morality are trampled beneath the feet of panic, social and technological structures collapse and the masses are left to sink or swim as individuals, scratching and clawing their way to unlikely survival. Even amidst the horror that pervades the zombie apocalypse narrative at every turn, somehow—even in this decidedly pessimistic view of human nature—one can still spot that faint but sturdy glimmer. That glimmer is the belief, no matter how foolish, no matter what evidence to the contrary, that a very few survivors cling to: the belief that there is some kind of vaguely-defined moral framework for ‘humanity’ they can find buried beneath all the
muck, that they must still try to live and do so with some sort of morality, no matter how warped.

Chief among these characters is Rick. He is a Leader of Conviction because he still believes in a kind of justice and sense of right. But that position becomes more and more fraught because he is also an Incidental Leader—a man caught in impossible circumstances with an impossible job only because there is no one better to do it. At various points in the narrative, those conflicting aspects of his role bring his leadership into question, for himself and the group. One of these crucial junctions follows a horrific double murder committed by a former prison inmate they have in their midst. Upon discovering the man’s guilt, Rick flies into a rage and beats him to the brink of death. In Issue 17, a subsequent argument reveals the frictions created by the shifting of ethical frameworks.
As he does at various points in the story, Rick takes what could be seen as a dictatorial position in the group. He insists that unlike other villainous power-mongers who take advantage of disaster to rule over others, he makes decisions singly as a kind of sacrifice—taking on the necessary choices that no one else can stomach.
A few frames later Rick delivers the verdict, fittingly while displaying the blood on his hands.

As the days pass and Rick is involved in other violent episodes seemingly necessitated by urgent circumstances, the members of the group begin to have some doubts about Rick’s capacity to maintain a balanced mental status—and therefore a mindset clear enough for decision-making.

In Issue 24, Dale informs Rick that that group has voted to remove him from leadership and put group decisions in the hands of a committee. Rick claims to be glad to shed the role he never asked for (as an Incidental Leader), but nevertheless engages in another argument about the changing circumstances. He counters a fellow survivor’s
argument that “we can’t just ignore the rules” and that “we’ve got to retain our humanity” by explaining the newly emerging definitions of “what’s right” (Kirkman, *Compendium* n.p.). Rick contextualizes the changing moral environment by challenging the group’s assumptions about the unlikelihood of any possible rescue from their situation and the necessity of adapting to their current circumstances.

Rick recalls the previously cited episode, when he justified the capital punishment of the child murderer with the pronouncement “You kill? You die.” At this later point he decides that it “was probably the most naïve thing I’ve ever said. The fact is—in most cases, now, the way things are—you kill—you live” (Kirkman, *Compendium* n.p.)

With contrasting images of the group’s children and the grisly zombies at their gates in the background behind Rick’s words, he finishes his speech in what is perhaps the most pivotal, representative, and precedent-setting moment in the series thus far:
WE ARE, RICK. THAT'S WHAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. WE ARE TRYING TO REESTABLISH LIFE—AS IT WAS. THAT'S OUR GOAL.

WE DON'T WANT TO BECOME SAVAGES THOSE WHAT YOU DON'T GET.

IT'S OBVIOUS NOW THAT I'M THE ONLY SANE ONE HERE. WE ALREADY ARE SAVAGES, TYRESE.

YOU ESPECIALLY!

THE SECOND WE PUT A BULLET IN THE HEAD OF ONE OF THESE UNDEAD MONSTERS—THE MOMENT ONE OF US DROVE A HAMMER INTO ONE OF THEIR FACES—OR CUT A HEAD OFF.

WE BECAME WHAT WE ARE.

AND THAT'S JUST IT. THAT'S WHAT THIS COMES DOWN TO. YOU PEOPLE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE ARE.

WE'RE SURROUNDED BY THE DEAD.

WE'RE AMONG THEM—AND WHEN WE FINALLY GIVE UP WE BECOME THEM! WE'RE LIVING ON BORROWED TIME HERE. EVERY MINUTE OF OUR LIFE A MINUTE WE STEAL FROM THEM!

YOU SEE THEM OUT THERE. YOU KNOW THAT WHEN WE DIE—WE BECOME THEM. YOU THINK WE HIDE BEHIND WALLS TO PROTECT US FROM THE WALKING DEAD?

DON'T YOU GET IT?
This final statement in Issue 24, certainly designed to stick in the mind of the reader as a landmark (if not the landmark) statement of the story, hinges both from the survivors’ physical condition as infected beings inescapably doomed to become the monsters they fight and from their identity as survivors in appearance only (Kirkman, *Compendium* n.p.). Although they live on, the people they were did not survive. Those people are dead, seemingly replaced by monsters that will do anything to meet their own needs and agendas.

Rick is able to continue as leader because he can live with this realization and evolve, however painfully, into the enforcer of the new rules that govern their existence. Although there are several leader figures who come and go in *The Walking Dead*—Rick is the only constant. He is an Incidental Leader, but one who possesses the capabilities of a Skilled Leader and the magnetism and drive of a Leader of Conviction. No matter how much they question, fear or despise him, those around Rick will always choose to follow
him because of those three facets of his leadership persona: his fallibility (which paradoxically increases their trust, perhaps through his relatability), his willingness and ability to do what it takes to stay alive (thus securing their own means of survival), and his unfailing return to the belief, despite the steadily increasing horrors of the narrative, that there is a possible end to their journey (he hopes when they cannot).

Like Kirkman, Cormac McCarthy goes to great lengths descriptively to create a landscape of horror as the backdrop for the fraught journey of his characters in *The Road*. The unnamed father and son trudge through a post-apocalyptic world that is unchangingly painted in shades of ash and darkness. The author emphasizes this point by employing a redundancy of descriptive language, rarely straying from constantly repeated words of starkness: “gray,” “blackness,” “darkness,” “dead,” “ash.” Intermittently the pair comes across scenes of terrible carnage that have become a normal part of their post-disaster reality. It is not so rare for the two to walk up to “gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field-dressed and hauled away,” or “a frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes” (McCarthy 90).

It is in this landscape of horror that the man takes up his role as leader of their fragile company of two. Like Rick in *The Walking Dead*, the man is a more complex combination of the three leadership roles. Unlike Rick, who we know was formerly a sheriff, there is no mention of the man's occupation in his former life—and therefore no evidence of previous experience to prepare him for a survival situation. The only name we get for him is “Papa”, which describes the only occupation of his that continues to matter. His lack of identity makes him into an ordinary man—someone who could be
anyone. The man can be described as an Incidental Leader who becomes a Skilled Leader by necessity and inadvertently displays traits of the Leader of Conviction.

Like many survivor heroes, including the foundational Crusoe, the man is marked both by a tragic fallibility and a continuous oscillation between hope and despair. At several moments he reveals his awareness of his own inevitable death, a near-entity that follows close on their heels. From the beginning of the story, the man admits that “[t]here was a good chance they would die... and that would be that” (McCarthy 29). He does not always know what course to take and sometimes makes ethically questionable decisions out of fear. The man is a reflection of the statement that could very well be the motto of their world: “Nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave” (169). The phrase reveals the impetus to press forward and live, even in the absence of any real hope of improved circumstances.

The man's often impossibly tenacious will to live is a trait shared by Incidental Leaders such as Toby. That tenacity, along with the ability to adapt to drastically changed circumstances, are central coping mechanisms of an Incidental Leader. Other traits of this type of leadership he shares are a tendency to fall into recollections of the past (the dangers of which are discussed in Chapter Three) and a reluctance or inability to leave it behind that is symptomatic of the violent interruption of the former life (as portrayed in Chapter Two), along with the gift (or curse) at the heart of many a survival tale: luck.

Like Toby, the man has the impulse to continue trudging forward. Whether at night or during the day, the father and son are traveling in a “blackness without depth or dimension” that is as directionless and purposeless as their existence. Although there is “nowhere to go,” the man knows that stasis is death, metaphorically because of the
implication of the complete loss of belief in a future and literally because of the freezing temperatures. He can’t see in the darkness, but says “We’ve got to move… We can’t just lie here” (McCarthy 67). Even on his deathbed the man tries to bequeath his drive to live, wheezing out instructions for his son: “You need to go on… You need to keep going. You don’t know what might be down the road.” The uncertainty of the path ahead is often precisely the reason for a person’s immobility, but for the man this risk is paradoxically a motivation for continued movement. He explains away the insecurity by claiming that they possess a special endowment of luck: “We were always lucky. You’ll be lucky again. You’ll see. Just go. It’s all right” (278).

As the reader well knows, it’s not all right at all. In fact, the world only gets more wrong and there is no indication that things will be all right ever again. The road is directionless, but (as in The Walking Dead) also without a visible end. In that situation, luck is a boon, but not enough to ensure survival; what is needed on a daily basis is self-sufficiency, survival instincts and the ability to take the lessons that are valuable from the past world (rather than merely dwelling in its memory) while successfully adapting to the new. These are traits more characteristic of a Skilled Leader--which is exactly what the man must become in order to protect his child, and to that end, himself. From the point of the disaster, the man reacts quickly and pragmatically by beginning to fill the bathtub with water. He improvises solutions to every block in their path, from fixing wheels (16) and making bullets (149) to healing wounds (266) and foraging for food both in the wild and in abandoned structures. He reacts to fear and danger not with paralysis, but with initiative and resourcefulness, even when he falls into periods of pessimism (which, considering the circumstances, may actually be realism). The man generally has a keen
instinct for impending threats, though this sense of judgment seems to become increasingly questionable as the plot progresses and his physical condition worsens. The father's diminishing survival skills open a dangerous gap that the boy tentatively begins to fill. The boy's efforts to step up as his father's successor reflect his role as a light of hope in the darkening gaze of the man.

While the imagery of darkness is pervasive, several spiritual moments tenuously glint through the bleakness. These moments and the frail hope they represent are almost always connected to the child, who several times is described as the sole source of hope for the man and his reason to stay alive. As the mother claims before choosing death, the only motivation that can make one endure the horrors of survival is not some kind of heroic stand (for “there is no stand to take”), but rather the love for another person. “The one thing I can tell you is that you won’t survive for yourself,” she tells the man. “A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost” (McCarthy 57). The father knows very well that “the boy was all that stood between him and death” (29). These observations, together with the musing and actions of the man regarding the fate of his son, show that the moral universe of the fathers fits in a small package. He is able to act because his world revolves in a tight circle around his son, who has become a stand-in for what has been lost, what cannot be lost, what might be regained, even God himself: “He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5).

The post-disaster world of The Road appears to be a godless one. There is no moral imperative other than survival and no institutions left to enforce another alternative. Although we do not know his past, the man does not appear to be a spiritual
leader of any sort, such as Adam One. However, the man is also a Leader of Conviction through his fervent worship at the only altar he knows. Fatherhood is his religion and the boy is the light that leads his path. McCarthy peppers the calmer contemplations of the man with religious imagery that emphasizes the spiritual dimension of his devotion to the child, including images of ritual, prayer and holiness. The man continues to believe that his role as the child’s protector is a task for which he was been appointed by God (McCarthy 77). He endows the son with the glow of the sacred, likening his fair-haired head as a “Golden chalice, good to house a god” (75). Although the two are together in the wasteland, both dying slowly in the filth and ash, the man often sees the son through this sacred haze, “standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (273). The father knows he is descending closer to a final darkness; however, in this scene he reverses the positions of death as utopia and life as dystopia. In his (prophetic?) vision the road temporarily becomes once more a path of hope, his son standing firmly on it as the tabernacle at which he worships.

Furthermore, as with Toby’s recitation of the special calendar days and Gardener saints in the aftermath of the plague, ritual shows up in The Road as a tool vital to emotional survival and necessary to memory. In one such scene, the man gazes at a forest fire that blazes with a color that “moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember,” he tells himself (31). The man tries to breathe life into a forgotten faith—the fire of hope he must somehow carry and protect, then pass on to the boy. The theme of passing on that hope is prevalent throughout, appearing perhaps most touchingly in moments of simple fatherhood, such as drying his son’s hair by the fire:

“All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing
else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (McCarthy 74). Like a prophet, the father is responsible for the anointing of the one who will carry “the word” into the future.

The transfer of power between the man and the boy is a symbolic shift from the past into the future, however short that future might be. The boy carries with him the fire of possibility bequeathed him by the father, who—like a true Leader of Conviction—also left him imprinted with lessons from language and storytelling to survival. The scenes in which the boy increasingly exerts his autonomy from the father align the novel with a rich tradition of child empowerment in disaster fiction. If the broken and blocked roads in stories of destruction signal the demise of the enlightenment promise of modernity and the introduction of pessimism and risk into our imaginary of futurity, then the rise of the child, however fragile or fleeting, seems a tentative sign of the unextinguished human will to keep even the tiniest hope clutched tightly. That glimmer of hope is the belief that perhaps the ruins of the past hold within them the materials for creating a newer, better future in which the tragedy of modernity can perhaps become a tale of redemption.

In an essay on Hergé’s Tintin comic, Jean-Marie Apostolidès writes about the myth of the “superchild.” He explains that the superchild myth, while present in film and novels after World War I, had particular success after World War II, “leaving its most enduring mark on the generation of ‘68.” According to Apostolidès, the triumph of the superchild myth in this period is due to “[t]he considerable arrogance of this generation derived not only from its rejection of patriarchal values, but also from its symbolic victory over parents—two key motifs of the superchild myth” (45). With the events of the Second World War close at their heels, it is not so surprising that the children of the post-
war era would go on to reject the bloody history of the mid-twentieth century, and the generation which represented its perpetration.

In the case of the young adventurer Tintin, Apostolidès describes a child who is suspended in time, caught in a “frozen temporality.” He stays exactly the same “both physically and morally, from the beginning of his adventures to the end,” acting within a “spatial displacement” and “repeating the same scenario each time,” albeit in different settings. “Tintin’s life rolls along a circle that perpetually begins anew” (Apostolidès 47). According to Apostolidès, Tintin’s “refusal of temporality” reflects his escape from “the temporal dimension, or in other words, History.”

Never does he stop and ask himself about his genealogy, or does he worry much about his long-term future. Throughout his adventures, the spatial dimension prevails over the temporal one; the experience of the world is given to him through the diversity of places rather than through confrontation with time. Unlike his readers, Tintin escapes a confrontation with history—a confrontation that often proved traumatic for his readers, who had to face the twentieth century’s recurrent wars and genocides. Here lies the foundation of the myth of Tintin: in partaking of his adventures, we forget the vagaries of our own history. Through his capacity to absorb us in his adventures, the hero carries us with him to a world where time stands still. (48)

Many of the young survivors in post-1945 disaster fiction are similarly situated as variations on the “superchild.” While in some ways portrayed as children who, as supposedly physically and emotionally weaker beings, elicit the protective impulses of
the adult survivors, the youngsters of the post-apocalypse time and again show that their survival is not only not less sure than that of their parents, but in some cases even more so.

The survivor superchild I describe here bears a likeness to but also divergence from Apostolidès’s superchild. The survivor superchild, like Tintin, must reject History, including the fallen world of his parents. Unlike Hergé’s hero, however, the young survivor does not reject temporality wholesale and is not necessarily caught in a frozen state of temporal suspension. Instead, the power of the survivor superchild lies in his willingness to delve into present, learning to navigate and master the world of the ruins, and (instead of rolling in a circle, like Tintin) to confront and step forward into the future, accepting and even embracing the new order.

We can cull a formal example of this rejection from McCarthy’s choice to leave out many apostrophes and other traditional textual cues in *The Road*. From the story we know that the man has been practically the sole imparter of knowledge to the son born after the disaster. The father, as mentioned previously, is tasked with passing on certain aspects of the past world—such as language. However, that language is necessarily different for the son, who does not live in a world permeated by written language and textual media; for him language therefore exists primarily as a spoken, oral form of communication—a reality that can be seen as reflected in McCarthy’s rejection of textual norms. Divorcing language from its culturally-mediated regulations is also a move away from history in order to adapt to the circumstances of the present.

That division from what is treasured in the past by the parent and what is present for the child appears again when the latter questions of the act of storytelling—an act
widely accepted as a foundation of culture around the world. While the father in *The Road* habitually told stories to the son, presumably in an effort to impart comfort, companionship and a connection to the human community now absent, near the end of the story the boy rejects that basic act of history formation:

Do you want me to tell you a story?
No.
Why not?
The boy looked at him and looked away.
Why not?
Those stories are not true.
They don’t have to be true. They’re stories.
Yes. But in the stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people. (McCarthy 267-68)

The boy calls into question the presumed safety and immunity of the story space, instead branding not only the events of the story but the telling itself as an ethical act. He rejects the historically and educationally-reinforced protection of the imagination as an acceptable lie, demanding instead an adherence to truth that applies to all spaces, from reality, to stories, to dreams. When the father invites him to tell “a story about himself,” the son resists, claiming that stories are by nature happy and his stories are only about the reality of their present lives, which “is pretty bad” (268). This exchange displays the widening gulf between father and son, with the former escaping to imaginings or memories of past happiness and the latter’s only experience populated by the present reality of ash and violence.
Another prime example of the divide between the parent mired in the past and the utterly present survivor superchild is the intrepid pack of boys who run briefly through Philip K. Dick's 1963 short story “The Days of Perky Pat.” The story is set in a ruined, rubble-strewn version of Northern California that is spotted with huge craters inhabited by groups of “flukers,” the few remaining humans who view their survival as a fluke. The flukers live off of the charity of some mysterious other-worldly beings who drop care parcels into the “fluke-pits” using ships called careboys. Unfortunately for the survivors, their benefactors have little real knowledge or concern for the real needs of humans, such as a balanced diet. Instead the careboys drop massive quantities of random items, such as five thousand pounds of salt. The twist of the tale lies in the particular value the adult flukers place on the parts left over from the projectiles, or anything they can use to outfit not their own lodgings, but that of an elaborate, glorified dollhouse for a doll named Perky Pat. They spend the majority of their time and energy developing “layouts” for Perky Pat and using them to play role-playing games about her daily life: a very ordinary, quotidian existence modeled on the world that no longer exists for the flukers.

The childishness and futility of the adult’s obsession with Perky Pat is highlighted, interestingly, by a child: “Seated cross-legged with his whetstone, Timothy Schein, ten years old and aware of his many responsibilities, sharpened his knife, slowly and expertly. Meanwhile, disturbing him, his mother and father noisily quarreled with Mr. and Mrs. Morrison, on the far side of the partition. They were playing Perky Pat again. As usual” (Dick, “Perky” 268). Young Timothy’s bored, condescending vantage point of the adults’ game places him in the role of competence and seriousness, an aura of danger added by his expert sharpening of the knife. The parents are lowered to the
traditional role of the child as they “disturb” Timothy with their pointless arguments and inane activities.

“How many times today they have to play that dumb game?”

Timothy asked himself. Forever, I guess. He could see nothing in it, but his parents played on anyhow. And they weren’t the only ones; he knew from what other kids said, even from other fluke-pits, that their parents, too, played Perky Pat most of the day, and sometimes even on into the night.

His mother said loudly, “Perky Pat’s going to the grocery store and it’s got one of those electric eyes that opens the door. Look.” A pause.

“See, it opened for her, and now she’s inside.”

“She pushes a cart,” Timothy’s dad added, in support.

“No, she doesn’t,” Mrs. Morrison contradicted. “That’s wrong. She gives her list to the grocer and he fills it.”

...Now the voices rose in anger; another squabble had broken out.

As usual. (Dick, “Perky” 268)

Timothy’s repetition of the resigned phrase “As usual,” which the reader could easily supplement with an accompanying deep sigh and lengthy eye-roll, is his perception and subsequent rejection of the adult flukers’ state of temporal paralysis.

The parents live comfortably trapped in the re-enactment of their former lives, while their children prefer to sprint off to the hunt.

“Aw, cung to them,” Timothy said to himself, using the strongest word which he and his friends knew. What's a supermarket, anyhow? He
tested the blade of his knife—he had made it himself, originally, out of a heavy metal pan—and then hopped to his feet. …

Fred, also ten years old, answered. “Hi. Ready to go? I see you got that ol’ knife of yours sharpened; what do you think we’ll catch?”

“Not a do-cat,” Timothy said. “A lot better than that…”

“Your parents playing Perky Pat?”

“Yeah.”

Fred…glanced sideways at Timothy, and in an instant they had shared their mute disappointment regarding their parents. …

“How come your parents play it?” Timothy asked.

“Same reason yours do,” Fred said.

Hesitating, Timothy said. “Well, why? I don’t know why they do; I’m asking you, can’t you say?”

“It’s because—” Fred broke off. “Ask them. Come on; let’s get upstairs and start hunting.” His eyes shone. “Let’s see what we can catch and kill today.” (Dick, “Perky” 269)

Fred’s refusal to finish his sentence represents the children’s discomfort, impatience and even embarrassment with the parents’ nostalgia. Instead of engaging in speculations on the adults’ motivations, Fred rejects the mode of reflection and embraces the present day of action by hunting “today” with gusto. As was the case in the works I discussed in Chapter Three, Dick here creates a dichotomy that reinforces the negative possibility of nostalgia to chain survivors to the past, thereby preventing them from acting effectively in the present to construct a positive future.
Instead of directing their gaze toward a history that is lost forever, Timothy and Fred plant themselves firmly in the present and look out into the ruins with eyes shining. To them the rubble represents a world of adventure and possibility, the “thrilling initial sight of the expanse” a far-reaching glimpse into the horizon of the future. Heart pounding, Timothy reflects on why their exit into the landscape of dust and rocks “always overwhelmed him, the first instant of reaching the upstairs.” It thrills him “[b]ecause it was never the same. The dust, heavier today, had a darker gray color to it than before; it seemed denser, more mysterious” (Dick, “Perky” 269). Timothy revels in the acknowledgment of change where the adults find comfort in pretending that all has remained the same, sheltered in the illusion of routines like visits to the doctor or the grocery store. Even the dusty gray color of their new surroundings, ordinarily a grim symbol of starkness, boredom and death, holds mystery and variation to Timothy’s present, ready gaze.

The boys’ presentness translates beyond their vision to purposeful action, an energy of initiative evidenced by the hunt. As the careboys fly overhead, they speculate on how outraged their Martian benefactors would be if they knew their charity was going to supply Perky Pat, “this utterly wasteful, stupid purpose to which their goods were being put.” Rejecting his initial impulse to communicate their wants to the careboys, Timothy scoffs at the medium itself: “Acts, deed, could be done, conveying something...but not mere words, not mere signs” (270). To the children of disaster, “mere words” have lost their meaning. Significance is now present to them only in the realm of action that affects the world of the real. I will return to this point at greater length later in this chapter.
At the end of the story, Timothy’s family is exiled from their community, fittingly because of their acquisition of a doll that grows up—a frightful move into the future. Unfazed by the development, Timothy runs full of hope and excitement into the newness ahead, “peering to see what lay before them, the opportunities and possibilities. ‘I can’t wait,’ he yelled back at his father, and Norm Schein managed a faint, fatigued smile in answer” (Dick, “Perky” 290). Timothy’s joyous exclamation, paired with the father’s expression of resignation, is a glaring example of the contrasted pairing of hope and despair, characterized by opposing positions of action and stasis.

The ambivalence between possibility on the one hand and futility on the other is characteristic of a post-1945 imaginary that has taken in a quantity of horror once considered inconceivable, yet almost impossibly retains a glimmer of the optimism inherent in the rhetoric of modernization and enlightenment. In the post-atomic, post-World War imaginary, nihilism and despair in the face of a quickly-encroaching future reveal themselves through fictions that create the worlds we fear, forcing us to go through the imagined motions of surviving dystopian scenarios that can no longer be dismissed as merely the stuff of nightmares. The presence of despair in fictions of destruction is not surprising. What is more interesting, perhaps, is that persistent, unlikely glimmer of hope.

Despite the introduction of such frightening potential for darkness in our shared imaginary of the future, or maybe because of the impossibility of imagining its sheer magnitude, fictionalizations of disaster situations often disclose the lingering existence of hope in the human ability to overcome, to change, to adapt, to improve. This is the case in narratives from both the postwar decades and the post-9/11 period, though to different degrees. By the time we reach the 21st century narratives I discuss here, the beacon of
hope that appears for the survivors in *Alas, Babylon* has dimmed into the mere glimmer that appears intermittently in *The Road*. However, in both time nodes the very nature of the post-apocalyptic narrative includes the possibility of survival within the framework of disaster. One possible answer to that unlikely optimism is simply an issue of narrative structure: there can be no story without a protagonist, almost exclusively a human one. On another level, however, the glimmer of hope amongst despair discloses the persistence of such belief in the possibility of survival and even redemption deep within the cultural imaginary. That glimmer is tied to the liberating aspect of the post-apocalyptic: the appeal of disaster as a way to clear out the structures of modernity and the wasteland as a site for new beginnings. I discussed this at the end of Chapter Two in reference to a re-awakening of the frontier fantasy and its implications of openness and possibility.

The survivor superchild in post-disaster narratives is often the sole possessor of that rare glimmer. The child among the ruins shines forth, whether weakly or glaringly, in defiance of the sense of doom and hopelessness that engulfs their older companions. In *Alas, Babylon*, Pat Frank portrays children as more adaptable and far less emotionally fragile than the adults. Before the nuclear attacks break out, their father sends them, along with their mother, to their uncle's home in Fort Repose (a town less likely to be a tactical target than theirs). Even before the destruction of war, as the family says their goodbyes at the airport (perhaps forever), young Ben Franklin already shows his hardiness and perceptiveness in the face of uncertainty.
Ben looked up at [his father], his brown eyes troubled. When he spoke, his voice was intentionally low. “This is an evacuation, isn’t it, Dad?”

“Yes. …I hate to send you away but it’s necessary. ..You’ll have to be the man of the family for a while.”

“Don’t worry about us. We’ll be okay in Fort Repose. I’m worried about you.” The boy's eyes were filling. Ben Franklin was a child of the atomic age, and knowledgeable.

“I’ll be all right in the Hole.”

“Not if...Anyway, Dad, you don’t have to worry about us,” he repeated. (Frank 60-61)

Frank creates the young characters with the knowledge that while children had previously been known for their surprising wisdom and adaptability to their circumstances, something had fundamentally changed in the generation growing up after the fall of the atomic bombs that likewise triggered a shift in the imaginary of childhood.

For the children of the Nuclear Age (along with many others around the globe), being abruptly faced with the sheer vastness of our capacity for destruction and its potential imminence and suddenness did away with a certain innocence about the fate of humankind and consequently the way we conduct our lives in the wake of that new world order. While the events of the twentieth century, particularly the staggering violence of the World Wars, had already done much to damage the optimism surrounding our future in a modern, technological era at the turn of the century, proof of the massive, even global reach of possible destruction scenarios with the new weapons sent shockwaves
coursing worldwide. When the future is no longer certain in such a starkly real and possible sense, the present can become paralyzingly weighty, especially when supplemented with the guilt and horror of a very near and very terrible past. Here is where the human being must emerge, phoenix-like, from the ruins: a new being who is equipped with the daring, energy and hopefulness to function in the daunting new present regardless of the threats of the future while shunning the burden of history. That new being is the survivor superchild.

I would certainly not brand the grimmest of disaster fiction, such as *The Road* or *The Walking Dead*, as dominantly optimistic. The moniker “superchild” holds within it the flaw of a resonance with the indestructible “supers” that permeated culture since the Golden Age of comics. Children in survival narratives, particularly the ones I discuss here, are not guaranteed to have a bright future—if they have a future at all. Furthermore, if children become small glimmers of hope in a landscape of despair, their absence is a sign of an interrupted, impossible future for humankind, as with the epidemic of infertility in P.J. James’ *Children of Men* or the infamous, brutal scene from *The Road* in which a helpless baby becomes food for a group of cannibalistic villains. On the other hand, the birth of a child is a symbol of survival and resilience. In *Alas, Babylon*, the group’s physician rejoices at the birth of “the first live baby, full term,” especially in the midst of his usual duties tending to previously routine medical situations that become dire and hopeless. “…now we know that there’s going to be a human race, don’t we?” ‘I’d never really thought there might not be.’ ‘I had,’ Dan said quietly” (Frank 266). Children, especially born into the post-catastrophic world, are both symbolically and literally the carriers of humanity’s future.
Unlike the Tintin described by Apostolidès, many of the children in these survival stories are not self-sufficient and free of familial supervision. Ben Franklin and his sister Peyton still depend on their mother and uncle to provide them with basic resources and emotional reassurance. At times, however, it seems that the coddling is more for the benefit of the adults than the needs and desires of the children. The siblings both insist on being brought in as useful members of their new post-disaster family. They look for ways to contribute to the group’s survival and are frustrated with attempts to shield them from the harshness of their circumstances. The survivor superchild isn’t “super” because s/he will escape the widespread destruction that claimed the world of the past. The survivor superchild is such because the likelihood of death is indeed part of his or her reality, yet is somehow not a reason to escape but instead a challenge to overcome. To do so these children often transcend the boundaries of their traditional roles—a necessary evolution to survive in a world filled with dangers that transcend the traditional rules.

Later in Frank’s novel, when the adults ask Ben to look after his sister while they investigate a fly-over by an unknown aircraft, he protests: “Is this what I’m going to be—a professional baby-sitter?” Not only are the adults assuming that Ben cannot be useful outside in the dangers of the world, they are also overestimating the fragility of his younger sister in comparison to the grown-ups, as the following slip implies:

Dan said, “That poor girl.”

“Peyton?”

“No. Helen [her mother]. Uncertainty is the worst. She’d be better off if she knew Mark was dead.” (Frank 122)
While the children are concerned about the fate of their father, who was at the location of one of the heaviest atomic attacks, they deal with the uncertainty more stoically than their mother Helen.

After the babysitting comment, Ben’s uncle Randy appears to re-think his nephew’s role in the household and the extent to which he can survive the perils lurking at their door.

“[Randy] called Ben Franklin to the living room and Ben came in, his mother following. “Ben,” Randy said, “ever shoot a pistol?”

“Only once, on the range at Offutt.”

“What about a rifle?”

“I’ve shot a twenty-two. I’m pretty good with a twenty-two.”

“Okay,” Randy said, I’m going to give you what you’re good at.”

Randy proceeds to find a Remington pump for Ben while Helen, without surprise or protest, promises to find ammunition for her son. With that, Randy gives his blessing to his newly-armed nephew. “You load up your gun, Ben,” he said. “It’s yours now. Never point it at a man unless you intent to shoot him, and never shoot unless you mean to kill. You understand that?...Okay, Ben. You can babysit now” (Frank 123).

With that, Randy acknowledges that the sheltered place of children in the pre-nuclear society is no longer possible. None of the adults can say with any certainty that they will be around to protect and guide the two youngsters. The rifle is a pragmatic and symbolic step to hand the children the reins of their own survival and withdraws any illusions about the adults’ capacity to ensure their safety. Because of its power in signaling a decisive transition of the child suddenly into the world of adults, far before
the time many societies find comfortable and acceptable, the scene of the survivor child taking up a gun reappears commonly in disaster narratives.

Interestingly, while in Frank’s 1959 novel young Ben is handed a gun cheerfully “without surprise or protest” from his mother (70), this initiation by firearm into the world of conflict is much more fraught in more contemporary works. In *The Road*, the father has to force the gun on his reluctant son, who is most often portrayed in a state of extreme fear. His reluctance to take the gun, which is really a reluctance to commit the acts that firing a gun entails, is an example of the difficulty of the transition from the past (in which children are passive recipients of protection) and the new reality (in which children, like survivors of any age, must take action in order to protect their own future).

Unlike the boy in *The Road*, Carl in *The Walking Dead* embraces the chance to have a gun as a brand of honor and the process of learning how to fire it as exciting as a game. In Issue 5 of the comic the conflict is focused on the parents, with Rick trying to help his son face the present reality of constant danger (“I know he’s young, but just for safety’s sake, he’s going to be carrying his own gun from now on.”) and Lori, Carl’s mother, still clinging to previous categories of protector and protected (“He’s seven years old, for Christ’s sake! This is not a good idea, but I guess the end of the world means I no longer have a say in parenting my own son.”). Kirkman undermines the mother’s side of the argument by decisively shattering any remaining illusions of childhood (*Compendium*, n.p.).
The image of Carl saving his mother’s life is charged with visual indicators of the transition I describe. While the adult ‘protector’ crouches cowered, speechless with a face of fear, the small child stands in front facing the enemy in an upright posture, looking upward with an expression of determination. His weapon fills in the impotent void left by his mother’s silence with a blast of light and a loud “BLAM!”—a statement visually portrayed to be louder than any of her arguments that came before (Kirkman, *Compendium* n.p.).

These scenes from early issues of *The Walking Dead* portray Carl as a stronger survivor than the boy in *The Road*. As the comic series progresses, however, Carl’s confident transition from protected son to survivor superchild comes continually into question. In a much later and very critical scene, we can see a well-defined example of a superchild’s oscillation between frailty and strength which typifies the wrenching pain of a transition of power from parent to child, itself emblematic of tearing away dependencies on the past in order to allow the possibility of another, newer (although not necessarily better) reality.
The above scene from Issue 50 shows Carl’s attempt to release his father, who is near death, from his role as protector (Kirkman, Issue 50 n.p.). However, the tearful display of heroics is once again turned upside down just a few panels later:

Carl and the boy in McCarthy’s novel, emotionally so unlike the fearless boys in the post-war works by Frank and Dick, add a much-needed contour to the image of the survivor superchild.
As characters from 21st-century disaster narratives, their worlds are more horrific and their futures less certain than those of the child survivors in postwar novels. The increased darkness of the later stories’ themes and situations perhaps reflect realizations gained with the passage of time. The hope in the postwar years that humanity could learn from the suffering of the first half of the 20th century and prevent its recurrence in the future had been significantly dimmed by continued mass violence and the awareness of other major threats to human survival by the beginning of the 21st. Furthermore, the loss of the children’s faith in previous authority figures (such as parents) increases seemingly in concurrence with the failures of social, financial, spiritual and governmental structures that continues into today.

The strength of the survivor superchild is not simply a matter of the absence of fear or of running headlong and carefree into the ruins. The survivor superchild also knows that paralyzing terror, that despair that comes with absolute want, that difficulty in seeing any good in the future. However, as in the case of the leader types in the post-apocalyptic worlds, these particular children are emblems of the ability to transcend that fear, despair and lack and take steps forward. By the end of *The Road*, the timid boy holds the pistol close, refusing to relinquish it “no matter what” (McCarthy 283). Despite their fear and their awareness of both the bleakness of their existence and the near-impossibility of their future, they continue to survive where many adults crumble to dust. Perhaps one of their many lacks, that of a significant past, also means a smaller burden of regret and nostalgia. The absence of those backward-pulling ties allows for forward movement, just as world-destruction in one sense ‘liberates’ mankind from the burdens of modernity.
In *Alas, Babylon* it is the youngest child, Peyton, who provides the grown-ups with the comfort of nostalgia (on their end) with what to her was simple initiative. Randy and his wife Lib awaken with delight one day to the sounds of music and on seeking out its source discover that it’s emanating from an old-fashioned phonograph in Peyton's room.

...Over the rhythm, Lib whispered, “Where did you get it, Peyton? …”

“The attic. I went up the little ladder in the back hall. Mother will be furious. She told me never to go up there because the rungs were cracked and I might fall.”

...Randy said, “Why did you do it, Peyton?”

“I don’t know. I was lonely and there wasn’t anything else to do and I’d never been up there. You know how it is. When you’ve never been some place, you want to go.” (Frank 267)

Peyton’s sense of curiosity and initiative is undaunted by the difficulties of their survival thus far. She acts on her desires and deals with dilemmas without excessive introspection or fear—two of the chief culprits in the adults’ failure to act. Thanks to her resourcefulness, the group obtains other objects of need and comfort, such as kerosene lamps and razors. As her uncle says upon receiving the latter, “In this manner, Peyton became a heroine” (268).

Ben Franklin and Peyton, like Timothy in Dick’s story, are able to escape the paralyzing fear that pervades the post-disaster thanks to their willingness to inhabit the present fully. Like the adults, the survivor superchild is aware that the future is not a guarantee. The adults find this loss of innocence and faith in the future to be one of the
great tragedies of the post-disaster world, as we see when Peyton declares that “If I grow up I’m not going to be a fisherman!” (Frank 198). Randy quickly notices the crucial change in the colloquialism:

…”Did you ever hear a little girl say ‘If I grow up’ before?

“No, I never did. It gives me the creeps.”

“No their fault,” Randy said. “Ours.” (199)

Guilt is in the jurisdiction of adulthood - an anchor tethering them firmly with the weight of history. Whether in action or language, the survivor superchild’s possession of the present comes with a penchant for that most valuable of survival mechanisms - adaptability.

Margaret Atwood literalizes that trait in her 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake* by populating her post-apocalyptic landscape with the Children of Crake, a species of post-human, genetically-evolved beings adapted to withstand life in a world devastated by plague and disease. Snowman, the last remaining human to the best of his knowledge, lives on among them as a guide and pathetic reminder of the frailties and flaws of the human race: “he sits wrapped in his decaying sheet, hugging his shins and sucking on his mango, in under the shade of the trees because of the punishing sun. For the children—thick-skinned, resistant to ultraviolet—he's a creature of dimness, of the dusk” (Atwood, *Oryx* 6). Snowman names himself after the icy creature of legend in keeping with his perceived monstrosity and ephemerality, “The Abominable Snowman – existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards...stealthy, elusive...known only through rumours” (Atwood, *Oryx* 8).
Although genetically engineered to develop physically at hyper-speed, even the adults among the “Crakers” are still children in an experiential and psychological sense. Like the children from the other narratives mentioned above, these young beings are foragers, combing the beach for the flotsam of a nearly forgotten human civilization. They come to Snowman with their loot, seeking meaning and possible worth in the ruins. While they must depend on Snowman to point out any lurking dangers in the unfamiliar objects, their strength is supposed to lie in their ignorance. The Children of Crake rely on Snowman as a kind of father figure or shepherd – the caretaker designated by their maker to ensure their survival in the newly-razed earth.

The new race of super-humans is a hard break from the past—a discarding of the imperfect humanity that wrought the destruction of their own world in favor of a new, absolutely materialistic alternative. Crake’s ultimate decision as a scientist to reject the world of culture – the world of the mind – is foreshadowed in his debates with Snowman (Jimmy), the awkward representative of the side of language and art. As one of Snowman’s reflections reveals, the two friends represent the Cartesian division that Crake eventually takes to its extreme:

When did the body first set out on its own adventures? Snowman thinks; after having ditched its old travelling companions, the mind and the soul, for whom it had once been considered a mere corrupt vessel or else a puppet acting out their dramas for them, or else bad company, leading the other two astray. It must have got tired of the soul’s constant nagging and whining and the anxiety-driven intellectual web-spinning of the mind, distracting it whenever it was getting its teeth into something
juicy or its fingers into something good. It had dumped the other two back there somewhere, leaving them stranded in some damp sanctuary or stuffy lecture hall while it made a beeline for the topless bars, and it had dumped culture along with them: music and painting and poetry and plays.

(Atwood, *Oryx* 85)

Crake wanted his Children to be free of abstraction. For example, one of the rules imposed by Crake, was that “no name could be chosen for which a physical equivalent – even stuffed, even skeletal – could not be demonstrated. No unicorns, no griffins, no manticores or basilisks” (7).

While problematic in its failure to acknowledge the level of abstract thought inherent in any use of language, Crake’s attempt to reject the abstract or imagined bears an intriguing affinity to the wariness of the metaphysical in Theodor Adorno’s “Meditations on Metaphysics,” where the human capacity to “rise above” material reality can be the site of supposedly “inhuman” atrocity facilitated by indifference (363). While the anti-metaphysical rejection of abstraction is, in one sense, a practical matter of avoiding confusion, the Children of Crake can be seen in another sense as an answer to frustration and disgust with the dark side of the human capacity for invention, imagination and ideology. “Watch out for art, Crake used to say. As soon as they start doing art, we’re in trouble. Symbolic thinking of any kind could signal downfall, in Crake’s view. Next they’d be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery and war” (361). While certainly absolute materialism may be equally associated with cruelty and barbarism (as Snowman points out, “the body had its own cultural forms. It had its own art. Execution
were its tragedies, pornography was its romance” [85].), it is perhaps not surprising as a rejection of modern history: a response to the destruction forged in the minds of a metaphysically-inclined civilization obsessed with the futile “delusion” of self-preservation that tries to deny the underlying, real presence of “that poor and emotionally animal-like ephemerality” (Adorno 363).

The relationship (or conflict) between the metaphysical and the material that emerges in Atwood’s work, and in other fictions of destruction, is an area rich with potential for literary analysis and philosophical inquiry. I will continue to explore it in the future as I extend the scope of this chapter. For now, however, I introduce the question as an illustration of one of the primary and most valuable questions that the survivalist dimension of disaster fiction raises: Where do we go from here?

The survivors of post-catastrophic narratives are, to varying degrees, in desperate situations. The trajectory not only of their own lives but of the modern world in which those lives were grounded has been violently interrupted. Any sense of security in the future to come has been shattered and replaced by a stifling environment of anxiety and imminent, multi-dimensional threat. Those who survive to struggle amid the rubble are forced by those circumstances to decide whether to be paralyzed or consumed by them, or somehow find a glimmer of hope, however weak or from whatever source, that can drive them to take action.

The survivalist mode brings together all of these different yet interrelated concerns and reveals their dominance in the collective imaginary. Even if we lose a significant part of our belief in a positive future and instead expect disasters to come, the fact that our even our darkest, most despaired imaginings of that destruction reveal
flickers of hope suggests that we still believe ourselves to be survivors. We still want to believe that no matter what comes, we would not let ourselves be defeated by despair. Most, if not all, of the narratives I have examined convey the possibility that the only hope for the survival of humankind is a massive shift in the way we structure our relationships to each other and to the Earth.

As I have shown in this and the previous chapters, mass-scale disaster scenarios have a particular set of elements that allow us to tap into our fraught relationship with the past, the seemingly impossible choices to be made in the present in order to address our anxieties about the future. Stories of destruction and survival give us a low-risk environment in which to try out our responses to extreme situations. In this sense the disaster itself is secondary. What we are really drawn to, and perhaps the root of the disaster genre’s popularity, is the survivors. Through them we can face our fears without being in danger ourselves, such as the strength of our own ethical boundaries and our capacity for survival. Would I be able to do what I needed to survive? What role would I fill in my own tale of survival? Would I fight for what I now consider to be right, or would I adjust to accommodate new circumstances?

Fictional narratives about surviving disaster are frightening, but also somewhat liberating. We like to imagine a world in which we could start anew as different people, despite the difficult possibilities that freedom presents. Under different circumstances, would I be vicious? Would I protect those I love? Would I be a leader or a follower? Would I be a survivalist? Would I save myself at the cost of others, or my ‘humanity’, whatever that means to me? These questions we ask as individuals are reflections of the questions that have dominated discussions worldwide since the end of World War II.
How did we allow ourselves to fail so extensively at our quests for kinship and enlightenment in the past? What will the ‘human’ really look like if the structures of modernity crumble? How can we retain a position of superiority on the Earth as humans when we see more clearly the consequences of our actions? And if we can’t, how can we reconfigure our definition of what it means to be human and act accordingly and productively to rebuild a hopeful future from our ever-increasing destiny of despair?
CLOSING REMARKS

When I started this dissertation I set out to discover characteristics of a collective imaginary of impending disaster that has developed in a particular way since the end of World War II. By the end of my examination of fictions of destruction after 1945, I have come to believe that this collective imaginary of disaster is more importantly a collective imaginary of survival.

At the beginning of the final chapter I wrote that the question concerning humanity is tied to the question concerning survival. The former is in many ways a question concerning the past. Upon reflecting on the history of humankind over the past century, one answer to the question of what it is to be human includes expansive potential, creativity and incredible acts of kindness. The other, more frightening answer, includes expansive failure, destructiveness and acts of incredible cruelty.

The question concerning survival, which includes within it the question of humanity, is rather a question concerning the future. It asks: Now that we are here, how can and how will we proceed? How can we survive the plethora of risks that approach at greater speeds and on an increasing scale? Is it possible for us to shape the nature of our humanity with the same zeal with which we shape the stuff of the world and with the resolution to ultimately create a more hospitable horizon? The primacy of these questions in the current stage of modernity has in many ways propelled survival to become the dominant mode of self-reference for individuals and communities across the globe. I here define post-1945 survivalism not only in the material, survivalist sense of taking the necessary action to extend a person or persons’ physical survival into another day, but
also the reflections on how that survival should be accomplished. The latter concerns of survivalism are where the thinking happens regarding the creation or revision of ethical frameworks that determine the survival of humankind as an entity (and a concept) that is socially bound to its own members and the rest of the planet. Survivalism asks: What is the survival of the individual worth if obtained at the cost of the human, and what can/should the human be?

The years after 1945 were marked by a philosophical crisis regarding the place, meaning and purpose of humanism. The historical realities of mass violence and the zeitgeist of future threat make humanism—the attempt to define what is within and outside the boundaries of the human (such as the ‘inhuman’) and, jointly, what the nature of the human is—an increasingly fraught enterprise. Survivalist disaster narratives provide a staging-ground for the ‘safe’ discussion of the most frightening possibilities presented by these questions. In doing so they have become the site where some of the most significant thinking about the human is happening from 1945 into today. Himself caught up in serious questions about the ethical implications of philosophies of the human and their material applications, Heidegger writes in his 1949 “Letter on Humanism” that while “-isms” have long “been suspect… the market of public opinion continually demands new ones” and “[w]e are always ready to supply the demand” (241). I suggest that particularly after the mid-20th century, survivalism has become the new humanism.

Survivalism meets the demand for “-isms” by continuing the concern of humanism regarding human beings, but within a framework in which they are not guaranteed perpetual dominance or even existence. Survivalism reflects the post-1945
distrust and disillusionment regarding previous categorizations of what is human or inhuman. Furthermore, it successfully introduces difficult questions of essence, ethics and relativity. For example: Are cruelty and violence inhuman, or essentially human? Do ethical norms still count under circumstances of extreme stress and hardship? How do we weigh the choices that could ensure the survival or those closest to us, versus the survival of the frameworks that protect strangers or human society at large?

Questions concerning survival also address the possibility of human obsolescence and the position of our species on the earth. The modern Fall of Man can be thought of as humankind’s failure in the task of stewardship, and even further—a questioning of the role of stewardship itself. Post-disaster narratives of survival, as experimental testing grounds for these issues, provide various possible answers to doubts about whether humans can still survive if we lose what we believed to be the essence of our humanity.

I stated that survivalist narratives are concerned with the possibility of a future after destruction. It is important to point out that they are concerned not just with if, but also with how and as whom humans survive. In Heideggerian terms, one could say that survivalism is concerned with both essence and ek-sistence. For example, are survivors ek-sisting more intensely than those mired in modernity, separated from the grounding by layers of modernization (“Letter” 247-251)? Disaster fiction strips away those layers of modernity, thus potentially forcing the survivors into a closer or more aware relationship to the world (thereby intensifying their groundedness). While survivalism does certainly engage with metaphysical, a significant part of the force of these narratives lies in their exploration of the possibility that focusing on immediate material needs of survival and extreme ethical decisions. This aspect is a move away from the metaphysical (which to
many, such as Theodor Adorno, becomes suspect after the mid-20th century), thus opening being up to more raw immediate realizations (unveilings) of Being.

My analysis of the survivor superchild in the final chapter of this dissertation is significant in large part because of its discussion of the separation from history. I bring this idea back now in an expanded sense to think about world-destruction in fiction as a move that reflects the un-grounding, or the “homelessness of contemporary human beings from the essence of being’s history.” Heidegger writes that this homelessness “is coming to be the destiny of the world” and describes the “estrangement of the human being” as something particular to the “modern” human (“Letter” 258). Disaster narratives bring out this situation of the modern human’s homelessness and estrangement particularly overtly. They do so, however, not exclusively with the result of emphasizing the mood of despair. As I discussed in the final chapter, in their themes of survivalism they carry the hope that the clearing away of the human’s previous “home” can provide an opportunity for possible epiphany and, more optimistically, renewal.

I have already discussed Hannah Arendt’s philosophy of Action and her insistence on the importance of expression and creation of the action out from the individual into the world of others. Heidegger also ties the essence of action to its unfolding: “We view action only as causing an effect. The actuality of the effect is valued according to its utility. But the essence of action is accomplishment. To accomplish means to unfold something into the fullness of its essence, to lead it forth into this fullness – producere.” Fictions of destruction are expressions, or accomplished unfoldings, of the collective imaginary and as such can also be considered to be actions themselves.
That said, these actions of expression, as I posited from the first chapter, are intertwined in a dynamic, mutually-affective relationship with the constant changes of the collective imaginary that are themselves already a type of action before they make their appearance. While Arendt focuses on the value of overt, socially-affective action, Heidegger writes that “[t]hinking does not become action only because some effect issues from it or because it is applied. Thinking acts insofar as it thinks. Such action is presumably the simplest and at the same time the highest because it concerns the relation of being to humans” (239). Survivalism in narrative fictions tends toward a middle ground between a complete focus on action (such as the absolute materialism of the stark, day-to-day survivalist way of life followed by, for example, the un-reflectively cannibalistic or murderous in disaster narratives) and the above focus on thinking, reflection, or the metaphysical as being equal to action taken within the socio-political sphere. In survivalism, both extremes are treated as suspect.

The protagonists of many fictions of destruction struggle between the materialistic demands of daily survival (which often violate previous ethical frameworks) and the sense that survival is somehow more than those immediate needs—something that also involves thinking through the survival of the ‘human’ in a more social, metaphysical sense. The question of survivalism isn’t just “How do I and my family/group survive to see another day?” but also “How should we live in relation to others who are on the journey of survival?” The material and metaphysical are intertwined in survivalist narratives in a way that allows them to take up some of the most difficult humanistic questions that have become so predominant post-1945. Similarly, I see the collective imaginary and its emanations as the joining of the action of thought and the action of
expression. We act by reflecting on the questions concerning the human, the questions concerning technology, the questions concerning survival, and so on, both within our individual thinking and through the expression of that thinking in narratives such as the fictions of destruction. Such reflection can in turn perhaps open new trajectories for overt action that affects (and therefore creates) the shape of the future.

The capacity of post-1945 disaster narratives to engage these issues means that there is great potential for much more extensive examination. I plan to continue my own analysis in several ways. For example, I plan to expand on the second and third chapters, which address the breakdown of the narrative of progress and the emergence of a zeitgeist of risk, by conducting more extensive field research on current social movements that embrace self-sufficiency and survivalist training, including interviews with so-called doomsday preppers invested in disaster preparation and with members of think tanks that focus on future threat prediction and assessment. I will also expand my typology of survival with analyses of other recurring survivor figures such as lone survivors (and their oft-appearing canine companions) and women in post-catastrophic communities, including the reawakening of patriarchal gender roles. Finally, I plan to expand the scope of my source materials more globally so that I can compare the paradigms and tropes of the North American disaster fictions I discussed here to those in Latin America, Europe and East Asia. Through these explorations I look forward to contributing to a more expansive knowledge of the great concerns that pervade the collective imaginary and through it form the shape of contemporary cultures.
WORKS CITED


