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"The Four Horseman of the Late Capitalist Apocalypse": U.S. Comic Books, Ideology, and Trauma in Post-9/11 Society

Kathryn Manis

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**“THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE LATE CAPITALIST APOCALYPSE:”
U.S COMIC BOOKS, IDEOLOGY, AND TRAUMA IN POST 9/11 SOCIETY**

by

KATHRYN MANIS

**B.A. ART HISTORY
B.A. ENGLISH**

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Art History

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Dedication

For my beautiful, strong, brilliant, crazy, and incredibly lovable younger siblings,
who inspire me every single day.

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**“The Four Horsemen of the Late Capitalist Apocalypse:”
U.S. Comic Books, Ideology, and Trauma in Post-9/11 Society**

by

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B.A., Appalachian State University, 2012

M.A., University of New Mexico, 2015

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary United States apocalypse, dystopia, and catastrophe are commonplace. Indeed, both the increasing presence of fictional apocalypse in art and popular culture and the tone of apocalypticism in U.S. political, environmental, and social rhetorics, have been noted by writers and thinkers from a wide range of fields. Scholars of neoliberalism in particular have traced this popularity to the economic and political realities of late-capitalism and the ideological contradictions embedded in the evolution of capitalism to its current, immersive iteration. What has gone undiscussed, however, is the relationship of this anxious preoccupation to a prevailing, national condition; a condition that responds to the traumatic reality of existence under “American” neoliberalism.

Using the framework of the apocalyptic riders and the medium of contemporary comics, this thesis demonstrates the legacy of sacred apocalypse in contemporary versions and explicates the ways in which neoliberal economic and political policy have led us back around to apocalyptic ground zero.

Table of Contents

List of figures.....	vii
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2. Literature Review.....	12
Chapter 3. Pestilence, or, “the consequences of biogenetic revolution”.....	17
Chapter 4. War, or, “the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions”.....	44
Chapter 5. Famine, or, “imbalances within the system itself”.....	67
Chapter 6. Death, or, “ecological crisis”.....	92
Chapter 7. Conclusion.....	110
Figures.....	115
Bibliography.....	123

List of Figures

Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer, <i>The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse</i>	114
Figure 2. Ben Templesmith, from <i>Wormwood: Gentleman Corpse</i> (Vol. 2).....	114
Figure 3. Pia Guerra and Brian K. Vaughan, From <i>Y The Last Man</i> (Vol. 1).....	114
Figure 4. Pia Guerra. Cover Art. <i>Y The Last Man</i> (Vol. 1, no. 11).....	114
Figure 5. Pia Guerra. Cover Art. <i>Y The Last Man</i> (Vol. 1, no. 1).....	115
Figure 6. Pia Guerra. From <i>Y The Last Man</i> (Vol. 4, no. 19).....	115
Figure 7. Riccardo Burchielli, Brian Wood. Cover Art. <i>DMZ</i> (Vol. 1, no. 1).....	115
Figure 8. Riccardo Burchielli, Brian Wood. From <i>DMZ</i> (Vol. 1, no. 1).....	116
Figure 9. Riccardo Burchielli, Brian Wood. From <i>DMZ</i> (Vol. 5, no. 3).....	116
Figure 10. Riccardo Burchielli, Brian Wood. Cover Art. From <i>DMZ</i> (Vol. 5, no. 5)....	117
Figure 11. Riccardo Burchielli, Brian Wood. Cover Art. From <i>DMZ</i> (Vol. 5, no. 6)....	117
Figure 12. Marcos Martin, Brian K. Vaughan, and Munsta Vicente. From <i>The Private Eye</i> (No. 1).....	117
Figure 13. Marcos Martin, Brian K. Vaughan, and Munsta Vicente. From <i>The Private Eye</i> (No. 1).....	118
Figure 14. Marcos Martin, Brian K. Vaughan, and Munsta Vicente. From <i>The Private Eye</i> (No. 1).....	118
Figure 15. Marcos Martin, Brian K. Vaughan, and Munsta Vicente. From <i>The Private Eye</i> (No. 8).....	119
Figure 16. <i>Captain Callum Israel</i> . Brian Wood, Gary Brown, Dave Stewart. From, “Black Pacific,” <i>The Massive</i> , (Vol. 1).....	119

Figure 17. Brian Wood, Kristian Donaldson, and Dave Stewart. From, “Landfall,” <i>The Massive</i> (Vol. 1).....	120
Figure 18. <i>The Massive</i> . Brian Wood, Gary Brown, and Jordan Bellaire. From, “Ragnarok,” <i>The Massive</i> (Vol. 5).....	121

Chapter 1. Introduction

In the 21st century the post-apocalyptic scenario is particularly compelling.¹ This palpable narrative proliferates in literary, visual, and popular culture in the U.S., appearing in the work of authors like Colson Whitehead, Cormac McCarthy and Max Brooks, comics, film, and television programs like *The Walking Dead* and *Zombie Land* and in the oeuvre of environmentally concerned visual artists like Chris Jordan and Agnes Denes. The increasing popularity of these works demonstrates that the end of the world as we know it is an unquestionably salient topic.

Scholars of culture and neoliberalism² have noted the complex economic, social, and political conditions, particularly in the U.S., which make it nearly impossible to imagine a structural alternative to contemporaneity. Nicholas Mierzoff describes this condition as an order of seeing, which he calls “immersion,” that has no outside but is instead, “constituted by the cosmographic circulation between nature and culture, the West and its Empire.”³ This perceived lack of “outside,” it can be argued, is a primary source for the popular obsession with apocalypse and dystopia. Though James Berger considered post-apocalyptic representation as a site of hope in 1999, describing the impetus for this mode as a recognition of, “formative catastrophes and their symptoms,”

¹ And by post-apocalypse I am here referring to a structural and institutional upheaval or change from a contrasting present, fictional or real.

² David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, Translated by Michel Senellart, (New York: Picador, 2008); Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1993); Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, (Winchester, Washington: Zero Books, 2009); Walter Benn Michaels, “The Beauty of a Social Problem e.g. unemployment,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, 57, no. 3 (2011) to list just a few.

³ Nicholas Mirzeoff, “The Sea and the Land: Biopower and Visuality from Slavery to Katrina,” *Culture, Theory, and Critique*, 50, no. 2-3 (2009): 289-305.

and the, “ideological sutures that hide the damages and repetitions,”⁴ the post-911 version is dramatically less hopeful.

Berger’s estimation of apocalyptic scenario is less idyllic when applied to earlier eras of science fiction and horror in literature and film. As Michael Cart and others have noted, apocalypse in the earlier decades of American science fiction centered on a speculative future.⁵ Though Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), for example, was largely the end-result of the socio-political problems of Huxley’s time as he saw them, the unseen dystopic event or shift happens far in the reader’s future, preserving an element of hopefulness. In the contemporary post-911, post-Katrina, economically depressed, and environmentally unsound U.S., however, the apocalypse is now. And, as Mark Fisher describes it, apocalyptic worlds are no longer strange and different but are exaggerated versions of our current world.⁶

Apocalypse, brought to bear by the four horsemen in its early biblical iterations, has obsessed cultures influenced by Judeo-Christianity for centuries. While general anxiety, moralistic judgment, and a fear of societal dismemberment have been consistent in apocalyptic imaginings, the specifics and attitudes towards total destruction have undergone many transitions. In the early Judeo-Christian tradition, apocalypse functions as a necessary corrective when sin has fully and fundamentally penetrated humanity. In this narrative it is no longer a question of punishing/saving anyone; human society is beyond saving because the general populace has internalized sin and transgression such that there is no achievable alternative. The only course of action left, for the good of

⁴ James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁵ Michael Cart, "Carte Blanche: Dateline Darkness," *Booklist* 106, no. 18 (2010): 34.

⁶ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, (Winchester, Washington: Zero Books, 2009), 2.

human salvation, is for Pestilence, War, Famine, and Death to end it all so that existence might begin anew elsewhere, replicating age-old cycles of destruction and renewal.

In the U.S. and European contexts in particular, ideologies and values established during the spread of the Scottish Enlightenment by people like John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson radically altered public and academic attitudes towards a variety of things, including the end of the world. Enlightenment humanism in its U.S. iteration lauded the ability of human intelligence, logic, and deductive reasoning, in lieu of religion, to engage, advance, understand, and uplift human societies. Despite an insistence on progressiveness, this formative period in the 18th century also gave initial birth to the ideologies of “race” and “America” specific to the U.S. and its enduringly problematic mythology. Barbara Jeanne Fields in her important essay, “Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America”⁷ explains the nature of ideology and reveals the dramatic tension between the rhetoric of these foundational values of liberty, rationality, freedom, happiness etc. and their practical deployment, historically and contemporaneously. She writes:

Race is not an idea but an ideology. It came into existence at a discernible historical moment for rationally understandable historical reasons and is subject to change for similar reasons. Ideology is ... the interpretation in thought of the social relations through which people create and re-create their collective being, in all the varied forms their collective being may assume ... As such, ideologies are not delusions but real, as real as the social relations for which they stand.⁸

Though I will argue that our contemporary moment represents a break from the economic and political formations of this earlier period in U.S. history, the ideological legacy of

⁷ Barbara Jeanne Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review*, 1, no. 181 (May-June 1990).

⁸ *Ibid*, 95.

contradiction and discrimination is still present and bears interrogation in its current, institutionalized form.

At the same time that these ideologies of value and difference were being developed in the U.S., a rhetoric of sentiment and “sensibility” was also deployed by many of the country’s Founding Fathers.⁹ George Washington, for example, declared in 1783 that:

The researches of the human mind after social happiness have been carried Put extension of commerce, the progressive refinement of manners, the growing liberality of sentiment ... have had a meliorating influence on mankind and increased the blessings of society.¹⁰

The powerful combination of grandiose values and an intensely moralistic appeal as the motivating factors behind a unifying concept of “nation” is still palpable to contemporary “Americans.”¹¹ Indeed, as Andrew Burstein explains, “To future patriots as well, America’s genius would never be treated separate from the decent impulses of its founders, who are credited with having joined *reason* and *sentiment*.”¹² Furthermore, the original advocates of this sense of “sense” were the country’s white, male founders - a relationship that is still present and which will be explored throughout this thesis. As

⁹ This is a logical continuation of the same kind of rhetoric and ethical justification used for the Revolutionary War and the split from England.

¹⁰ George Washington to Benjamin Harrison, June 12, 1783, as published in the *Virginia Gazette*, July 5, 1773.

¹¹ I put the words “America,” “American,” and “Americans” in quotations throughout this thesis in order to emphasize the purely ideological and conceptual reality of the terms. Indeed, there are many Americas in a geographical sense: North, Central, and South. The use of “America” to describe the United States, however, is deeply and inextricably connected to the country’s colonial roots and the subsequent need to claim ownership over the land actually stolen from First Nations communities. Using the term in the contemporary moment necessarily alludes to this history as well as the invented ideologies, many of which are deeply problematic, which were (and still are) created to sustain the myth of the U.S. as a diverse, democratic, “sensible” nation. Many of these ideologies are exposed and critiqued in this thesis and it is therefore important to maintain an awareness of the illusory quality of “America” throughout.

¹² Andrew Burstein, *Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America’s Romantic Self-Image*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), 294. Italics added.

Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler highlight in their volume, *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*, sentimentality is as crucial to “American” masculinity, specifically, as it is to the country’s national ideology, broadly.

Following the regime of this earlier period into the mid-twentieth century, apocalyptic fictions functioned allegorically, addressing specific sources of anxiety rather than touting the inevitable failure of human culture. Perhaps the most popular narrative concerning apocalypse to come from this allegorical trend is that of the zombie, the impetus for which is most often constructed as fear of, “infectious disease, biological warfare, euthanasia, terrorism or immigration.”¹³ Apocalyptic art and literature in this vein demonstrates how particular ideas or behaviors, like racial integration, immigration, alcohol consumption, and unchecked sexuality to name a few, pose a threat to perfect rationalism; apocalypse is a polemical *potential* if we continue down a particular path, not the necessary *inevitable*.

This conception of human potential and failure began a slow unravelling in the wake of World War II and the Cold War, however, when genocide and nuclear catastrophe, initiated by the so-called “West,” forced the U.S. to reconsider total annihilation, as well as humanity’s imperfect sense of morality. Alongside these ideological challenges, governments spearheaded by Ronald Reagan and Margaret

¹³ Kyle Bishop, "Dead Man Still Walking: Explaining the Zombie Renaissance," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 31, no 1 (2009), 22.

In an early draft of this thesis, Dr. Kirsten Buick noted the irony in using the zombie narrative to address the concerns of 20th c. U.S. citizens with immigration in light of colonization as the “European and Euroamerican Enlightenment version of immigration.” Dr. Buick’s insight is particularly important in lieu of the argument I make here for the contradictions in U.S. ideology and pragmatic reality as well as the use of sentiment and moral appeal to mask many of these inadequacies.

Further, Dr. Raymond Hernandez-Duran noted the role of the contemporary zombie as representing an absence of culture and, perhaps, an anti-capitalist impulse in their lack of intellect and free will. Both ideas will be explored in a larger version of this project in which I intend to consider the zombie apocalypse in light of neoliberalism and contemporary trauma.

Thatcher enacted changes in economic, political, and foreign policy which radically changed the United States and its relationship to the rest of the world on both practical and ideological levels.¹⁴ The resulting complex system is referred to as “globalization,” “financialization,” or “neoliberalism,” depending on your attitude towards it. I will argue that this new economic and political structure represents a “con-sequence” of Enlightenment ideology—a break from early socio-capitalistic structures at the logical end of colonialist globalization but still bearing the marks of “America’s” foundational ideologies.

While no one would argue that neoliberalization has been a solitary event, my argument will hinge on the notion that the U.S. public has been experiencing it as a trauma. A large scale, cultural trauma like a major war or violation of human and civil rights, as many scholars have explained, often corresponds with a societal obsession with apocalyptic fiction.¹⁵ Differing from earlier eras of extreme pressure, scarcity, or violence which were typically localized around specific events or issues, the contemporary version is less concrete. In the era of late-capitalism and an esoteric globalization, the interconnectedness of political ideologies, economic investments, social exclusions, information and biological technologies, and agricultural and environmental concerns is difficult to see. Unlike reactions to industrialization, military attacks, or political corruptions where the source can (at least to some degree) be located,

¹⁴ Importantly, “neoliberalism” as both a governmental practice and critical term existed before the Reagan/Thatcher moment in scholarship and practice in South and Central America. This paper intends to consider artifacts of U.S. visual and popular culture, however, and the complexity of neoliberal critique and the space of this project necessitate a specific scope.

¹⁵ See, for example: Peter Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* (2010) and Linnie Blake, *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma, and National Identity* (2008).

contemporary anxiety is necessarily more amorphous. This vagueness is reflected in recent U.S. apocalyptic fictions which take a variety of forms and often skip over what actually causes the end of days and go directly to what happens afterwards.

Trauma theory has been applied with increasing attention and frequency in the fields of literary criticism, sociology, psychology, and others since the 1996 publication of both Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading Literatures of Trauma*. These early works developed the still-popular notion that trauma, in both memory (neurobiology) and art (literature, film, visual arts), is dominated by a sense of absence. The (perhaps, misrepresented) quote from Theodore Adorno that "there is no poetry after Auschwitz" and its still-enduring impact represents the impetus for this strain of trauma theory. However, as Michelle Balaev explains, "Adhering to the dominant concept of trauma as a universal absence furthers certain ethical and aesthetic concerns but severely restricts the exploration of others. Understanding trauma beyond these monikers produces a greater range of questions regarding experience, representation and value."¹⁶ It is from this later group of scholars and scholarship that this project arises.

The unsettling of "America's" foundational ideologies, a radical restructuring of daily, embodied life as a consequence of advancements in technology, increasing globalization, and incoherent cultural trauma, I will argue, has led us full circle in our concept and rendering of apocalypse. Replacing Pestilence, War, Famine, and Death in the contemporary version are Slavoj Žižek's late capitalist apocalyptic riders: "the ecological crises, the consequences of biogenetic revolution, imbalances with the system

¹⁶ Michelle Balaev, "Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered," In *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 5.

itself (problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food, and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions.”¹⁷ Or, put another way, “Many of our newer anxieties turn, in fact, on the idea that the oil-intensive planetary transportation system so vital to the functioning of contemporary capitalism ultimately abets climate change, the arrival of peak oil, and the circulation of viruses, while globalized financial markets are capable of spreading contagions (as in the "Asian flu" of 1998) of a different kind.”¹⁸

Albrecht Dürer famously gave frightening life to the four apocalyptic horsemen in his 1497-8 woodcut, imbuing the riders with disconcerting motion and personality (Fig. 1). Created at the turn of the 15th century amidst many forms of conflict and rumors of others, this iconic work will be used to make apparent the overlap between biblical apocalypse and contemporary American apocalypse. In Dürer’s depiction the riders, despite Death’s withered appearance, are incredibly human, in form, expression, and movement. The most frightening connotation of this visual choice being the implication in that identification; the metaphor of the biblical horsemen writ literal. Neoliberal apocalypse is human-caused apocalypse in an even more overt way. Ben Templesmith, for example, plays with this metaphor and its nihilistic weight in the neoliberal age in his black humor comic, *Wormwood: Gentleman Corpse* (Fig. 2). In this series, Wormwood, a trans-dimensional demon in the form of a worm, stalls the four horsemen with drugs, booze, and women because a corrupt (living) humanity is a pliable one. Their weakness for the sins of the flesh and their representation as skeletons, the actual remains of previously living people, makes even more explicit the message in traditional sacred and

¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, (London, New York: Verso, 2010), x.

¹⁸ Benjamin Kunkel, “Dystopia and the End of Politics.” *Dissent*, 55, no 4 (Fall 2008), 89.

contemporary secular apocalypse: that we the people will, inevitably, bring about our own catastrophic demise.

This thesis will consider Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra's, *Y the Last Man* (2002-2008), Vaughan and Marcos Martin's digital comic, *The Private Eye* (2014-2015), Brian Wood and Riccardo Burchielli's, *DMZ* (2005-2012), and the recently concluded *The Massive* (2012-2015), by Wood and colorist Dave Stewart, and the post-apocalyptic scenarios they offer. Using the framework of the apocalyptic riders I will demonstrate the legacy of sacred apocalypse in contemporary versions and explicate the ways in which neoliberal economic and political policy have led us back around to apocalyptic ground zero. The comics, which demonstrate this circular cultural fear, engage anxiety about environmental and agricultural degradation, the destructive consequences of American political policy, technological advancements, genetic experimentation, economic downturn, and worldwide poverty. They also, like the zombie novel and Romero's early zombie films, engage concerns about race, biopower, and "knowledge-power¹⁹" as explained by Foucault in the 1970s.

The majority of scholarship about comics and comic books has historically come out of English departments, primarily from literary scholars, but increasingly from film and media scholars as well. While both of these approaches are useful, focusing discussion on things like the role of plot and character development and borrowing from the language of film critics, neither fully comprehends the role of the visual in comic books. Though film-inspired scholars certainly acknowledge the importance of the images in service of narrative, the static blending of word and image in the comic book

¹⁹ Term attributed to Foucault's series of lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics : Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*.

requires additional consideration. Robert C. Harvey attempts to develop an “aesthetic history” of comic books in his 1996 book, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*. In the introductory chapter, Harvey identifies four formal elements of the medium – narrative breakdown, composition, layout, and graphic style – which, far from encapsulating the arsenal of techniques available, provide an entry point into the relationship between the written and visual elements. He explains that:

Although pulling at separate threads like this might threaten to unravel the fabric, discussion of one aspect of graphics almost invariably leads to another, with the result that the visual tapestry always emerges whole. To understand the role of pictures in the art of comics, it’s not enough to simply identify these visual elements as if they were so many idlers loitering across the page. We must see how each functions to tell the story.²⁰

Likewise, many scholars have argued for an appreciation of comics, not as merely relevant to film studies or as facets of popular culture, but also as important *artifacts*. As Thierry Groensteen describes it, “Readers who are confronted with a comic, whether or not they perceive the presence of a narrative agent, of someone telling them something, cannot, in any case, fail to be aware that the images they are looking at *have been drawn*, that they are artifacts.”²¹ That is, unlike film which often encourages an immersive experience, one is already aware of the comic book as object. Indeed, as Scott Bukatman explains, “They [comics] are normally more *engrossing* than immersive and present instead a complex adventure of reading in which syntheses of word and image, image

²⁰ Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 9.

²¹ Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, translated by Ann Miller, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), 85.

sequences, and serial narratives are continually performed.”²² And in many cases it is quite common for comic book artists and writers to include “self-reflexive material.”²³ Examples include Art Spiegelman’s experimentation with texture and references to “books, other comics, and picture-making in general,”²⁴ and the breaking of the “fourth wall” with characters like *Marvel’s* Deadpool. In this self-awareness and reflection, I will argue, lies a comparable capacity for reflection and awareness of the context in which these works are made. As Groensteen and many others argue, whether or not a “message” can be clearly discerned, comics as a multi-lingual medium represent a unique site of communication.

Neoliberalism, a complex system where economics, politics, and popular culture mix in subtle ways, can be difficult to identify, explain, or fully comprehend. Likewise, the combination of image and word in the comic book, decidedly different than film, newspapers, and magazines, continues to challenge scholars who attempt to establish medium specificity for the serial comic book. It is my belief that the equally complex fields of comics scholarship and neoliberal studies can be used together to elucidate some of the problems unique to each field. But, more importantly, that together they contribute to a larger understanding of the increasingly important relationship between popular culture, the financialization of the United States and much of the world, and the experience of contemporary life under this financial regime as traumatic.

²² Scott Bukatman, “Sculpture, Stasis, The Comics, and Hellboy,” *Critical Inquiry*, 40, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 104-117.

²³ See: Charles Hatfield, “An Art of Tensions,” In *A Comic Studies Reader*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), 132-147.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 147.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This thesis attempts to bring together several threads of research: the study of comic books as unique art forms and objects of “American” culture, the burgeoning study of neoliberal ideology and practice in the United States, and a current obsession with apocalypse, dystopia, and catastrophe. The goal in doing so is to generate a more complete picture of the contemporary moment in the United States and draw attention to the subtle form of national trauma brought on by financialization and global capitalism. I also look to artifacts of popular culture, specifically comic books which communicate visually and narratively, in the hopes of accessing public, as well as academic, reception and navigation of neoliberal ideologies and experiences.

Though this may seem an excess of topics for this format, and though these three subjects have most often been discussed in isolation, they are all part of the same question: how does our current, uniquely traumatic moment affect the national “American” mythos as well as psychological stability and quality of life at the individual level? And, furthermore, how is this message received, internalized, and potentially challenged in the public sphere? Indeed, no work yet contends that neoliberal life in the U.S. is akin to a national trauma despite the wealth of scholarly theorizing about its psychological, physical, and psychical effects. In the age of the allegorical zombie, the frequency with which this apocalypse shows up in genre fictions, comic books, and other popular mediums merits analysis and consideration. The following is a discussion of the texts from each of the above fields that proved most informative to this analysis.

There is no shortage of scholarship on the subject of “neoliberalism.” Indeed, in the past decade alone scholars from as diverse fields as economics, geography, literary

studies, art history, sociology, philosophy, history, and psychology have added their perspectives to the conversation. The term has come to refer, not just to the particular economic system which relies on an extreme free market, but also to the ideological, political, cultural, and social results of its widespread practice. And it is not a new one. Though scholars like David Harvey, whose 2005 tome *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* is one of the most comprehensive on the subject, begin their study in earnest in the years immediately preceding the Reagan/Thatcher era, scholars of Central and South America trace its roots much earlier. Nevertheless, given the long and committed relationship with capitalism in the United States, from which neoliberalism (in many ways) logically rises, it is worthwhile to pay close attention to the especially extreme form that it takes.

Slavoj Žižek's *Living in the End Times* (2010) is one of the major texts upon which this study is built. While the text in its entirety is not drawn from heavily, particularly because Žižek's book focuses on postmodernism, Marxism, and other issues too vast to be appropriately addressed in the scope of this thesis, he describes the "four horseman of the late capitalist apocalypse" in the introduction. In choosing the comics for this study I was influenced by my reading of Žižek's horseman and endeavored to test the parameters of his text in my own work on U.S. comics. Therefore, in the interest of narrowing the scope of this project to a reasonable field, the facets of American neoliberalism here discussed are Žižek's apocalyptic riders.

Among the works that take the case of American neoliberalism as a phenomenon are Foucault's series of lectures from the 1970's since collected in a volume called, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Harvey's already mentioned history, several of Frederic Jameson's works including *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), and Mark Fisher's *Capitalist*

Realism: Is there no alternative? (2009). Foucault's lectures do not focus exclusively on the United States, but his discussions of "America" and *homo economicus* are useful in connecting the lived body to the practice of neoliberalism in this context. In these early lectures, the philosopher elucidates the ways in which the extreme economic system drives individuals to think of themselves and others in market terms. This work, begun during the Enlightenment, I argue, reaches a logical peak in intensity during neoliberalism as well as a break from this foundational ideology in its traumatic fallout. Jameson is the author of a long list of works that consider the effects of late-capitalism on culture, art, nationalism, and psychology. For this project Jameson's concept of utopia as critical dystopia in *Archaeologies of the Future* is particularly useful for the chapter about *The Private Eye*, digital comics, and the "tech apocalypse." Likewise, Fisher's work had a profound impact on this thesis as it attempts to draw together the main threads of discussion about neoliberalism in a coherent volume – a gesture from which this project drew inspiration.

The majority of the most recent scholarship about American neoliberalism, in contrast to these broader histories, isolates a particular facet of it (for example: individualism, consumerism, affect, inequality, technology) as is evident in the works of scholars like Wendy Brown and Lauren Berlant. Essays by each of these scholars are drawn upon throughout. These works consider the ways in which neoliberalism effects the American public at a psychological, structural, ideological, or cultural level. The other common strategy is to spotlight a specific aspect of American culture which highlights the ways in which financialization and late capitalism have crept into daily life. Among these studies is Anna McCarthy's seminal article, "Reality Television: A

Neoliberal Theater of Suffering” (2007), which analyzes the success of reality television in the past decade and demonstrates the ways in which neoliberal ideology is reinforced in this form of media.

Apocalypse is a subject unto itself and is most certainly not a new one. Most recently scholars have noted the increasing popularity of the post-apocalyptic scenario in the United States, leading to a body of literature by scholars like Kyle Bishop, Andrew Hoberek, Ben Marcus, and many others, on the “zombie renaissance.” Though this thesis does not consider zombies, the scholarship in this group is instructive as a model for how to approach a specific theme in popular culture in light of neoliberalism. Additionally, studies such as John Wallis and Kenneth Newport’s edited volume, *The End All Around Us: Apocalyptic Texts and Popular Culture* and Thomas Robbins and Susan Palmer’s *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem* examine the many manifestations of apocalypse in our moment and the array of factors that influence our obsession. I am indebted to texts of this kind for the wealth of historical research, variety of approaches, and comprehensive study of the appearance of apocalypse in pop-culture mediums.

A substantial body of research on comics exists, which considers the medium as a whole; geographic and ideological contexts for comic books and their development; as well as the relevance of specific works to socio-cultural questions. Works by comics scholars such as Scott Bukatman, Charles Hatfield, Thierry Groensteen, Bradford Wright, Sean Howe, and Bart Beatty are drawn from in this project for their impressive accounting of the history and formal potential of the medium as well as to provide context for the recent works here examined. Additionally, works like Martin Barker’s, *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics* (1989) and Hillary Chute’s, *Graphic Women*

(2010) served as invaluable examples for understanding the impact of comics and comics narratives on discourse and ideology.

Finally, the subject of national trauma is no small issue, nor is there a lack of information on specific issues, time periods, and national contexts. While few scholars have addressed neoliberalism specifically as trauma, many have gestured towards it. And, most instructive for this process, is a wealth of information about the ways in which national trauma manifests in popular culture historically. This project leans heavily on the works of Arthur G. Neil, including *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience* (2005) and “Nuclear War and Popular Culture” (2009) both of which focus primarily on violence and war as trauma. Closest in theme to this project, however, is Laurie Vickroy’s book, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002), a study of several popular fictions and the relationship between trauma and survival.

I also am grateful for scholars like Ursula Heise, Frederick Buell, and Ulrich Beck whose work on environmental catastrophe heavily informed the final chapter of this thesis. Likewise, Ana Ramos-Zayas, Nicholas Mierzoff, and Rachel Greenwald Smith whose writing on affect, race, and bio-power contributed to this work’s understanding of the “American” neoliberal context and to the close reading and formal analysis of the comic books here studied. Additionally, a variety of sources on technology, genetic science, depression and anxiety disorders, poverty and wealth distribution, and protest violence, among others, were instrumental in the defense of this project’s thesis and made it possible to generate a fuller picture of our moment and our popular obsessions.

Chapter 3: Pestilence, or, “Consequences of Biogenetic Revolution.”

Our stories reflect our own ignorance and fear. They betray the failure of nerve that makes us unwilling to contemplate the future because we cannot imagine a future that is not worse than the present. We are the victims of our self-inflicted cultural denigration and scientists are our scapegoats.

-Allaby, 1995.

Then I saw when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, “Come.” I looked, and behold, a white horse, and he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

-Revelation 6:1-2

In the canonical woodcut, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1497-8), Albrecht Dürer represents the first apocalyptic rider, “conquest” or “pestilence” depending on interpretation, with raised bow in hand (Fig. 1). Largely overshadowed by his three more substantive brothers, but no less formidable and deadly for it, Dürer’s inconspicuous Pestilence is a perfect predecessor to Slavoj Žižek’s contemporary rider, “the consequences of biogenetic revolution.” The development of biogenetic science in the U.S. begins as early as the 1930’s and 1940’s.²⁵ The foundational moment of its application in the minds of many Americans though, is the successful cloning of Dolly the sheep in 1996 by the Roslin Institute in Scotland. Since then, the evolution of genetic thought and science has been applied to many areas of human life including, but certainly not limited to, animal populations and agriculture, human medicine, and even human engineering through increasingly sophisticated prosthetics.

²⁵ For information about the history of genetics and the evolution of scientific thought on the subject see: Raphael Falk, *Genetic Analysis: A History of Genetic Thinking*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and Lily E. Kay, *Who Wrote the Book of Life?: A History of the Genetic Code*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009).

The United States' anxious relationship to science and technology is well documented and can be traced as least as far back as the heyday of Enlightenment ideology around the 18th century.²⁶ As a society, Americans have both an abiding fascination with and love for scientific exploration as well as a deeply embedded fear of it. Indeed, despite the cultural authority scientific thought and theory seems to wield in our moment, many Americans feel equally entitled to ignore it. This is evident in continued debates between popular and scientific authorities over childhood vaccinations, global climate change, GMO's, animal testing, anti-depressants and so on. For much of human history we have devised technological instruments to end or improve the *material* quality of human life. With the "discovery"²⁷ of DNA by Watson and Crick in 1953, the potential application of American science moved inward, the evolution of which is visible in the recent move to print transplant-worthy 3D organs.²⁸ Playing into an already present fascination with human biology and its manipulation in the popular imaginary, supported by the continued popularity of the Frankenstein story and its contemporary bastardizations as well as the increased presence of scientifically manipulated humans in American science-fiction, genetic and biological science occupy an interesting space in contemporary American culture.²⁹

²⁶ There is a lot to be said about the U.S. relationship to science and technology. Since it is more applicable there, however, an extended discussion will appear in Chapter 5.

²⁷ Though Watson and Crick were the first to gather all of the research at the time together into a single theory about DNA their paper, "Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids: A Structure for Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid" (1953) was based on information gathered by a handful of other scientists, many of whom were conducting experiments at King's College London.

²⁸ For more information on 3D printed organs: Ungar, Laura, "Researchers Closing in on 3-D Printed Organs," *The (Louisville, Ky.) Courier-Journal*, 2013. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2013/05/29/health-3d-printing-organ-transplant/2370079/>; Children's Hospital Los Angeles, "3D printing makes heart surgery safer for children," *ScienceDaily*. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/01/150129093946.htm.

²⁹ As recently as 2014 yet another version of the Frankenstein story was made into a film, *I Frankenstein*, starring Aaron Eckhart, and (though created by a British production team) the SHOWTIME series *Penny*

At the same time, the genetic modification of foods and organisms, which originated in the era of the “Dust Bowl” in the U.S. as a desperate attempt to sustain agricultural production, has developed with increasing implications for humans as well as plant and animal life. The ability to genetically engineer animal populations, such as the recent and contentious AcuAdvantage Salmon,³⁰ as well as the health issues surrounding genetically modified foods (GMO’s), despite causing debates and uproar among environmentalists, has been largely overshadowed in the public imaginary by more broad environmental concerns, information technology, and threats from outside of the U.S. And, like many aspects of contemporary neoliberalism, biogenetic science is both frightening and difficult to imagine an alternative to given its cementation into our agricultural, and consequently economic, system. This predicament reflects a common hallmark of American neoliberalism according to many scholars. As Mark Fisher describes it in *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?* borrowing phrasing often attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek:

... it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by ‘capitalist realism’: the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.³¹

Dreadful featuring Victor Frankenstein and his monster has been wildly popular with U.S. audiences. For an interesting and compelling discussion of the Frankenstein concept in American popular culture see: Jon Turney, *Frankenstein's Footsteps: Science, Genetics and Popular Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

³⁰ For further description and debate regarding pros and cons of AcuAdvantage salmon, in particular, see: Aqua Bounty Technologies, Inc., and Center for Veterinary Medicine (U.S.), *Environmental Assessment for AquAdvantage Salmon*, (Rockville, MD: Center for Veterinary Medicine, US Food and Drug Administration and R. Clausen and SB Longo), 2012 and R. Clausen and S.B. Longo, "The Tragedy of the Commodity and the Farce of AquAdvantage Salmon," *Development and Change*, 43, no. 1 (2012): 229-51.

³¹ Emphasis in original. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, Washington: Zero Books, 2009), 2.

Additionally, the post-Cold War era in the United States saw public officials searching about for a new stealthy enemy. It has already been thoroughly and cleverly discussed by a variety of scholars that U.S. military conflicts in the last fifty years have been increasingly vague and ideological, requiring an absent “other.” In the years since the attacks on the World Trade Center, however, military violence is not the only type of violence which Americans and American politicians have come to fear; in the neoliberal age, we also fight wars on economic and cultural fronts. The “war on terror,” following the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center, is perhaps the most dramatic culmination of this shift in focus in the case of actual armed conflict. The need for a physically absent “other,” has also led to a cultural obsession with China³², which has replaced Japan and joined “the Middle East” in recent decades, and the growing country’s seeming dominance in economic and cultural spheres. As Michael Barr reminds us, however, we cannot think of this fear as based purely on economic or military concerns. He explains:

In other words, the rise of China isn’t only an economic event; it’s a cultural one which impacts ‘our’ very identity. Thus, focusing on the traditional structures of international relations misses the way that culture shapes how people think, behave and perceive others.³³

In the exceptionally popular comic book, *Y the Last Man*, Brian K. Vaughan and artist Pia Guerra respond to the United States’ pervasive fear of China and suspicion of the Middle East (the two great “Others” of our contemporary moment), and explore some of the implications of advancement in biogenetic science. Their work also embodies

³² A 2013 documentary by best-selling author and film-maker Peter Navarro called “Death by China” is an interesting example of the dissemination of this fear through artistic and academic, as well as political, platforms.

³³ Michael D. Barr, *Who's afraid of China?: The Challenge of Chinese Soft Power*, (London: Zed, 2009), 3.

many of the PTSD-like symptoms of life under American neoliberal policy and ideology. Or, to borrow from Colson Whitehead's zombie novel *Zone One*, "PASD" (Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder). Following such catastrophic national events as those of 9/11, war in the Middle East, struggles over natural resources, awareness of climate change, unprecedented discoveries in medical science and technology, and the economic crash of 2008, many scholars have described our contemporary moment as a "culture of fear."³⁴ And, as Arthur Neal reminds us, the mythologizing and retelling of these "fears" is a driving force behind an "American" national culture. He explains:

The social significance of traumatic events stems from collective debates over the causes, conditions, and consequences of the chaotic forces that impinge upon our consciousness. In the trauma phase of an event, basic questions are raised, such as 'How did it happen?' 'Why did it happen?' and 'What is going to happen next?' With the passing of time, however, the boundaries around specific events weaken as the events are placed within the general fabric of social life. In the telling and retelling of the stories of our past, the events in question become stereotyped and selectively distorted as they become embedded in collective memories.³⁵

With this in mind, I suggest that many of the behaviors and psychological issues of the past few decades result from our daily, lived, national trauma under these conditions, comparable in kind if not degree, to an apocalyptic event. This comic book, in particular, reproduces many of these PASD symptoms in its characters and narrative arcs. Like Dürer's *Pestilence*, the traumatic effects of life under U.S. neoliberalism have crept inconspicuously, pervasively, and deadly into our individual and cultural psyches.

Vaughan and Guerra's *Y the Last Man* was first published in September 2002 and ran for 60 issues until March 2008. The apocalyptic moment of the series is the

³⁴ See, for example: Arthur G. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience* (2005). In particular, chapters 10, 11, and 12.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 197.

apparently simultaneous death of every mammal with a Y-chromosome; every mammal except for Yorick Brown and his pet Capuchin, Ampersand. This “plague” is both the most unique and most confusing aspect of the world of the comic. Avoiding some possibly obvious or clichéd results of the death of the all of the males on the planet (one could easily imagine a scenario where (a) all of the world’s problems are solved because the violent males are gone, or (b) the majority of the narrative is taken up by Yorick’s sexual exploits). Vaughan’s comic is remarkably similar to other apocalyptic narratives in that trauma brings out the best in some and the worst in others. Attempts to locate the “good guys” and “bad guys” are continuously thwarted by Vaughan’s intentional ambiguity and Guerra’s subtle and detailed rendering of the facial expressions and body language of her characters. Even seemingly straightforward situations are complicated by the frequent appearance of fear, regret, confusion, panic, pain, grief, and desperation on the faces and bodies of the characters.

As I will continue to develop throughout this chapter, Vaughan and Guerra’s work demonstrates a renewed relevancy under the late capitalism of sentimentality and affect in fiction and art.³⁶ The contradictory juxtapositions of “bad” behavior with visually demonstrated regret, shame, and sadness by the perpetrators is one way in which this is visible. Rather than allowing “sides” in the world of this comic, the creators focus on highly emotional, ambiguous, and often traumatic content; the preoccupation of the series is not a message, story, or question, but rather an experience and an emotional journey to mirror the quest of its characters. An apt example from the first volume features violence between Democratic senators and the gun-wielding wives of deceased

³⁶ See the introduction to this thesis for a more robust explanation of sentimentality, the Scottish Enlightenment, and the foundation of “America.”

Republican senators, who, seeking enforcement of the widow succession precedent, march on the capitol (Fig. 3). In this exchange, one Democratic senator is held at gun point and accidentally shot in the middle of an impassioned speech as the Republican women lobby for representation in the new man-less government.

The panel depicting this stand-off between the groups of white women follows what Thierry Groensteen calls a “simple” or “classical”³⁷ rhetoric in which the panel arrangements and movement of narrative are simple so as to enable easy interpretation and accessibility. With panels of essentially the same size, stacked in succession, and with very little visible setting, the focus of the reader is on the figures of the women and the looks of horror, shock, and anger which appear on their faces following the unintended death. This “simplicity” is likewise reflected in the language of one of the Republican senators who explains:

If we’re going to save this country, there are... there are decisions to be made. And our voices deserve to be heard as much as yours do. We’re not evil people, Representative. We just want to...to carry on our husband’s work. Those men survive in us. We dedicated our lives to them. We share their ideals and sense of service and...³⁸

In this instance, rather than developing the many implications of this encounter for “American” ideals and politics (which abound), the scene is over as quickly as it begins, lasting for only a few pages. Despite its political context, this scene emphasizes a universal *feeling* caused by intense and frightening situations over the more complicated content of the encounter; the focus is on the trauma of the scene rather than the factors that led to it.

³⁷ Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, translated by Ann Miller, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), 46.

³⁸ Vaughan and Guerra, *Y the Last Man: Vol. 1*, (DC Comics, 2002).

Vaughan's protagonist, Yorick, a twenty-something white male whose defining characteristics are awkwardness and escape artistry, is immediately joined post-plague by a code-named government operative and member of a secret society called the Culper Ring, Agent 355. Agent 355 and the Culper Ring in the world of the comic are drawn from actual figures in American history. The Agent, a strong, emotionally distant, black woman in Vaughan's imaginary, is based on the real-life agent whose identity is unknown but who, many hypothesize, was directly involved in the arrest of Major John Andre and exposure of Benedict Arnold during the American Revolution. The other crucial companion to Yorick is Dr. Mann, a Chinese-Japanese-American geneticist experimenting with human cloning. The narrative begins as the group sets out for Mann's laboratory in California after a group of extremists with a propensity for violence, The Daughters of the Amazon, burn down her lab in Connecticut. The unlikely trio and their journey to restore the future of humanity recalls the canonical quest narrative from literary history in works such as *The Odyssey*, *The Hobbit*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and *The Wizard of Oz*. Indeed, Vaughan attempts to create of their journey an epic, in every sense of the word.

The main characters in Vaughan and Guerra's world trade on incredibly popular and well-used stock characterizations and stereotypes and ones which are particular to the U.S. context. Undeniably, associations with people of Asian descent and scientific prowess as well as the trope of the "strong, black woman" are not unique to our moment. Rather, in the continuation of a much older history of representations in which, as scholars like Richard Dyer have described, a negative stereotype is traded for a more

positive one in lieu of true character building.³⁹ Both Dr. Mann and Agent 355 represent, physically and in their personalities, deeply embedded artifacts of “American” culture: Agent 355 is a black woman whose name makes reference to the era of the American Revolution and the creation of “race” in the U.S. context and Dr. Mann embodies two “other” cultures of great anxiety to U.S. supremacy, historically and currently. Additionally, the lone white male with non-white female companions is particularly popular in comic books and genre fiction, as will be made apparent in this thesis.

With a particularly predictable reading audience, a well-documented appeal to sentiment (which I will deal with more, later in this chapter), and an indebtedness to earlier eras of caricature and satire, it is not surprising that a comic book series would reach for “positive” stereotypes to build its characters (Fig. 4). Indeed, as Bradford Wright has written about attempts by major comics publishers, as early as the 1970’s, to diversify the content of mainstream stories, “As difficult as it was to get white readers to buy comics books about black characters, explained Roy Thomas, ‘it was even harder to get boys to buy comics about women.’ And evidently, if white boys did not buy the comic books, the comic books did not sell.”⁴⁰ Though Wright was writing specifically about comics of the 1970’s, an overwhelming number of contemporary mainstream comics suggest a similar target audience. Indeed, of the four comics here examined,

³⁹ These characters are common stereotypes, alongside the primary white male, in many recent apocalyptic narratives, including almost all of those discussed in this thesis. In particular, the “strong, emotionally distant, black woman” is a wildly popular contemporary trope that should be understood as limiting and problematic as such. Think, Michonne (*The Walking Dead*), Zoe (*Firefly*) etc. For more information about the proliferation of this stereotype in popular culture see: Stephane Dunn, ‘Baad Bitches’ and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008). See also: Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, (London, New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁴⁰ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 251.

three feature straight, white, male protagonists, non-white female “side-kicks,” and occasional non-white, male, secondary characters. The only series which deviates from this model (the subject of Chapter 5, *The Private Eye*) is published through an independent, web platform. It is important to acknowledge the efforts of major publishers to include more diversity in recent years such as Marvel’s decision to feature a female Thor and black Captain America and DC’s inclusion of characters like Selena Kyle and Batwoman who identify as gay or bisexual. It is likewise necessary to remember that these are exemplary instances in a still predominantly white, straight, and male fan culture.

The trade on established “American” symbols and meaning in *Y the Last Man* extends to genre and historical references as well. Alongside allusions to the Culper Ring, a literal agent of the creation of “America,” Yorick and his quest make explicit reference to another important figure in “American” culture and masculinity: the master of escape, Harry Houdini. The great escape artist, born Ehrich Weiss, was a prominent figure during the age of “rugged masculinity” popularized by Theodore Roosevelt and cemented by the popularity of the strong man in the early years of the twentieth century. Yorick’s escape artistry is a nod to the famous masculine icon and Guerra’s early depictions of the character reference the figure’s famous feats. In the first issue Yorick talks on the phone with his girlfriend while hanging upside down in a doorframe restricted by a straightjacket. Later, he appears on a cover crouching in front of a gene sequence in the same straight jacket, an emblem iconic of Weiss’s practice and many of his most famous tricks (Fig. 5).

As John F. Kasson has argued, Houdini, alongside Eugen Sandow (an iconic “strongman”) and the fictional Tarzan, was instrumental in cementing a “modern” masculinity in the U.S. This “American” masculinity was definitively white, physical, spectacular, and authoritative and, in the trying twentieth century, served as a positive representation of the country as a whole. Kasson explains:

Not only did he [Houdini] make his body the nexus of challenges, but, crucial to his success, he made it a subject to interpret, a bearer of meaning and a source of mystery. . . . Sandow appealed to a male ideal purportedly rooted in both ancient sculpture and modern science. Houdini cultivated illusion in order to reaffirm traditional verities of masculinity. The distance between strongman and escape artist was often surprisingly short.⁴¹

Appropriately, Yorick’s failed and often pathetic masculinity in Vaughan and Guerra’s imagining, creates a need for the physical and internal escapism of which comics have often been accused - an escapism fictionalized by Michael Chabon in his novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* and the later *Escapist* comic inspired by Chabon’s story. At the same time, reaching for the ideologically “white” and “masculine” character of Harry Houdini to prove Yorick’s failure as the last man on earth demonstrates the enduring, and problematic, legacy of this version of “American manhood.”⁴²

Famously, the “cause” of the plague that kills all Y-chromosome carrying organisms except for Yorick and, as the reader eventually learns, Dr. Mann’s Chinese father Dr. Matsumori, is not immediately clear. The explanation offered from a character

⁴¹ John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 113, 155.

⁴² For an excellent discussion of this “American manhood” see: Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, (New York: Free Press, 1996).

within the comic is given by Dr. Matsumori, a world-renowned geneticist. We learn that father and daughter were engaged in a race to be the first to successfully clone a human, and both were using Dr. Mann's genes as source material. According to Dr. Matsumori, approximately 2.9 billion people and uncountable animals perish when he finally perfects the cloning process, rendering males superfluous, and rightfully so. He explains:

The Y-chromosome has been rationally self-destructing for hundreds of millions of years. It used to contain thousands of working genes, but was whittled down to just a few dozen even before the plague. Men have long been a necessary evil for the continuation of the species, but the moment that even became *OBSOLETE*, nature righted its course. I was merely the trigger that set off a time bomb that's been ticking for millennia. . . . Ever since I was a little boy, women have terrified me. I suspect this is why my male colleagues and I marginalized so many later in life. Our sexes might be equal but they are not the same. I'd hoped we could all find a way to coexist, but evolution clearly prefers the idea of *SEGREGATION*, a newly passed natural law by which you and I must abide.⁴³

This explanation is full of hyperbolic emotion and provides a more insidious parallel to Yorick's own pathetic masculinity and fear of women. It is also eerily appropriate for the current moment in light of continued research, bringing us closer to the actual moment in which the Y-chromosome will not be necessary for human reproduction.⁴⁴ If this sounds like a ridiculous, irreverent explanation to the deaths of so many people, it is likely because Vaughan insists that he buried the "true" cause elsewhere in the series.

In an abridged script published two years after the completion of the series it is explained that General Alter T'selon, the leader of a rogue Israeli military group that provides continuous roadblocks to the success of the group, and the Culper Ring, are the actual perpetrators (further highlighting the pitiful manhood of Dr. Matsumori).

⁴³ Emphases in original. Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra, *Y the Last Man*. Vol. 9: Issues 49-54, 73 and 79.

⁴⁴ For more information about this research see: "New Study Indicates That Y Chromosome May Be Unnecessary for Reproduction," *Huffington Post*, 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/22/y-chromosome-reproduction_n_4326558.html.

According to this narrative thread, Alter propagated an attack on China using a chemical agent developed by the Culper Ring and designed to prevent women from conceiving male children. Reminding the reader of recent media outcry over the Chinese privileging of male children as more economically mobile, this was a gesture meant to cripple the Chinese economy. Something goes wrong with the agent though and it targets all existing organisms with Y-chromosomes rather than inhibiting them in conceiving mothers. The implied relationship between the U.S. Culper Ring and the Israeli military group draws a fictional parallel to the contemporary alliance between the two controversial nations despite increasing pressure to dismantle it in light of Israel's continued conflict with Palestine. In this alternative ending, the anxiety of life after the "war on terror," continued conflict relating to the U.S./Israel alliance, and emerging suspicion of China in lieu of American economic distress is represented. Indeed, Vaughan and Guerra draw on nearly all of the symbolic "threats" to the myth of exceptionalism and sentiment in the contemporary moment, albeit in vague and often contradictory ways.

And yet, their narrative masks many of the disunities between rhetoric and reality that is the hallmark of contemporary neoliberal ideology, as well as its Enlightenment predecessor. Though China has replaced Japan and the earlier Soviet Union in the minds of many "Americans" as the greatest threat to national safety, many of the country's largest corporations rely heavily on exploitative Chinese labor. Major tech-companies like Apple and Samsung, for example, are especially reliant on outsourced labor; a disconcerting relationship for many U.S. citizens in this era of much praise and hope for the "tech-revolution." This also grants an additional problematizing layer to the common

political/social adage about the lack of jobs for “Americans.” Again displaying the common hallmark of U.S. political and national rhetoric under neoliberalism, the reality of job outsourcing is dramatically different than the imagined situation according to prevailing sentiment.

Apple in particular has been repeatedly under investigation since the early 2000’s for serious human rights violations in regards to Chinese labor conditions. The popular “nation-state” argument against China, which blames Chinese trade regulations for the decay of the U.S. economy and requires that the Chinese government implement “market-freeing” policies as a solution, misrepresents the reality of global economics. As Martin Hart-Landsberg points out, it is rather the larger issue of a discontinuity between capitalist logic and a new form of globalization than specific relations with China; China is perhaps best understood as the final platform for a global system itself organized like a corporation.⁴⁵ Indeed, if China were to truly be undermined, as is the apparent goal in *Y the Last Man*, the economic implications for the U.S. would be far worse than the supposedly constricting trade relations between the countries contemporaneously.

While Yorick’s supporting cast assists in driving the story along, the world of this apocalypse is constructed through the main character’s emotional interpretation and experience. Indeed, Yorick’s emotional state is so crucial to the story that the majority of the fourth trade paperback (issues 18-23) is devoted to the hero’s suicide intervention. The unique intervention strategy, called *Le Precede D’enfer*, is administered by another Culper Ring agent, Agent 711 (sharing her code name with General George Washington

⁴⁵ Martin Hart-Landsberg, “The U.S. Economy and China: Capitalism, Class, and Crisis,” *Monthly Review*, 61, no. 2 (February 2010). <http://monthlyreview.org/2010/02/01/the-u-s-economy-and-china-capitalism-class-and-crisis/>.

himself). A slightly older white woman and depressed widow with whom Agent 355 is close, Agent 711 conducts an elaborate therapy that involves taunting Yorick with an accusation of homosexuality, physically harming him, tying him up in several arrangements, and forcing him to “consent” to rape. She retroactively explains that it is “a form of aversion therapy developed during a secret meeting between Benjamin Franklin and the Marquis de Sade. It’s based on the idea that your sexuality and mortality are indissoluble elements of...”⁴⁶ and that, “The process is based on secrecy.”

The treatment looks like a BDSM-influenced Jungian therapy session, and several pages are devoted to Yorick’s bizarre psycho-sexual shaming and eventual “epiphany” (Fig. 6) Here again, as in the earlier vignette between the opposing senators, the creators load the scene with highly emotional, problematic, and even offensive content. And, rather than using this content towards a narrative development, theme, or “message,” it is deployed for affect and effect, only. Yorick’s torture is violent, emotional, and titillating. And, like the famous Houdini and his strategically nude acts, the vulnerable display and subsequent recovery of Yorick’s white, heterosexual, male body reaffirms the primacy of that position and his centrality in the story and in the “American” imaginary, more broadly. It is in Yorick’s ability to recover from these vulnerable, exposing situations that he maintains the central position in the narrative despite his reliance on women and inadaptability.

Though this is the most glaring example, Vaughan includes a multitude of [often extreme] opportunities to empathize with and relate to Yorick’s alienation and difficulty in the new world. Among these are frequent peeks into Yorick’s dream life, recurrent

⁴⁶ Dialogue ends mid-sentence.

and lengthy monologues to himself and other characters, flashbacks to sentimental vignettes of his relationship with Beth (the blonde, anthropologist girlfriend with whom he longs to be reunited), an otherwise unnecessary familial drama involving Yorick's sister, Hero, and the abrupt addition of commentary from Yorick's much older self at the very end of the series. Vaughan's preoccupation with the white, male individual in this way reveals the legacy of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution in the rhetoric, if not the economic and political model, of neoliberalism in the U.S.

Like its Enlightenment counterpart whose appeal to sentiment granted substantive life primarily to white males, neoliberal subjectivity, while granting personhood to non-white characters, privileges the white male perspective over others. As already mentioned, three out of four comic series' in this analysis are told from the perspective of single, white males who are experiencing emotional and moral dilemmas and being aided by their non-white, female assistants. Scholars such as Kirsten Buick, Daniel Bernardi, Ruth Frankenberg, and Hamilton Carroll⁴⁷ demonstrate the persistence of "whiteness" as "normal" according to prevailing sentiment under "American" nationalism. Recalling the nineteenth century literary climate that gave birth to writers like Joseph Conrad, and Herman Melville and Mark Twain in the U.S., the comic books in this study demonstrate the lasting cultural authority of the sad, troubled, white man. Likewise, they demonstrate the continued flaws in this medium's ability to fully imagine and criticize cultural and social ills, even in its best iteration.

⁴⁷ Kirsten Buick, *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Daniel Bernardi, *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Hamilton Carroll, *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity*, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

The persistence of privileging white male emotional trauma is particularly important, as sentimentality was instrumental in the nineteenth century as part of a project to imagine the “national body.” As Samuels writes, “while frequently operating as social commentary or critique, sentimentality acts in conjunction with the problem of the body and what it embodies, how social, political, racial, and gendered meanings are determined through their differential embodiments.”⁴⁸ Thus, the representation of bodies in this genre both reflects and acts upon the ways in which those bodies are conceived of in real time. This is in turn made possible by a “ritual repetition of appropriate behavior” in which governing attitudes of difference are both consented to and reenacted by those who benefit from it, as well as those who do not.⁴⁹

In the United States in the post-Reagan moment, who is represented and who is not is equally important. While the contemporary nationalistic project and the details of exclusion are different, the sentimentalizing of a solely white, male experience as a stand in for the “American” experience is just as problematic now as it was then. Indeed, as Kirsten Buick explains, “The framing of race and gender as ‘problems’ or ‘questions’ acts as a rhetorical index of the condition of racial and patriarchal subordination within which white male subjectivity take shape. ... America still has a Negro problem and an Indian problem and a Woman Question...”⁵⁰

The centrality of empathy and emotional connections to Yorick and his counterparts evident in the narrative of *Y the Last Man* is mirrored in the visual style of

⁴⁸ Shirley Samuels, “Introduction,” *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 6.

⁴⁹ Kirsten Buick, *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History’s Black and Indian Subject*, xv-xvi.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, xvii-xviii.

Pia Guerra. The liminal space of comic books, somewhere between [or simultaneously both] written and visual language, and its debatably shorter history⁵¹ ostensibly grants, or can grant, creators a degree of creative flexibility and an escape from as tried a canon as that of the novel or painting. Because of this comparative freedom, artists and writers in the industry have stretched the limits of the traditional newspaper funny or superhero comic, producing works that rely solely on image; playing with references to other mediums like photography and film, giving rise to the “motion comic;”⁵² and popularizing digital comics, and using the comic to convey complex phenomenological experiences as in David Beauchard’s *Le Ascension du haut mal* (published in English as *Epileptic*). There have also been a variety of movements that resist or refigure aspects of the comic book industry and classic form such as the underground comix movements in the U.S. and Canada (1960’s-1970’s) and the emergence of a self-publishing zine culture.

With all of these adaptations and evolutions in mind, however, there has also been the push to think of comic books as “Art,” resulting in a canon, of sorts. In many cases, the rule of this canon suggest the importance of striving towards realism despite the two-dimensional medium. As Robert Harvey explains in *The Art of the Comic Book: An*

⁵¹ In the American tradition it is generally agreed upon that the “beginning” of the “modern” comic book form and separate industry (comic strips and political/social “cartoons” were printed in newspapers from the beginning of the printing press) as mainstream and standardized can be traced to the printing of “Famous Funnies” in July 1934 which was a reprint of 100 classic newspaper comics in one trade book. The industry exploded almost immediately and gave rise to a multitude of publishing companies and styles. The “first” superhero was born shortly thereafter with the appearance of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s Superman in Action Comics #1 in June 1938. There are, however, much earlier traditions in Japan and Europe and some debate about what exactly constitutes the beginning of a “modern comic.”

⁵² Motion comics are a very recent comic book form which combine traditional stylistic elements with animation that have been popularized alongside tablet technology. Many of the early versions were created to coincide with the release of comic adaptation films so the major publishers like DC and Marvel generated many of the first. In recent years, however, many individual artists have created them, often collaborating with or being commissioned by Apple or smaller app developing companies. Japanese artists and writers also has a comparable form of this called the visual novel.

Aesthetic History, Will Eisner, Bob Kane, and Harvey Kurtzman (creator of *MAD Magazine*) are seminal figures who aided this endeavor in different ways. Eisner for his evolution of the mood-capturing “splash page;” Kane for his experimentation with the relationship between image and text and for giving rise to the “graphic novel;” and Kurtzman for pushing the limits of the medium towards the development of characters with rich, dynamic personalities. Of the comics included in this analysis, Guerra’s style of visual storytelling is most in line with these established and valued parameters.

Pia Guerra’s creation is the least heavily stylized and the most detailed and naturalistically rendered of those here discussed and makes reference to the old house style of the series’ publisher, Vertigo Comics.⁵³ The majority of the series follows what one might be tempted to call a standard format – obviously sequential panels, flowing either from top to bottom or left to right, with a few full sized splash pages per issue. The characters and settings are drawn with a remarkable level of realism and the settings and world of the comic faithfully mimic our world. The only contrast to these general rules are the special covers for the individual issues which pull out central characters and props, artifacts, or symbols from the narrative contained within in a collage-like arrangement. For a lot of this cover art, Guerra does also play with the heavy-handed, flatly colored style that a lot of artists employ in the years after Frank Miller’s *Batman* comics. This artistic style affirms the “artistic” aspiration of many comics and graphic novels. It also adheres to the tone of Vaughan’s storytelling which appeals to sentiment in its attempts to generate empathy; Guerra’s attention to realism and accessible reading

⁵³ Examples of this style include Alan Moore’s *Swamp Thing*, *Hellblazer*, *Shade the Changing Man*, *Preacher*, and *Scalped*.

makes the pained, lustful, confused, or frightened countenances of her characters and the world in which they live all the more compelling (Fig. 3-6).

One of the most often agreed upon conditions of American neoliberalism is a complete penetration of market signals into daily life such that we begin to think of even ourselves and our children in terms of capital and economic viability. Or, as Foucault put it, the attempt to “use the market economy and the typical analyses of the market economy to decipher non-market relationships and phenomena which are ... what we call social phenomena.”⁵⁴ This is most evident in political and public rhetoric which insists that we “invest in ourselves” in order to produce the happiest possible future and irrationally maintains the myth of meritocracy and American “essentialism.” This phenomenon often works alongside identity politics⁵⁵ to distract from the inequality of our economic reality by shifting the focus from the real or the concrete to the abstract. It also represents one of the many points of contradiction between neoliberal economic reality, “accumulation by dispossession” according to David Harvey, and rhetoric.

Harvey explains:

Dispossession ... is fragmented and particular—a privatization here, an environmental degradation there, a financial crisis of indebtedness somewhere else. It is hard to oppose all of this specificity and particularity without appeal to universal principles. Dispossession entails the loss of rights. Hence the turn to a universalist rhetoric of human rights, dignity, sustainable ecological practices, environmental rights, and the like as the basis for unified oppositional politics.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault. *The Birth of Biopolitics*, (New York: Picador, 2008), 240.

⁵⁵ Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed Jr., among others, describe how identity politics often reduce discussions about social/economic/political conditions to issues of “intolerance” rather than issues of “inequality.” These scholars suggest that shifting the rhetoric to tolerance distracts from any pragmatic resolution of economic disparity. See: Walter Benn Michaels, “The Beauty of a Social Problem e.g. unemployment,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, 57, no. 3 (2011): 309-327 and Adolph Reed Jr., “Django Unchained, or, The Help: How “Cultural Politics” Is Worse Than No Politics at All, and Why,” *NonSite.Org*, February 25, 2013. <http://nonsite.org/feature/django-unchained-or-the-help-how-cultural-politics-is-worse-than-no-politics-at-all-and-why>.

⁵⁶ Harvey, 178.

A primary vehicle for this version of distraction, from advertisement to fine art, is an appeal to emotion and sentiment. Anna McCarthy describes the psychological results of neoliberalism as akin to the infantile state of “anxious attachment.”⁵⁷ In this state a child, whose parent bestows affection randomly and infrequently, feels perpetually unfulfilled by the relationship. The child’s response in this state is to continue to seek the random affection with increasing fervor, though history has proved this quest futile. McCarthy suggests that the neoliberal subject lives in a similar state, that we nostalgically cling to ideals, practices, and structures that no longer exist even though we know that they do not. A useful example of this is the response to many of our current environmental dilemmas. Despite the now unquestionable evidence about climate change, very little has been done to remedy or counteract it; we prefer to wait and see if things will go back to how they used to be. And *Y the Last Man* offers a comparable coping strategy to its own problems with a supposedly self-correcting world, according to Dr. Matsumori.

It follows logically, then, that visual culture would occupy itself with the realm of sentiment when decision-making and political rhetoric is based on nostalgia, hope, and individual feeling. The resulting affective mode in art and popular culture is attractive to a contemporary audience because of its soothing familiarity and its distraction from a much more complex reality than it offers. Yorrick, Vaughan and Guerra’s struggling, pitiful hero, has a similar relationship to his environment. From clinging to now ridiculously impractical concepts of chivalry that results in risks to his own life, to

⁵⁷ Anna McCarthy, “Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theater of Suffering,” *Social Text*. 25, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 17-41.

insisting on remaining faithful to his missing girlfriend, Yorick never stops seeking positive reinforcement from the world that no longer exists. His pathetic depiction by both Vaughan and Guerra and the emotional trauma he undergoes over and over again, offers a satisfying catharsis for a similarly anxious reader.

This [re]turn to affect in art is often figured as an antidote to the tonal coldness of post-modern art and literature. However, as Rachel Greenwald Smith has noted about literature, this is likely the result of a misinterpretation of the project of postmodernism and a misunderstanding of contemporary literature. In the essay “Postmodernism and the Affective Turn,” she writes:

The piety with which we approach individual emotions supports individualism in a range of other activities that we see as reflective of individual choice: the relationship between consumption and identity seen in the growth of lifestyle consumerism being perhaps the clearest expression of the relationship between the respect with which we afford seemingly individual feeling and neoliberal capitalism. The parallels between Margaret Thatcher’s contention that ‘there is no such thing as society, only individual men and women’ and the implicit suggestion that the best novels focus on society only insofar as it is reflected in and influenced by individuals should draw our attention to the sociopolitical stakes of this trend in critical appraisals of contemporary fiction.⁵⁸

Though Smith is describing a critical approach that she sees as flawed, it is an approach that is remarkably prevalent across genres. Vaughan’s preoccupation with Yorick’s internal life and gratuitous attention to his romantic and familial attachments, is an example of the author and artist setting this strategy loose in narrative and visual form. Even in a dystopic present, the narrative is overly concerned with a single character’s psychological trauma.

⁵⁸ Rachel Greenwald Smith, “Postmodernism and the Affective Turn,” *Twentieth Century Literature*. 57, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2011), 426.

In particular, the emotional trauma of a single, white male as a cathartic release for a readership that is still typically male, is an unsurprising one. In the introduction to the 1999 collection of essays *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*, editors Chapman and Hendler explain that masculine displays of sentimentality and even tears hold a central and culturally readable place in American history. They explain [using President George Washington's tearful military resignation speech in 1783 and Walt Whitman's poetic re-visitation of the moment as the backdrop]:

... One of America's foundational national moments, reproduced in one of its canonical literary texts, involves a fluid affective exchange between men. It is both 'surprising' and historically revealing to recognize this exchange—and its recurrent representation in both history and literature—as an example of sentimentality, one of 'a set of cultural practices designed to evoke a certain form of emotional response, usually empathy, in the reader or viewer.'⁵⁹

Yorick's emotional experience as the only sexually viable man to survive a frighteningly specific apocalypse is a continuation of this tradition. Yorick is a man in a tumultuous world with whom many American men, in a society whose shifting masculine sphere is well documented by scholars like Michael Kimmel, Anthony Rotundo, Brenton Malin, Tim Edwards, William Pinar, Hazel Carby, and many others, may identify.⁶⁰ And, Dr.

⁵⁹ Chapman and Hendler, "Introduction," *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*.

⁶⁰ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, (New York: Free Press, 1996); Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Brenton Malin, "Looking White and Middle-Class: Stereoscopic Imagery and Technology in the Early Twentieth Century in America," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 93, no. 4 (November 2007); *American Masculinity Under Clinton: Popular Media and the Nineties 'Crisis of Masculinity'*, (New York: P. Lang, 2005); Tim Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity*, (London, New York: Routledge, 2006); William Pinar, "'I Am a Man': The Queer Politics of Race," *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies*, 2, no. 1 (2002): 113-130; Hazel Carby, *Race Men*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Matsumori as well, epitomizing the stereotype of the impotent Asia male, affirms the series emphasis on uncertain, unstable, and unsuccessful masculinity.

In the era of the growing “Red Pill masculinity”⁶¹ movement which appeals to its followers in the same affective mode, to everyone’s detriment, it is imperative to give scholarly attention to this neoliberal, racialized masculine sentimentality and where and how it is deployed in popular culture. Vaughan’s *Yorick* and the red pill movement’s “rational male” (despite the misleading title, the movement’s seminal tome of the same name, and others like it, are highly emotional texts) are not at all the same figure. They do, however, appeal to their intended audiences using the same formal mechanisms and cultural references: sentiment, science, overpowering women, the appearance of pragmatic honesty, and the thesis that the space for white men in a neoliberal, contemporary America is uncertain.

Vaughan and Guerra’s series similarly demonstrates the prevalence of what Lauren Berlant describes as “cruel optimism,” another result of the tension between neoliberal rhetoric and its reality. The premise of Berlant’s argument is that

⁶¹ The “red pill masculinity” movement and its “manosphere” forums online are touted as spaces where a movement comparable to the feminist movement can give voice and encouragement to a contemporary crisis in American manhood. At its best, it is that. At its worst, the manosphere trades rape tips, encourages racism, and rationalizes infidelity and child abandonment. Taking its name from the Matrix films and drawing on the white, male savior character of Keanu Reeves’ Neo as emblematic of appropriate maleness, the movement calls itself “red pill” to indicate that they are the only ones who “really see” what is happening to men in the current moment. Further, the primary authors and advocates of the movement draw on misrepresentations of evolutionary theory and biological data about human mating as “support” for their claims. Thus, Red Pill theories can be seen as a far darker side to the masculine sentiment inherent to the apocalypses in this study. Still sentimental, still apocalyptic, and still focused on the white male body, the masculinist movements of our moment, rather than uplifting pitiful men as in Vaughan’s story, encourage men to forcefully resume misogynist, racist, and classist hierarchies in their own lives. The Red Pill movement is most publically associated with a recent shooting in Santa Barbara where a 22 year old killed 6 people, leaving behind a stomach-churning red pill manifesto. For more information see: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/05/27/inside-the-manosphere-that-inspired-santa-barbara-shooter-elliott-rodger/>, as well as the movement’s seminal text, *The Rational Male*, by Rollo Tomassi.

neoliberalism generates a nostalgic attitude towards objects of desire; that the neoliberal subject clings to values and desires that have been proven obsolete, despite his awareness of this obsolescence. Berlant defines cruel optimism as “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic.”⁶² Though we know it is superfluous, illogical, or unhelpful, we long for artifacts of a pre-neoliberal past. Ironically, this “past” only really exists ideologically, as the U.S. relationship to capital in the neoliberal moment is not so much different from as (an exaggerated version of) the commodity culture born out of the Enlightenment.

Nevertheless, a cultural nostalgia remains palpable, evident in works like Dave Eggers *Hologram for the King* (2012) as well as the endless conservative lament about the decline of “American” manufacturing and the increasing fervor with which U.S. citizens rebel against immigration into the country. Yorick reacts to his new situation in much the same way. While his survival depends on his ability to adapt to new ethical paradigms and maneuver in the world without being recognized as male, he repeatedly risks bodily harm for himself and his companions by clinging to old rules. Indeed, a central theme of the story is Yorick’s (in)ability to live up to the role of “last man on earth” (the reader does not learn about Dr. Matsumori until the very end of the series and the only other men are astronauts who are technically in space) because of his inflexibility and misplaced moralism, a theme not uncommon in comics generally.

Y the Last Man is, to this day, one of the most critically acclaimed and popular American comic book series. It also reflects more fully than most others the ways in

⁶² Emphasis in original. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 24.

which contemporary national fears (foreign and domestic) including foreign assault, the development of biogenetic science, and its effects on the sanctity and historically privileged position of the male body, are reflected in U.S. popular culture. In particular, I have argued, this series demonstrates the anxiety and uncertainty that characterizes American neoliberalism. In the era of financialization, to be American is to experience subtle, consistent, and government supported trauma. Perhaps the most compelling evidence for this is the dramatic rise of anxiety disorders in Americans of all demographics and the anxious despair evident in the “red pill” movement and its subscribers.

Vaughan and Guerra manifest the psychological effects of life under this traumatic neoliberalism from a particularly historical and contested position in the United States: the awkward, white male. In *Science Talk: Changing Notions of Science in Popular Culture*, Daniel Patrick Thurs reminds us that:

Communication studies scholar John Fiske has stressed the existence of popular culture in reaction to attempts to exert widespread control and argued in particular that ‘a text that is to be made into popular culture must . . . contain both the forces of domination and the opportunities to speak against them.’⁶³

If we take this to be true then Vaughan and Guerra’s series, which so fully embodies the neoliberal condition, may also be encoded with a less-traumatic way of being in the neoliberal age. If so, perhaps it is rooted in the lack of discernible markets in the world of the comic?

Alternatively, the legacy of Enlightenment ideology and the ways in which its rhetoric is often deployed to support neoliberal economic agendas is difficult to address

⁶³ Daniel Patrick Thurs, *Science Talk: Changing Notions of Science in Popular Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 46.

in summation. Indeed, like Dürer's subtle and inconspicuous Pestilence rider and Žižek's "biogenetic revolution," the sources of insidiousness are difficult to trace, despite the anxiety that they have caused among many "Americans." Like continued panic concerning Measles outbreaks, HIV/Aids, and diseases related to immunizations, as well as the well-documented fear of technology as it advances, the fallout of life under neoliberalism cleverly avoids specific blame. This is due, in large part, to the incredible power of the American myth propagated by the Founding Fathers in the 18th century which continues to sway public opinion, even against its own interests, in the contemporary moment.

Chapter 4: War, or, The Explosive Growth of Social Divisions and Exclusions.

Men are estranged from one another as each secretly tries to make an instrument of the other; and in time a full circle is made; one makes an instrument of himself, and is estranged from It also.

-C. Wright Mills.

When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, 'Come!' And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another.

-Revelation 6:3-4

In *The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse* (1497-8) Dürer represents War as an older man with a substantial beard, brandishing his sword as he charges out into the world, crushing underfoot all of those in his path (Fig. 1). The ever-poised sword of a middle-aged War in Dürer's imagination coincides frighteningly well with one of Žižek's riders: a violent, age-old tradition of exclusion and division. In the late capitalist moment the results are extreme - the few rich are impossibly wealthy and the numerous poor are shockingly impoverished. Like military conflict, social divisions in a neoliberal society are both source and symptom of a cultural problem. War can be an aggressive action, as in Germany's role in WWII, as well as a reaction (or pre-emption), as in Bush's "war against terrorism." Both versions often represent a willingness to sacrifice a large number of the general population in service of an ideological goal and an inability, or unwillingness, of those in power to find internal solutions; a condition that is commonplace in the late-capitalist U.S.

In the same way, extreme free markets in the age of neoliberalism are touted as a solution to economic depression as well as a kind of purposeful action against global markets that might seek to overthrow supposed U.S. global dominance; both of which

service particularly “American” ideological values. The reality of both practices is that many suffer and a few are afforded a tangible reward for success. In *DMZ*, a comic book by writer, Brian Wood, and artist, Riccardo Burchielli, both the metaphor of Dürer’s War and neoliberal exclusion play out in an admirably literal way.

DMZ, published by Vertigo Comics, released its first single issue in November 2005. The popular comic ran for 72 total issues until February 2012, resulting in twelve trade paperbacks. The series has been described by Wood as a response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and “a love letter to New York City.”⁶⁴ The world of the story is a very-near American future in which a second civil war has turned Manhattan into a demilitarized zone (DMZ), split into a variety of factions, dead zones, and areas that never see ceasefire. The United States, post-war, is divided between the agendas of the Free States of America, the dissenting group, and The United States of America, made primarily of government officials, military officers, and those civilians living on the east coast who were lucky enough to be unaffected by heavy fire.

Wood and Burchielli’s comic depicts and engages the ways in which the contemporary subject defines itself in opposition to others, the ideological intensity of these distinctions, and their catastrophic results. The resulting affective mode is a familiar, romantic attachment to revolutionary ideology and violence, a mode especially meaningful to “Americans” whose attachment to the drama of the Revolutionary War

⁶⁴ The back of the twelfth, and final, trade paperback in the series, for example, reads, “After six years and a dozen volumes, Matty Roth’s story comes to an end. With it also comes the end of the war, the Second American Civil War that tore a nation in half. Here, in this final volume, the last two weeks of Matty’s time in the city is detailed, along with a powerful epilogue issue that removes any doubt that DMZ, at its core, is a love letter to New York City.” In the introduction to the first trade paperback author Brian Azzarello similarly states that “It was on those streets, [New York City] looking at the lights behind the windows, that I realized Brian and Riccardo weren’t trying to make me see their vision; they were pointing out what was already there. New York defines itself. Put a Gap on every corner, and a Starbuck’s across the street, it’ll still be New York. Put it at ground zero, it won’t change what it is.”

continues to define contemporary patriotism. Indeed, as recently as 2015, *AMC* picked up a television series called *Turn* which romantically and heroically depicts General Washington's famous Culper Ring of spies during the Revolutionary War, ignoring the fact that spying was considered a low-brow behavior at the time. Recalling the ways in which the U.S. has historically mythologized traumatic war-time events, *DMZ* reminds the reader of what Arthur Neal explains is an especially "American" relationship between war, trauma, and popular culture:

With the passing of time, these [American collective] memories came to be characterized by mythmaking and Cold War preoccupations with the worst-case scenario (Clarke, 2006). The realities of nuclear war were prominent themes in popular culture for several decades following World War II. Justifications for policies in the war on terrorism drew heavily upon memories of Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor.⁶⁵

Avoiding the list of potential issues that scholars have come to associate with Captain America and Superman comics, which attempted to deal with real-life figures of conflict,⁶⁶ Wood and Burchielli instead use a fictional war backdrop to engage American militarism, national ideologies, and economic disparity and difference in "urban" communities.

The narrative follows Matthew "Matty" Roth, a young, white, brash, and inexperienced journalist for Liberty News, a major news corporation comparable to Fox News in both tone and influence. Landing a spot on the first journalistic foray into the DMZ since the onset of violence, thanks to his politician father, Matty is dropped into an

⁶⁵ Arthur G. Neal, "Nuclear War and Popular Culture," *War, Memory, and Popular Culture: Essays on Modes of Remembrance and Commemoration* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2009), 94.

⁶⁶ For example: Christopher Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed?: Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda during WWII*, (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2011).

unprecedentedly isolated situation in war, and violence-ravaged, Manhattan. Wood and Burchielli build on the tradition established by Joe Sacco and Warren Ellis of featuring journalists as critical observers. Matty, however, is primarily drawn to the assignment in the DMZ out of necessity and naiveté as opposed to the indignation, curiosity, or concern of these earlier models. When their helicopter is shot down, Matty and Nobel Prize-winning Viktor Ferguson, the celebrity journalist whom he is accompanying, are kidnapped. Ferguson is eventually murdered and Matty begins an intense attempt at assimilation into the damaged, complicated, and unexpectedly beautiful war-zone. Not unlike the narrative of *Y the Last Man* and *The Private Eye* (to be discussed in the next chapter), Wood and Burchielli's story is told primarily through the lens of Matty's predominantly emotional experience. The journalistic element of this series, however, necessitates snapshots of other characters and a multitude of flashbacks to earlier events in the demilitarized zone.

With his hyper-saturated visual style, Burchielli braces the reader for the grittiness and intensity for which the comic is resoundingly celebrated. Matty's introduction into the landscape of the DMZ includes barbed wire, blocks of demolished and burning buildings, and hanging bodies. The first issue, "On the Ground," begins with washed-out cityscapes framed by the recurring silhouette of a man in Army Combat Uniform holding a long-range rifle. The following page features a map of "Manhattan Island: The 'DMZ' (population 400,000)," which documents and labels New Jersey and Inland (the Free States), Brooklyn/Queens/Long Island (the United States of America) and the Demarcation Line, as well as details like the location of the mass of the Free States Armies, Ground Zero, and "Sniper Heaven." The map and introductory pages are

overlaid with text boxes that the reader soon realizes are clips from media pundits for Liberty News. These boxes include discussions of the development and details of the conflict between the two armies, but often without any mention of the impact on the larger population (Figs. 7-8). This composite, mixed media design reminds the reader of Matty's journalism background and his purpose in the DMZ – to document the lives of those who are still there. It also often embodies the chaos that it illustrates; the artist overlays images of violence with news coverage, magazine-like editorials, individual portraits, representations of photographs and Polaroids, maps, diagrams, and handwritten notes, creating an atmospheric echo of the event or thought that he is representing.

Wood and Burchielli's series, more than any of the works here discussed, relies on an experimental narrative and visual structure that Thierry Groensteen has dubbed, "neo-baroque." In *Comics and Narration* (2013), the scholar's revisit of his seminal work, *The System of Comics* (2007), Groensteen explains:

The 'neo-baroque' permanently deploys a whole arsenal of unsystematic effects ... the effects that the specialists of 'neo-baroque' favor and indulge in at every possible opportunity are: the destructuring of the hyperframe by images that bleed off the edge of the page and intrusions into the gutter, the use of multiple inserts, the maximization of the contrast between large background images and the inset panels, the vertical or horizontal elongation of panels, and the frequent stacking of very narrow horizontal panels.⁶⁷

While I do not share Groensteen's disdain for the "complication" of comics structure in recent years, there may be something to his observation that, "The prominence of the 'neo-baroque' can be attributed to a generation that has turned its back on the ideals of

⁶⁷ Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, translated by Ann Miller, (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2013), 47.

simplicity and transparency.”⁶⁸ As Mierzoff has explained, it is not that contemporary U.S. citizens cannot see the compromised and ideological nature of these tropes of realism, but rather that it is impossible to imagine complete alternatives. Indeed, these ideals are increasingly uncommon in political and media arenas, the legacy of deconstruction in art and scholarship (while fading in prominence) still often influences us to complicate, convolute, and “problematize,” and the world itself (globalization, economics etc.) seems to have become immensely more complex.

The issue entitled, “Wilson’s War,” (2008), an issue that zeroes in on Chinatown and its construction in the world of the comic, is a particularly useful example of *DMZ* as “neo-baroque” (Fig. 9). In this issue, Burchielli experiments most dramatically with the manipulation of three dimensional space and the use of panels. At the top of the opening page, the viewer encounters a heavy-handed rendering of New York City in the rain. This city-scape is not inside of a panel but several panels are layered unsystematically beneath it. Connected by the increasingly abstracted presence of a symbolic white dove, the illusion of true depth is compromised as the rain can be seen on top of, behind, and inside the panels. Further, while the series employs extreme realism elsewhere, this section is darkly, simplistically, and geometrically rendered.

Burchielli also channels graffiti art traditions for the construction of the urban spaces of the *DMZ*. Scholars in recent decades have hypothesized about the concentrated presence of graffiti arts in liminal, transitory places, especially in spaces impacted by war and conflict. As Victor Burgin described it in 1996:

The generation of Europeans to which I belong grew up in a world of fixed borders, of glacial boundaries: frozen, it seemed for eternity, by the cold war. Now, in the time of thaw, borders everywhere are melting,

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 47.

sliding, submerging, re-emerging. Identities – national, cultural, individual – are experiencing the exultant anxieties that accompany the threat of dissolution.⁶⁹

In the contemporary U.S. context as well, anxieties about the dissolution of boundaries (often via immigration and the disappearance of the middle class), outside cultural influences, and the threat of conflicts have given rise to a sense of nervousness.

Appropriately, the post-second civil war U.S. of *DMZ* features a comparable sense of anxiety around borders and culture, a climate emphasized by the graffiti style of Burchielli's cityscape.

While unified by Burchielli's, and occasionally Wood's (who drew pages and covers sporadically throughout the series), generally moody atmosphere for this series, the issues in this volume are drawn in a surprising range of styles. An issue about Random Fire, an underground DJ, for example, is drawn in an almost psychedelic style with swirling lines and bright, rich colors. When devoted to Soames, the FSA-defecting environmentalist who protects Central Park like a fortress, the art work is naturalistic and highly detailed (Figs. 10-11). The volume that is called "The Hidden War" seems to want to show how all walks of life suffer in the wake of war. What it also does visually is reinforce differences between individuals, often at the level of stereotype. It also demonstrates through those it chooses to feature (a wealthy and powerful Mafioso; a successful DJ with a massive following; a woman who is able to survive by using her body as capital; and a man who takes control of Central Park by force) that individuals with capital (physical, social, practical, or economic) will be more successful, even post

⁶⁹Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

apocalypse. Thus the series seems to reflect one of the strongest ideological facets of American neoliberalism: that what happens to you, whatever your society looks like, is a matter of personal merit. The characters who suffer are depicted as pathetic and those who thrive, even (and often) at the expense of others, are presented as “survivors.”

Upon crash-landing in the fictional war zone, Wood’s main character immediately meets Zee Hernandez, a young medical student who was working in Manhattan-area hospitals before the war. Having chosen to stay in the DMZ rather than evacuate with her family, she acts as an emergency responder, surgeon, and general practitioner for the people still living in the DMZ. Burchielli represents Zee as a young woman of color who sheds her more subdued, med-school look for the bleached dreads, facial piercings, and combat boots of a counter-culture stereotype. She is a character who possesses a secret, near-mystical, knowledge of the DMZ and its inhabitants; and despite refusing to participate in violence, she and Matty recall the increasingly popular team dynamic in post-apocalyptic comics of a distressed white male protagonist and his non-white, kick ass, female counterpart (i.e. Michonne in *The Walking Dead* and Vaughan’s Agent 355). Zee tends to Matty’s post-crash injuries and attempts to explain to him, with little luck, the complexity of the situation for people living in the DMZ – a vignette which summarizes their relationship throughout the series. Though it is written more eloquently later, Zee states in the very first issue that, “We’re not your enemy, we just LIVE HERE. If we have guns, it’s to keep our homes safe from looters and psychopaths and fucking attack helicopters! We don’t want to get all caught up in your shit.”⁷⁰ According to Zee and other residents of the DMZ, the area is about its people, living and thriving and

⁷⁰ Brian Wood and Riccardo Burchielli, *DMZ, Vol 1.*, “On the Ground,” (DC Comics, 2005), 26.

sometimes suffering, not about the ideological position it holds for both sides of the civil war.

Zee introduces several counterpoints to Matty's original introduction to the environment of the new, New York. Early on she takes him to a roof top restaurant where the proprietors grow their own food and accept any form of trade or payment that customers can afford to offer. The roof is even decorated with palm trees and stylish tents, recalling some of the cities' former dazzle. Matty is so surprised by the contrast that he struggles to stifle his offensive response- "Back home they say people here are eating mostly rats and pigeons now."⁷¹ The citizens of the war zone also generate a fireworks display on the Fourth of July. This display of patriotism is surprising given the violence of their living situation and the fact that much of that violence is perpetrated by government and military officials.⁷² In this way, Zee contributes to the over-arching confusion of the drama of the DMZ; a confusion caused by the complexity of factors involved in every major action and the difficulty for both characters and readers in pinpointing definitive causes and perpetrators. Like the U.S. neoliberal subject who struggles to imagine alternatives and to locate what exactly one should be protesting/rebelling/speaking out against, the characters in this post-apocalyptic "America" struggle to grasp their situation and how to behave within it.

Along with Zee, Matty makes recurrent and lasting connections with other characters such as the aforementioned Wilson, who runs Chinatown as a benevolent and well-loved Mafioso. A Chinese immigrant and endless jester, Wilson is an older man with a shock of white hair and a surprisingly dark and vulgar sense of humor. He is

⁷¹ Ibid. pg. 37.

⁷² Wood and Burchielli, *DMZ, Vol 2*, "Body of a Journalist," (DC Comics, 2006), 49-50.

almost always drawn with a teasing grin and is frequently surrounded by attractive young women. The *de facto* leader, not quite hero or anti-hero, spends the duration of the war effectively preserving the safety and cultural identity of the residents of Chinatown. He justifies this decision:

In order to **protect** Chinatown—to save Chinatown—we have to **isolate** Chinatown. Don't listen to what's going on out there. **Hey**, look at me. How much do you love your neighborhood? Enough to make it hated? Make it feared? Enough to endure the racial slurs and retaliations? Enough to **never** lay eyes on it again? I have a war for you. No flags. No uniforms. No rules. ... Only one message: leave us **alone**. We're not a part of you. We don't want to be. When you fight for New York, don't fight in our name. You don't represent us. And you'll never take us by force. You can't **own** us.⁷³

And, while his pragmatism is harsh at times, Wilson expresses genuine concern for the well-being of the people residing in his town. Wilson is perhaps best described by the character himself in *The Hidden War*, in which he pithily explains that, "I'm not a gangster, this WAR is going to be gangster."⁷⁴

Chinatown thus represents a major contradiction in the world of the comic, especially in a world whose apocalyptic moment is brought on by violent clashes between ideological parties. Though Wilson's isolating gesture is in service of those whom he deems family, it is a gesture that is detrimental to people who we see suffering in other parts of the DMZ and who would benefit from the access that Wilson and the Chinatown residents have. This contradiction in the DMZ is emblematic of what Benjamin Kunkel describes as the confusing, non-political, anti-organization impulse in contemporary apocalyptic fiction that is upset by the conditions of neoliberalism but does not necessarily want to fix it. He writes:

⁷³ Burchielli and Wood. *DMZ, Vol. 5. "The Hidden War,"* (DC Comics, 2008), 62-63.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 61.

For the diversity of apocalyptic triggers hardly conceals the basic sameness, from work to work, of the apocalypse itself. In almost every case ... large-scale social organization, including the state, has disappeared; the cumulative technological capability of century upon century has collapsed to the point that only agricultural knowhow, if that, is retained; and the global society we know has shattered into small tribal groups, separate families or couples, and helpless solitary individuals. In such anarchic conditions, without governments to enforce contracts, stable currencies in circulation, or any industrial or transportation infrastructure, capitalism likewise becomes a thing of the past—and yet the contemporary apocalypse ... illustrates in the most literal fashion possible Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families.⁷⁵

As we saw in Vaughan and Guerra's *Y the Last Man*, affect and emotion driven discourse is the hallmark of this version of apocalypse which defames neoliberal practice while embodying it.

This is particularly relevant in the neoliberal age; in an era of extreme financialization and free markets, the most important questions are “who benefits” and “who is left out.” The right of access to Chinatown, it is suggested, is the birthright of residents because of their racial backgrounds and cultural affiliations as well as the fact that racist real estate markets frequently push various ethnic groups into mono-ethnic neighborhoods. Chinatown is, at once, a distorted microcosm of the contemporary U.S. in which the 1%, who possess over half of the world's wealth, look essentially the same, with a few rare exceptions,⁷⁶ and in line with contemporary concerns about the white-washing of culture in the wake of globalization. It also reinforces the American

⁷⁵ Benjamin Kunkel, “Dystopia and the End of Politics,” *Dissent*, 55, no.4 (Fall 2008), 94.

⁷⁶ For more information see: Beverley Moran, *Race and Wealth Disparities: A Multidisciplinary Discourse*, (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 2008).

suspicion of China, which has replaced Japan and the former Soviet Union as the stealthy enemy of the state that is evident in other comics examined in this analysis.⁷⁷

The unnamed Commander of the Free States Armies, as well, continuously complicates the reader's ability to identify protagonists and antagonists, heroes and villains. This is in fact a trait shared by most of the characters, with the potential exception of Zee Hernandez, who quickly shift from acceptance to hate, from peace to violence, from "good" to "bad." The commander appears sporadically throughout, enacting a creative series of military and intelligence schemes that cause trouble for Matty Roth. His calm and intelligence shed a complicatedly sympathetic light on the Free States Army, the initiators of the violent conflict that has swept the United States. A gun runner in the early years of the war, the commander joined the FSA when a deal went bad. Narrowly surviving an attempt on his life, made because of his success in the opportunistic profession, he develops an unprecedented commitment to and zeal for the cause of the Free States Armies, eventually becoming the leader. Depicted as an average looking white male, often with a substantial beard and dark sunglasses, the Free States commander is a particularly unique addition to the world of the *DMZ*.

Likewise, while the politicians and corporations on the side of the United States are depicted fairly straightforwardly as corrupt and self-serving, the soldiers fighting in the U.S. army cut problematizing figures in the world of the comic. In the fourth trade paperback, "Friendly Fire," the issues focus on an infamous event in the course of the war: the "Day 204 massacre." On this day, a group of 198 silent, unarmed protestors are gunned down by U.S. military officers posted in a dangerous part of the DMZ. These

⁷⁷ See Chapter 1 on Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra's comic, *Y the Last Man*.

issues take the reader back into the personal lives of the men who emptied their guns at the crowd and the conditions under which they prowled the dangerous area. The message of this portion of the series seems to be the humanization of the men responsible for this travesty but, more importantly, the ways in which military and police, as well as civilians, are manipulated and “sacrificed” by government officials.

The U.S. has a long and complicated history with armed militias, alternative living communities, and violent protests which I have already alluded to. The world of the DMZ consistently demonstrates the complexity of ideologically motivated behaviors and the frequent manipulation of people and facts by political figures. The Free States Army and its commander advance this theme and the continued exploration of “individual” vs. “collective.” In particular, both complicate the notion that many scholars have noted about prevailing attitudes towards protest, alternative living, and anti-government sentiment: that to be political in this way is to in fact be seen as unpolitical and unpatriotic.

Indeed, the “Free States Army” is as important to the world of the comic as the individuals with whom the journalist interacts. This dissenting army originally begins as a Montana-based militia; a disorganized and unfocused group of poor, white, right wing, civilian men. These origins recall the multitude of anti-federal groups who organized in Montana during the 1990’s. Among the most prominent of these were the Montana Freemen who became the subject of national news after a standoff with the FBI, and the paramilitary group, the Militia of Montana, who enjoyed their greatest popularity during mounting anxiety about Y2K.⁷⁸ This reference to a relationship between militias and

⁷⁸ The Montana Freemen were a Christian Patriot group located outside of Jordan, Montana in a community they named “Justus Township.” The group, like many “Christian Patriot” groups, espoused

survivalist groups in Montana and American anxiety about apocalypse is not accidental.

As Philip Lamy explains, apocalypse and survivalism⁷⁹ go hand in hand for secular and contemporary dooms-dayers in the United States. Lamy elaborates:

For ‘secular’ millennialists the Apocalypse will most likely be man-made—brought about by social, economic, or industrial collapse, environmental degradation, race war, civil war, or nuclear war. Salvation may not be in the hands of a messiah but in the preparations of the individual. ... To survivalist-oriented groups such as the militias, the Patriot Movement, *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, and the Unabomber, evil is represented by the government and big business, the mass media, technology, the entire complex industrial society, and the greatly feared emerging ‘new world order.’ The mix of survivalism with apocalypticism—as doom-sayers take up arms, hide out in the country’s hinterlands, and start throwing bombs at ‘the system’—reflects a secularization of millennialism, and increasingly popular and combustible mix.⁸⁰

Wood and Burchielli’s depiction of paramilitary violence also demonstrates what has always been a contentious topic for the American public: the relationship between violence and economic inequality. In a project that analyzes acts of political violence, globally, Tepperman and Gheihman reject the attitude prevalent in most discussions about protest violence - that it is motivated by either a sense of racial separatism or anti-patriotic sentiment. Instead, they suggest that institutional exclusions surrounding

absolute individual sovereignty and did not recognize the authority of the federal government. They were initially the subject of federal investigation in response to a multitude of fraudulent checks and money orders produced by the group’s leader, Leroy M. Schweitzer, and a plethora of other members. The infamy of the group ended in 1996 in a prolonged armed stand-off with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Militia of Montana, formed by John and David Trochmann, is a paramilitary group who gained popularity in the 1990’s by capitalizing on the survivalist impulse that resulted from anxiety over Y2K. Though they do still exist, mainly speaking out against anti-gun legislation and participating at NRA events, their membership dropped dramatically (and never recovered) after the Y2K scare proved unfounded.

⁷⁹ Defined by Lamy as “the philosophy and practice of disaster preparedness.” 94.

⁸⁰ Philip Lamy, “Secularizing the Millennium: Survivalists, Militias, and the New World Order,” In *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, (New York, New York: Routledge, 1997), 94.

resource distribution and population pressure and general perceptions of officials as self-motivated are the primary causes. They explain:

Given the importance of ethnic polarization and inequality, we need to consider the processes (such as exclusion, social division, and class formation) that lead to these outcomes. Here Pauline Peters notes the role of processes ‘including commodification, structural adjustment, market liberalization, and globalization ... that limit or end negotiation and flexibility for certain social groups and categories.’ This insight reminds us that processes of inter-group inequality and violence take place in a highly globalized, capitalized world.⁸¹

This makes a degree of sense when one looks at what is often shared between populations who, for example, resort to violent protesting or who seek refuge in survivalism: poverty. However, it is a mistake, and an impossibility, to take up a discussion of class without a concurrent one of race.

Indeed, I do not mean to suggest that protesting and militarism are the same or are intended to have the same results. Nor do I want to minimize or ignore the frustration with institutional racism inherent to much protest violence when economic disparity in the U.S. can still often be drawn along racial lines. What I *do* want to highlight is that the U.S. has, from the outset, experienced innumerable acts of political violence originating among the disenfranchised or economically oppressed, of all racial backgrounds. As Howard Zinn reminds us in a chapter about the 17th century Virginia colony and the concurrent establishment of racism and “liberty” to protect the upper classes, this is a problem embedded in the very ideological fabric of this country:

[These] upper classes, to rule, needed to make concessions to the middle class, without damage to their own wealth or power, at the expense of slaves, Indians, and poor whites. This bought loyalty. And to bind that loyalty with something more powerful even than material advantage, the

⁸¹ Lorne Tepperman and Nine Gheihman, *Habits of Inequality*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 287.

ruling group found, in the 1760's and 1770's, a wonderfully useful device. That device was the language of liberty and equality, which could unite just enough whites to fight a Revolution against England, without ending either slavery or inequality.⁸²

The establishment of social distinctions and exclusions between impoverished communities in the U.S. as a means of political control is as much a part of "America" as the right to vote and "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." And, in fact, "liberty," is invented in order to placate rebellions against early colonial inequality.⁸³ Thus, race, class, and protest/political rebellion share an enduring mutual history in which race is invented and reinvented over time in order to ameliorate class conflict.

Racially, culturally, and economically, the fictional city of *DMZ* is true to the diversity of the real-life New York City, featuring people from a wide array of backgrounds. Matty meets individuals as different as a former Wall Street executive lamenting the loss of his million dollar loft, an underground DJ, and a young homeless woman who is pimped out to, and manipulated by, a group of men capitalizing on the scarcity of necessities in the war zone. Despite the admonitions of exemplary characters like Zee about the DMZ as a site for solidarity and equality in mutual struggle, the designations of capitalist America have not entirely vanished. In Wood's American post-apocalypse, the trauma of civil war drastically alters existing social hierarchies based on class, race, sexuality etc. in lieu of smaller communities that spring up around a variety of commonalities. And, while it is easy to look at the DMZ and see a group of people who

⁸² Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 57-58.

⁸³ Indeed, Zinn goes on to describe how, between Bacon's Rebellion and 1760, there were upwards of 60 acts of political violence and rebellion in the early American colonies. He writes, "...there had been eighteen uprisings aimed at overthrowing colonial governments. There had also been six black rebellions, from South Carolina to New York, and forty riots of various origins," 59.

have managed to discard arbitrary distinctions, a closer look demonstrates the hold that free-market ideology has on the U.S., even in a time of civil war, and certainly after.

In the decades of Reagan-neoliberalism, replete with discourse insisting that we are “post-racial” (despite well-documented, disproportionate, persistent, and violent discrimination against non-white, non-male citizens) and with many still convinced by the foundational myth that those who work hardest or “invest in themselves” most effectively will see economic gain and social advancement (despite the narrowing of wealth reflected in the concept of the 1%), we need to consider how institutional structures perpetuate the problems which make violence seem like the only option. While neither racial nor sexual discrimination or lack of social mobility are unique to recent decades, our moment is hovering on the precipice of increasing violence and decreasing government aid, a frightening situation that merits interrogation of the relationship between economics and protest. Wood and Burchielli populate their world differently than ours but they do draw an obvious connective line, on both sides of their conflict, between those wielding guns against the American government and those who are desperately poor and disenfranchised. Indeed, the conflict even *between* afflicted communities in the fictional demilitarized zone demonstrates the lingering legacy of what Zinn convincingly argues is the ideological interplay of “class” and “race” as scapegoats for all manner of political issues in the U.S.

Zee, Wilson, and the FSA commander are emblematic of individual issues that are “illustrated” before, during, and after the DMZ. While the three of them have drastically different lives and experiences, the separate stories do the work of demonstrating the inevitable complexity of any war and the multitude of ways in which lives can be

affected and terrorized by it. And, as I have already mentioned, Wood and Burchielli's series frequently spotlights random citizens in flashback narratives and exposé like stories. This stepping-in-and-out-of-the-story likewise demonstrates an expansion of Scott McCloud's theory of "panel transitions,"⁸⁴ which describes the relationship between temporal/physical moments, their characters, and their settings in comics, and the shift from one of these isolated panels to the next. The creators of *DMZ* transition from issue to issue in the way that many comics artists transition on a single page, relying on the ability of the reader to discern implied relationships. This diverse and complex narrative structure for the series is also another way in which the creators draw on earlier comics like *Transmetropolitan*, which takes its readers into different parts of the journalist Spider Jerusalem's city as he unravels, bit by bit, the corruption, perversion, suffering, but also living, of the people around him.

Perhaps most influential on the series and its main character is Parco Delgado, a Hugo Chavez-like character who is elected governor of the DMZ during a reconciliation attempt. After several years in the DMZ, Matty is invested in the promise of building the city back up on its own terms; becoming a part of the governor's "Delgado Nation." The relationship shared by Parco and Matty reveals what is perhaps Wood's final point on war and ideological violence—that it is bad for and brings out the worst in all involved—when Parco manipulates Matty into retrieving a nuclear weapon for him and spearheading an attack force mobilized to maintain order and consensus within the Delgado Nation.

⁸⁴ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994).

More explicitly than the other comics in this analysis, *DMZ* takes on the issue of trauma as subject. While the trauma of war, especially civil war in a country for whom nationalistic ideology is so important, is obvious, Burchielli and Wood consider as well the struggles between public and private, individual and collective, psychological and physical well-being, all of which, Laurie Vickroy convincingly argues, are implicated in studies of trauma. She explains:

What does the study of trauma teach us about ourselves? Trauma leads us to examine the human consequences of socio-historical phenomena and the interconnections between public and private, the political and psychological. . . . Trauma also has meaning in that it is indicative of basic life issues such as the relation between life and death; the meaning and quality of existence; physical and psychological survival; how people understand and cope with loss and self-diminishment; and the nature of bonds and disconnections among people.⁸⁵

Indeed, beyond a world ravaged by war, the world of the series pictures a country equally plagued by economic and social inequality, government corruption and manipulation, and a misinformation of the public through politically involved media outlets. The journalist as interlocutor in this series examines the effects of all of these traumas on the people inside and outside of the DMZ. And what he discovers is familiar to a reading public in the contemporary United States.

In the final trade paperback, “The Five Nations of New York,” New Yorkers have begun to organize themselves as the war draws to a close. Chinatown is still intact, thanks to Wilson’s efforts, and seems to bear out the same cultural demographics that the character labored to maintain. The “First Nation” is located in Lower Manhattan and is the home of ex-Wall Street folks from the financial district. When Zee objects to

⁸⁵ Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Literature*, (Charlottesville and London: The University of Virginia Press, 2002), 221.

granting them the status of “first,” one of their leadership representatives replies with a familiar refrain from American news stations and political leadership, “AHA, you are a class warrior! Well, look around, Missy, and see what all **that’s** gotten you.” And, by the final issue, the country has been reunited and future citizens wander the idyllically recuperated New York City and read Matty’s from-prison memoir about the terrible effects of war and the importance of national integrity.

Indeed, the conclusion of the series reveals a general replacement of singular identity politics with group identity politics, exemplified throughout in the tenuous relationships between groups in and outside of the DMZ. As Sophie Fuggle has admirably demonstrated:

Regardless of the political and ethical action proposed by such contemporary discourses [that is, those which consist in a call to arms against things like unbridled consumerism and resource plundering], all ultimately end up endorsing a conservative and, moreover, neoliberal agenda concerned with maintaining the status quo rather than offering any sustained radical rethinking of existing socioeconomic structures.⁸⁶

Despite the comic’s effort to imagine collectives which pose alternatives to the “individuals and their families” from Thatcher’s famous dictum, the hierarchies of community embedded in the narrative resist any true abolishment of the contemporary status quo.

Further, the world of *DMZ* demonstrates the difficulty in the U.S. in particular in marshalling a true collective action in a country which relies so heavily on the responsibility, glorification, and success of the “individual.” This paradox, Fuggle has noted, is at the heart of Foucault’s notion of “security” and “biopower.” She explains:

⁸⁶ Sophie Fuggle, “To Have Done with the End-Times: Turning the Apocalypse into a Nonevent,” In *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2014), 31.

Whereas disciplinary power is focused on the anatomo-political, the management and control of the individual body, its locations, functions, movements, desires, and so on, security is concerned with the biopolitical, the management, growth, and circulation of the entire population. Recognizing that these two forms of power are closely linked and integrated within a whole series of institutions and discourses—education, the family, medicine, and so on—there is nevertheless a gap, an interstice between the collective and the individual.⁸⁷

Though a true militia is mounted against a U.S. government, which looks remarkably like the current neoliberal one, and typical boundaries of race and class are temporarily dissolved in the fictional Manhattan, a former and familiar order is restored by the end of the series; all things returned to their appropriate place. Recalling the recent Occupy Movement within which hostility towards the homeless who participated indicated this conceptual gap, the “revolutionaries” of the *DMZ* (whether one reads the Free States Armies or the various groups within the *DMZ* as embodying the revolutionary drive of the story) fail to fully realize and sustain their transgressive models.

Additionally, the comic’s too-familiar resolution is accomplished through the seemingly penultimate power of a media driven, economically motivated government. In Wood’s imagining, the United States Government is willing to blow up entire communities to restore a particular type of order. Indeed, this is a better solution than comprising “American” values in order to negotiate with the Free States rebels. This model recalls the neoliberal economic model in the U.S. which operates under the assumption that what is good for the few wealthy will benefit the economy, and by extension the country at large.⁸⁸ It also recalls Tariq Ali’s revelation about the nature of neoliberal democracy, that, “This is the permanent tension that lies at the heart of a

⁸⁷ Ibid, 34.

⁸⁸ See David Harvey (2005) on “accumulation by dispossession.”

capitalist democracy and is exacerbated in times of crisis. *In order to ensure the survival of the richest, it is democracy that has to be heavily regulated rather than capitalism.*⁸⁹

While explicit race-based identity politics seem to be absent in this comic book apocalypse, I have argued that a politics of neighborhoods has been employed in their stead, ultimately reaffirming a neoliberal “status quo” despite the series’ criticism of “politics,” broadly. And in the instance of the comic book, the visual can be deployed as a placeholder for these politics, relying on the acceptance and participation in these ideologies on the part of the reader. Thus, Wood need not explicitly articulate the contemporary politics of race in his story - the reader always already brings with them the ideologies of “America,” and the optics of comics help to fill in the blanks. As Aaron Marcus observes, “[V]isual literature begins where language leaves off; it extends mankind’s ability to identify, describe, analyze, evaluate, and extol the ineffable.”⁹⁰ And here again, as in Vaughan’s *Y the Last Man*, the ideological weight of sentiment, specifically the white male’s sentimental sacrifice, is the place holder for a substantial criticism or solution.

By analyzing a comic which is critical of the political and military behaviors of neoliberalism, I hope to have demonstrated the strength of “American” ideology, even in a politically motivated text. I also hope it is now apparent the ways in which popular culture can and does reveal the footholds of U.S. neoliberalism, how it is packaged to be appealing to the average consumer, and the trauma of contemporary life. By drawing on familiar references to the struggles of life in urban communities, the convolution of U.S.

⁸⁹ My emphasis. Tariq Ali, *The Obama Syndrome: Surrender Abroad, War at Home*, (London: Verso, 2010).

⁹⁰ Aaron Marcus, “Literature and Vision,” In *Visual Literature Criticism* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 19.

global interference and the attacks of September 11th, and a romanticization of revolutionary violence, Wood and Burchielli's series dramatizes the trauma of neoliberal life and the problem posed by contradictory ideological commitments in "America." Taking both Dürer's War and Žižek's social divisions as explicit subjects, *DMZ* accounts for many of the challenges of contemporary "American" life.

Chapter 5: Famine, or, “Imbalances Within the System Itself.”

Man desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before he understands.

-Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, (1984)

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, 'Come!' And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a balance in his hand.

-Revelations 6:5-6

Of Dürer’s horsemen, Famine, occupies the most space on the iconic 39.9 x 28.6 cm wood cut (Fig. 1). Depicted as the youngest and most stalwart of the riders, Famine is drawn in the center of the image, a solid right arm hauling the empty scales with which to measure the resources of the world. The irony of Famine as a young, healthy, giant is likely intentional. But it is even more appropriate in the late capitalist age of excess and planned obsolescence. The United States fits into the “global”⁹¹ economy of “accumulation by dispossession”⁹² through a hyper-consumption model. Thus the need for annual or seasonal “new versions,” vehicles and their parts that are designed to need repair or replacement within a few years, massive amounts of debt enabling us to live outside of our actual means, and the barrage of advertisement to proliferate the cultural

⁹¹ In quotations as many scholars refer to “globalization” and a “global contemporary world” despite the fact that many parts of the world still do not participate or do not have the right access to enable participation in this supposedly global marketplace.

⁹² This is a term used by David Harvey to describe a unique economic facet of the neoliberal state. He explains, “The main substantive achievement of neoliberalization, however, has been to redistribute, rather than to generate, wealth and income. ... Accumulation by dispossession comprises four main features: Privatization and commodification, financialization, the management and manipulation of crises’, and state redistributions.”(159-164). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005).

adage, “I spend, therefore, I am.” We do not just consume, we consume with the intent to discard. And less and less of us generate enough income to sustain this practice.⁹³

Our moment, the age of the Internet, is also characterized by a simultaneous gain of access and intense loss of privacy and intellectual property rights. The rhetoric of the original creators of the Internet is utopic and proclaims the ways in which quality of life will be improved. In a retrospectively published paper of the invention process, some of the foundational creators describe the original impetus, “A key to the rapid growth of the Internet has been the free and open access to the basic documents ... The beginnings of the ... Internet in the university research community promoted the academic tradition of open publication of ideas and results.”⁹⁴ And yet contemporary users increasingly find, when personal photos are published to public sites for example, that the network can certainly be used for other, and more insidious, endeavors. Perhaps most disconcertingly, the Internet is an incredibly profitable venue for a shrinking number of corporations driving the U.S. economy (i.e. Google, Apple, Amazon etc.) and, consequently, the U.S. government.

In 2013 the creators of the documentary *InRealLife* claimed that 90% of all data stored in clouds across the globe had been generated in the previous two years. The reality of this statistic is that an incomprehensible amount of personal information is publically accessible, and likely backed up on *multiple* servers across the “developed”

⁹³ For more information on the way in which this plays out, consider this article from the *NY Times* that talks about reduced economic mobility in the U.S.: Jason deParle, “Harder for Americans to Rise from Lower Rungs,” *New York Times Online*, January 4, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/us/harder-for-americans-to-rise-from-lower-rungs.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

⁹⁴ Barry M. Leiner, Vinton G. Cerf, David D. Clark, Robert E. Kahn, Leonard Kleinrock, Daniel C. Lynch, Jon Postel, Larry G. Roberts, Stephen Wolff, “Brief History of the Internet.,” *The Internet Society*. <http://www.internetsociety.org/internet/what-internet/history-internet/brief-history-internet>.

world. For younger generations in particular, the concept of privacy is an increasingly irrelevant one. The apocalyptic rhetoric aimed at younger generations and their reliance on communicative technology, vocalized satirically in popular films like *Idiocracy* and *Wall-E*, is purposefully exaggerated and inflammatory. On the other hand, remembering how the advent of large-scale literacy with the printing press changed the way that human memory capacity was utilized, we should pay close, scholarly attention to the ways in which these new, compulsory forms of communication impact us, neurologically as well as culturally.

At the same time, scientists warn about insurmountable threats to our global food systems and hypothesize that within some of our lifetimes nearly half of the world's population will be without safe drinking water.⁹⁵ Indeed, it has become such a substantial problem that we now have a special term for these places, which can be found on every continent except for Antarctica: "hot stains," coined by the Slovak hydrologist and environmentalist, Michael Kravcik. The past few decades have also taught us about the decline of agricultural systems and resources as we are forced to consider the possible extinction of vital bee populations; how global climate change effects farming cycles; and how over-fishing and hunting cause scientists to push the boundaries of current genetic science. Like Dürer's rider on a black horse, the late-capitalist moment in the U.S. is defined by an ironic combination of far too much and not nearly enough. In a later project, *The Private Eye*, Brian K. Vaughan plays with the unlikely relationship between

⁹⁵ The speculation and science on this varies but for some relatively reliable sources on the issue, see: Maude Barlow, *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water*, (New York: New Press, 2008) and <http://water.org/water-crisis/water-facts/water/>.

famine and contemporary American culture in an even more unlikely medium: a virtually free, digital comic.

The Private Eye, which ran for ten total issues, is the first iteration of a larger project, The Panel Syndicate, established by Vaughan and artist Marcos Martin, to “deliver original comics directly to readers all over the world who pay whatever the hell they want for each original issue.”⁹⁶ Interestingly, the project wears its economic aspirations on its sleeve. Every review of The Panel Syndicate mentions, with thinly veiled resentment, that the creators have actually made more money this way than they would have going through established publishers. In fact Vaughan and Martin say outright on the syndicate’s website, with a mildly distasteful irreverence, that, “You can download each and every one of our oversized issues, for any price you think is fair. 100% of your payments go directly into the greedy mitts of the authors and will help fund the rest of these stories that we’re very proud to present, so thanks for reading...”⁹⁷

Though this comic takes place in Los Angeles in 2076, a speculative future which may seem out of place in this analysis, the content of the world is remarkably similar. Most importantly, it deals with one of the great dilemmas of our time: reconciling public and private; the veritable famine of privacy and moderation. Indeed, in his proposal to Marcos Martin, added with other supplementary material to Volume 1 (issues 1-5) of the series, Vaughan wrote, “This is a story about privacy, and whether our generation’s

⁹⁶ From The Panel Syndicate website: <http://panelsyndicate.com/>.

⁹⁷ Vaughan additionally responded, when asked about the challenges/benefits of doing an owner-created book on a reddit thread he and Martin did as a plug for the book, that: “Biggest rewards? More money, true ownership of your creations, renewed love of the medium/industry, total artistic freedom, the joy of making something new, inner peace, free trips to France, pictures of readers dressed as your characters, personal growth, and more money.” Here is the full stream: http://www.reddit.com/r/comicbooks/comments/1vquaa/we_are_brian_k_vaughan_and_marcos_martin/.

ongoing campaign against it will ultimately be good or bad for society. I don't know the answer to that yet, so I want to make a comic to find out." As John Parker, writing for *Comics Alliance*, puts it:

Internet privacy is easily one of the most confusing realities of life in the 21st century. It's the best ongoing story in collective awareness, complete with heroes, villains, victims and martyrs, turning points, and insane plot twists that regularly put *The Good Wife* to shame. PRISM, WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, Xbox One, social engineering, News International, Anonymous, and even our stupid Facebook updates are all involved. Every player and plot-line are all tangled up in a worried knot that gets bigger and more complex every year. It's all one story, and we're all living it; spectators, beneficiaries, victims, and contributors. It's one of the defining issues of our age, a still-forming zeitgeist that could be explored for years to come.⁹⁸

And, while Martin and colorist Munsta Vincente create a brilliantly colored and impossibly detailed science fictional future, it is surprisingly, even eerily, familiar.

The creators reward the careful reader with a long list of references to contemporary popular culture including mentions of *The Los Angeles Times*, Apple products (woefully obsolete by 2076), *Freakonomics*, *The Audacity of Hope*, and The Flaming Lips. They also allude to issues, rather than artifacts, of our day with forwardly framed marijuana cigarettes in issue #1, subtle hints at sexual behavior whose "deviancy" is now being debated,⁹⁹ and inflated depictions of media outlets and reporters with desensitized and voracious appetites for blood and gore. They even make more dated references to literature, P.I. (the name of the main character) is seen reading a copy of Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1976) and owns a copy of Henry Miller's *Tropic*

⁹⁸ John Parker, "Privacy and Isolation in Brian K. Vaughan and Marcos Martin's 'The Private Eye,'" *Comics Alliance*, July 7, 2014, <http://comicsalliance.com/privacy-and-isolation-in-brian-k-vaughan-and-marcos-martins-the-private-eye/?trackback=tsmclip>.

⁹⁹ For an incredibly insightful and popular text on the presence of "deviancy" debates in the cultural imaginary see *Perv: The Deviant in All of Us* by Jesse Bering.

of *Cancer* (1934), as well as the comic's noir pretensions through posters hanging in P.I.'s office. Finally, though perhaps more subtly, Martin and Vaughan create a Los Angeles that looks remarkably similar to modern day cityscapes like Times Square in New York, Tokyo, and Beijing. Though *The Private Eye* is set over fifty years from now, the message is very clear: the RIGHT NOW is what leads us to this future.

The story, primarily a detective mystery, is set in a future where the most valuable and covetously protected commodity is privacy. The main character is a private eye who helps uncover, as well as hide, precious personal information despite the layers of disguise and deception inherent to this future culture. In this world it is necessary for individuals to assume entirely new names, identities, and disguises (more accurately costumes, many of which border on the comical and range from simple masks to full-body "furry" get-ups) once they have come of age. The protagonist, "Patrick Immelmann" or P.I., counsels his teenaged getaway driver, "You want my advice, get into as much trouble as you can now so your name will actually be worth disowning one day."

In the first issue Martin and Munsta give the reader the first wide angle views of the future city. Within the first five pages, P.I. springs off of a roof, escaping officials of the Press who have discovered him spying on a woman disguised as Jessica Rabbit. As he does, we get a glimpse at the new Los Angeles (Fig. 12). Set against a dark pink, night time sky, the cityscape is faithful to the contemporary city whose complex road systems already grant it a futuristic look. Though Munsta's use of unusual colors and heavy-handed lack of gradation and shading gives the work a graphic, screen printed look (comparable to Riccardo Burchielli's rendering of Manhattan in *DMZ*), it is a relatively

straightforward depiction. Later pages of the city-inhabited are impressively detailed and elaborate (Fig. 13).

The disguises of the people on the streets borrow from a range of cultural references including African masking and costume traditions, cartoon and anime characters, built set environments for theater productions, and a wide array of science fiction material (aliens, robots, etc.). They also make reference, sometimes specifically and sometimes in kind, to the world of cosplay that many comic book readers will be familiar with. The vehicles navigating the city streets, while obvious technologically advanced models, are aesthetically comparable to the muscle cars from the era of film noir that the comic borrows from regularly. Even at its most obviously futuristic, the bizarre environment of *The Private Eye* could be a contemporary major city on a festival day like Mardi Gras.

The science fictional setting and sharpness of line quality in this series further highlights what is perhaps its most unique, and most ironic, feature: that it is a totally digital comic. Reading comics in digital format is not uncommon thanks to websites like Comixology, the development of comics reading apps for Apple and Android, publishers like Image, Marvel, and DC releasing their stories in digital format, and even initiatives in academic settings to create digital comic book archives. At the same time, web comics are increasingly popular as the millennial generation comes of age and joins the blogosphere. The vision of *The Private Eye* and the publishing platform The Panel Syndicate, comics made only for digital access and distributed solely through the creators, is one which has been considered for some time but not seen much success until now. Indeed, in his seminal text, *Reinventing Comics* (2000), Scott McCloud imagined a

bright future for comics online. McCloud envisioned a relationship through which the costs of creating and distributing comics would be decreased, the ease of internet access would allow greater diversity in subject matter and wider publishing opportunities for artists and writers; that the creative potential of the medium would be set free by the “infinite canvas” of the web.¹⁰⁰ Vaughan and Martin, who intend to share the Panel Syndicate with less-popular artists and writers, are not far off from McCloud’s projections.

Anticipating the success of the move to digital, even Thierry Groensteen, despite an extreme disdain for the motion comic in particular, conceded:

Digital comics are intrinsically hybrid, cross-fertilizing the comics system with elements borrowed from animated cartoons, video games, computer technology (mouse, keyboard), and web navigation. Given that everything can be digitalized and that any content can be distributed via the internet, the digital environment is by definition a site for exchanging, mixing together, and perpetually founded.¹⁰¹

The Private Eye in particular demonstrates the potential hybridity of the digital comic.

As I will explore throughout this chapter, the creators reference and disrupt a long list of genre and medium elements including film noir, hard-boiled detective stories and mysteries, science fiction, comics culture (cosplay and comic conventions), a cartooning style popularized in the comic book form by artists like Jack Kirby, and an impressive engagement with “American” popular culture through the last century. The contradiction inherent in a digital comic investigating our reliance on the Internet should not be discarded. However, it may also be the perfect context from which to consider one of the biggest issues of our moment. Hilary Chute in describing the unique strengths of the

¹⁰⁰ Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*, (New York, New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 200.

¹⁰¹ Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, Translated by Ann Miller, (Jackson, University of Mississippi Press, 2013), 75.

graphic novel, has stated that, “Against a valorization of absence and aporia, graphic narrative asserts the value of presence, however complex and contingent.”¹⁰² It is possible, therefore, to see *The Private Eye* as asserting the presence of a web-centric world in the most effective and accessible way possible.

Like most Americans in 2076, according to Vaughan, P.I. is a young, multiracial man (“Black, Irish, and Spanish”) a detail excluded from the explicit narrative but made clear in representation of the character and his parents.¹⁰³ Sporting a simple, black, ninja inspired mask around his eyes, to which he occasionally adds a kabuki mask and long white trench coat, Martin’s rendering of the character is not wholly unfamiliar and is not as confusing or elaborate as others. Unlike the white male protagonists of the other comics in this study, the multi-racial P.I. and his white, female sidekick(s) problematize the standard sentimental journey traced elsewhere in this thesis. P.I. is also the only gay protagonist, a detail which is revealed in issue four and alluded to a second, and final, time in issue ten.

Patrick Immelmann is drawn to his profession through an egotistical pull, not an ethical one, and is willing to dabble in any type of “case” that will turn a profit, recalling the morally ambiguous characters from famous noir films like *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Double Indemnity* (1944). And while he eventually seems to operate under a particular, sociopathic sense of morality which lands him in the midst of the drama of the narrative, he avoids the familiar sentimentality of other characters. Indeed, in the

¹⁰² Hilary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narratives and Contemporary Comics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁰³ This information also taken from *The Private Eye: An Inside Look At The Creation Of The Digital Comic*. Vaughan and Martin include early sketches as well as the original pitch that Vaughan made to Martin with the first collected volume of the series (Issues #1-5).

vignette describing his mother's untimely death, P.I. thinks, "This is all it takes to make a little boy fall in love with mysteries forever. Another dead broad." Thus, this characterization relies more on a romanticization of male psychopathic behavior (seen elsewhere in popular fictional characters like Sherlock Holmes and Hannibal Lector, both the subjects of recent television shows and films),¹⁰⁴ than the sentimentality of the straight, white males in the other series' here examined.¹⁰⁵

Immelmann likewise articulates, and rearticulates, the reference to the noir tradition and hard-boiled detective stories in more than just reading preference, poster choice, and use of the word "broad." As James Naremore explains, two of the prominent themes in the "American" iteration of the genre are sexual violence (specifically, male-on-female) and racial blackness or "otherness;" the latter despite (and also because) it does not feature explicitly in the films. This is especially noteworthy given the 1950's heyday of the genre in the U.S. and its connection to postcolonial France.¹⁰⁶ In the futuristic noir of Martin and Vaughan's making, both of these hallmarks are turned on their head. The noir-era, male-on-female sexual violence does not exist in this scenario with a gay lead character whose sexual life plays only a small role in the story. Although problematic, the author's elision of P.I.'s sexual life as a gay male character does allow the comic to avoid stereotypical noir tropes of male-on-female violence, and complicates

¹⁰⁴ The creators even make explicit reference to Sherlock Holmes in the final issue in which Gramps insists that P.I. is not actually dead. He explains to Melanie that, "My boy just pulled a Reichenbach Falls."

¹⁰⁵ This is not to say that there is no sentiment in this comic. Indeed, Edgar Allan Poe, often considered the creator of the detective novel, famously wrote that "There is nothing so poetic as the death of a beautiful woman." However, the use of sentiment in this series is different from the other comics in this analysis in ways that will be explained throughout this chapter.

¹⁰⁶ James Naremore, "American Film Noir: The History of an Idea," *Film Quarterly*, 49, no. 2 (Winter 1995-1996): 12-28.

the explicitly white and heteronormative masculinity of noir's typical, Bogart-esque characters.¹⁰⁷

The story still contains many of the common symptoms of noir like excessive sexual behavior (not of the main characters, but it is a frequent backdrop to plot developments), extreme violence, and the use of flash blacks and the deaths of beautiful women as narrative tools. The series, however, deals differently with its characterization of masculinity. Difficult to pin down, influenced by the popularity of Freudian psychoanalysis, relying on affect and hyperbole, and evolving over the course of decades, noir also mirrors many scholarly descriptions of neoliberal ideology. Naremore makes this even more apparent in his description of noir as genre and the difficulty in defining it. He concludes the essay, "American Film Noir: The History of an Idea:" "Depending on how it [the term noir] is used, it can describe a dead period, a nostalgia for something that never existed, or perhaps even a vital tradition."¹⁰⁸

We learn about this world's apocalyptic moment through a discussion between the private eye and his grandfather, a tattooed, self-loving, cellphone, popular culture, and social networking-obsessed stereotype of the "millennial" generation. The explanation is the result of P.I.'s Alzheimer's suffering grandfather and his desperately

¹⁰⁷ It is difficult to encapsulate the way in which racial exclusion figures in the noir genre in the U.S. context and how this relates to its postcolonial French beginnings/pretensions. A good place to look for a fuller picture is Julian Murphet's excellent article, "Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious" (1998). She deftly explains, "Firstly, the persistence of the French classification [of film noir] implies the transference of aesthetic prestige between a European critical vocabulary and a particularly cheap and low-brow US cultural product. In this sense, film noir would be one of the first instances of a postmodernism in which the distinctions of high and low were dissolved in an increasingly global network of cultural exchange and an aggressive populism after World War II. Secondly, any reference (no matter how veiled) to 'blackness' in US culture instantly evokes the entire history of race relations in US politics and everyday life. This over-determination of the phrase 'film noir' invests the initial film cycle of that name with a political unconscious, since neither transatlantic aesthetics nor black/white race relations play a direct role in the figuration of postwar life offered by these films," 2.

¹⁰⁸ Naremore (1995-1996), 25.

irrational attempts to “get bars” for his cellphone. In front of a floor to ceiling screen, MTV backdrop, P.I.’s grandfather laments:

Grandfather: Dude! I’m not getting any bars, are you getting any bars?

Private Eye: Gramps, your toy hasn’t worked in sixty years.

Grandfather: What?

PI: Christ, they fed you kids a lot of pills. Look, once upon a time, people stored all of their deepest darkest secrets in something called ‘the cloud,’ remember? Well, one day the cloud *burst*.

G.: The fuck are you talking about?!

PI: You’re the one who lived through it!

G: I shared as much as I shared ‘cause my life was an open goddamn book! My generation was proud of who we were. We don’t have nothin’ to hide.

PI: Yeah. Look, nobody knows if it was an act of war or an act of God, but for forty days and forty nights, everything just poured out for the whole damn country to see. Every message you thought was safe, every photo you thought you deleted, every mortifying little search you ever made, it was all there for anyone to use against you. People lost their jobs, families were torn apart, blah fucking blah.¹⁰⁹

Martin’s depiction of the private eye’s grandfather as pitiable and pitiful offers a comically damning portrayal of the technological obsession of the millennial generation. The character is often drawn in the back of the scene, trying to connect with other players in his first person shooter game, and declaring the boldness of his generation (Fig. 14). The contrast of his tattoos and grand statements against wrinkled skin, a hunched back, thin frame, and pathetic expression of confusion create a humorous but harsh satire of the generation that came of age with the internet.

While it is never stated explicitly that Gramps suffers from Alzheimer’s, he struggles throughout the series to remember details of the past and frequently forgets that the Internet no longer exists. Gramps and his memory loss seem to mimic the loss of “the cloud” in the pre-history of the comic; the loss of digital memory, the temporary loss of

¹⁰⁹ Vaughan, Brian and Martin, Marcos. *The Private Eye*. The Panel Syndicate. (2014).

privacy when the massive repository “bursts”, and the ultimate loss of global connectivity as a result.¹¹⁰ The canonical discussions of trauma theory, taking inspiration from psychoanalysis and the collective experiences of horrible events like WWII, genocides all over the world, and acts of terrorism, center around trauma as loss and absence, and the representation of such loss as impossible or at least in bad taste.¹¹¹ In the U.S. context, this paradigm has shifted in response to the attacks on the Twin Towers when television, news media, and the internet played footage of the violent destruction of American lives in real time, and for days and weeks afterwards. And, far from neutrally documenting what was unfolding, this coverage generated new and shrouded old memories about the series of events leading up to these catastrophic events. Indeed, the global interference on the part of the U.S. was virtually forgotten and replaced with images of Middle Eastern “others as violent” and deserving the “preemptive” action that followed, effectively crafting this particular trauma for appropriate reading and consumption.¹¹²

Or, as a writer for *Nation* put it in 2005:

The Bush administration’s strategy has been to promote a culture of denial in which American abuses are first covered up, then acknowledged with shock and horror, then absorbed and neutralized (“excesses” by a few “rotten apples”) and finally forgotten—so that when new scandals surface, a new cycle can begin.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ The connection between the cloud as a memory repository and Gramps’ disease of memory being drawn in this section of the thesis was the original idea of Dr. Kirsten Buick who noted this relationship while reading an early draft and encouraged me to consider and develop it.

¹¹¹ See, for example, Barry Stampfl, “Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma,” In *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (2014) on this history and contemporary perspectives on the unrepresentability of traumatic events.

¹¹² For a more complex discussion of how media discussion of September 11th was used to justify the Bush/Cheney doctrine of “preemptive action” see Michael Welch’s excellent study, *Scapegoats of September 11th: Hate Crimes and State Crimes in the War on Terror* (2006).

¹¹³ Quoted from Michael Welch, *Scapegoats of September 11th: Hate Crimes and State Crimes in the War on Terror*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 164.

Now, with increasing frequency we turn to information and media technologies to both create (as in coverage of the 9/11 attacks) or to store (as in the invention of the cloud, Dropbox, and the recent efforts to run submarine cables under the ocean floor to increase world connectivity) individual, as well as collective, memory. Gramps' memory loss seems to emphasize the dangers of relying on technology to memorialize. This also reflects a general preoccupation on the part of the creators with whether or not our use of technology at the expense of our privacy is ultimately more dangerous than it is beneficial; does opening up individual and collective experience to the mercy of technological media (and the corporations and ideological parties that drive it) end up doing more harm than good? Though the series' conclusion leaves room for interpretation, Gramps' memory loss and its parallel to the bursting of the cloud cast a shadow on the utopic message of today's global connectivity.

Later in the series, Martin shifts his portrayal of P.I.'s grandfather – to another contemporary stereotype, but to a more positive one. Martin features him on the cover of issue #8, middle finger brandished, and face splattered with blood (Fig. 15). Here The Press has figured out that P.I. is involved with something important and potentially dangerous. Having just bandaged P.I. and his counterpart's wounds, Gramps puts his generation's obsession with cop dramas to good use and puts them off the trail. At this point the comic's unsettled attitude towards the issues of privacy and information technology is apparent, as Gramps forcefully defends his privacy and property against the prying eyes of The Press. Comically yelling at reporters to "get off my goddamn stoop!." Gramps pushes the exploration of privacy as well as that of excess in the narrative, both central to Vaughan's idea for the comic. Though the creators are critical of the internet

generation, the same generation is central, and not wholly unsympathetic, in the world of the comic. This tension in Gramps' characterization parallels one central to the comic itself – that *it* relies on the Internet even as it criticizes *our* reliance on it.

Through the earlier exchange between P.I. and Gramps, we also learn that contemporary propaganda about the benefits of advancements in information technology has proven more complicated. In this dystopic American future, people have resorted to physical as well as cyber disguises and defenses, librarians, as keepers and protectors of knowledge, have security clearances, and “the Press” is everyone’s worst enemy as well as an arm of the national government. Consideration of the benefits and dangers of technoscience (a term loosely conveying the relationship between “science” proper and technology, often attributed to the prosthetics and weapons industries, for example) is an important one in the neoliberal age. As Pellizzoni and Ylonen explain:

... Economic growth and environmental growth ... can be ensured by tightly coupling technoscientific knowledge and biological resources within a market framework. Sustainability, technoscience and the market, in other words, are seen as reciprocally strengthening each other. Market competition stimulates innovation, which enable growing eco-efficiency, which in turn triggers further market competition. (Levidow et. al, this volume).¹¹⁴

The relationship between technoscience and the economy is a prominent and disconcerting one in the U.S. cultural imaginary. A long list of recent television shows, films, and comics such as *Continuum*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Transmetropolitan*, and *I Robot* deal with tech companies as potentially very dangerous entities. This is a short list of a large number of examples, illustrating an increasing social anxiety about the

¹¹⁴ Pellizzoni, Ylonen, “Introduction,” *Theory, Technology and Society: Neoliberalism and Technoscience: Critical Assessments*, (England and Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2012), 6.

seemingly limitless power of tech companies and their role in our changing economy and world.

In *The Private Eye*, the murders that the protagonist and another white female partner have been investigating are tied to a revolutionary group. This “foreign” group, led by a man named Khalid DeGuerre frequently resorts to extreme violence and extortion in service of resurrecting the internet. Deguerre’s last name alludes to the phrase *nom de guerre*, the etymology of which is French for “war name,” and refers to the actual historical practice of adopting more intimidating or unique names to be used in battle. In contrast, the character’s first name is a common Arabic name meaning “eternal” or “endless.” Thus, the character represents two important facets of contemporary U.S. warfare: the element of fabrication and public persona and the need for “Americans” to be endlessly embattled with some “other.” Indeed, the character whose appearance and name suggest a Middle Eastern background, may even reference the endless history of violence in that region of the world and the insistence of involvement on the part of the U.S. government. Yet again, as in the *Y the Last Man* and *DMZ*, it is possible to read the rationally violent DeGuerre as a scapegoat particularly legible to an “American” viewership.

The mysterious DeGuerre believes that the collapse of the internet has stymied space travel and research and has allowed to U.S. to bolster itself at the expense of the rest of the world. He and his team plan to revive the internet, ostensibly for the greater good. And DeGuerre is a complicated villainous counterpart to the less-than-heroic P.I. Thanks to Martin’s detailed and incredibly emotive facial expressions, it is clear that he is remorseful for the violence that he propagates. In a Nabakovian move, the writer/artist

team makes the reader sympathetic to DeGuerre and his ultimately well-meaning conviction, even as he ruthlessly beats a man's head against a desk. And, most importantly, DeGuerre may have worthwhile criticisms of the world in which he lives. While he employs incredibly violent tactics, his utopic goal is not unlike the original rhetoric of those who created the Internet. His attempts to forcefully change American life also simultaneously mimic international terrorism as it is covered in media outlets *as well as* the rhetoric of American military intervention in other countries – a difficult tension for many Americans.

P.I. and his counterparts are in many ways representative of the impossibly extreme individualism which, beginning in the 18th century, has come to dominate both our world and the world of the comic. Indeed, the nature of life in Vaughan and Martin's future Los Angeles, which requires disguise and deception when interacting with anyone except for the closest of family members, necessitates a suspicious and solitary life. When the protagonist appears on television as the story's climactic action takes place, the comic shows a scene from the bedroom of P.I.'s former lover, a hyperbolic gallant named Maps, in the midst of a tryst. When his lover pauses and asks, "you *know* that guy?," Maps replies, "I don't think anyone does." Earlier in the series, the narrative suggests a legitimate intimacy between P.I. and Maps. Thus, a meaningful romantic relationship does not even allow for intimacy in the world of this comic. Further, the connectivity that DeGuerre proclaims will result with the return of the internet is distasteful and even frightening to each of the central characters, and death is literally the only thing around which they are able to unite. It is the death of a woman's sister and the opening of an

investigative case which begins the narrative, and Immelmann's own death which closes out the series.

Wendy Brown comments that the neoliberal version of individualism, differing from the era of rugged masculinity and westward expansion in the U.S. context, is not merely an inevitable product of late capitalism, but rather a project which intentionally reshapes the world at the level of the individual. She writes in "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy":

... all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality. While this entails submitting to every action and policy considerations of profitability, equally important is the production of all human institutional action as rational entrepreneurial action, conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a micro-economic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality. Neo-liberalism does not simply assume that all aspects of social, cultural and political life can be reduced to such a calculus, rather it develops institutional practices and rewards for enacting this vision.¹¹⁵

This institutional scaffolding is exacerbated by the trauma of life in a culture of finance capital. Scholars like Lauren Berlant highlight the simultaneous rise of work hours and anxiety disorders in the U.S., mounting uncertainty about the future (underscored by the millennial generation's concern over things like social security and retirement, as well as impending issues with natural resources), and a world which increasingly thinks of human beings as instruments of the marketplace. The anxious privacy of L.A. in 2076 seems a perfect culmination of the stress, anxiety, and uncertainty of the contemporary moment and the trauma of a world with rapidly declining standards for privacy and increasing reliance on technology, rather than other people.

¹¹⁵ Wendy Brown, "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory & Event*, 7, no.1 (2003), 9.

The rationalization which evolves from the “American” preoccupation with self-sufficiency and merit teaches that the individual is responsible for his or her well-being, precluding any intervention by governments or the institution of social programs that might interfere with the purity of a free market. Anna McCarthy comments that this prioritizing of the market over all else is reinforced through an especially affective preoccupation with the internal and the individual. She explains:

This process [of outsourcing the work of the state to the private sector, individualized in particular selves and experiences] foregrounds the double meanings of what several critics have described as the “shrinking” of the public sphere—a phenomenon inextricably linked to the privatizing momentum of neoliberal political economy. That is, the verb shrink here would seem to denote two movements: both the weakening of public discourse, truncating modes of dissent, and the strengthening of arguments about governance and rights that are based in *psychologized models of public culture, and which draw their warrants from intimate experiences and affective performances of the self*.¹¹⁶

It is through the affectation of these “selves and individuals” that the extreme disparity of wealth necessary for a neoliberal economy, among other things, is rationalized.

The comic books consulted for this study reflect this conception of the individual as well as the predicament of masculinity in the age of affect in the U.S.¹¹⁷ Each one details the trauma of the post-apocalypse through the emotional content of a single male character, occasionally consulting his non-white, female counterparts, relying on his affective response to situations (most often suffering, shame, and loneliness) as a vehicle for visual and narrative progression. These men struggle to take control of their own

¹¹⁶ My emphasis. Anna McCarthy, “Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theater of Suffering,” *Social Text*, 25, no. 4 (2007), 18.

¹¹⁷ For more a broad discussion of masculinity and affect see *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture* (1999), a volume edited by Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler. For a discussion of how these politics play out in American comics see Daniel Worden, “The Shameful Art: McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern, Comics, and the Politics of Affect” (2006).

situations, receiving aid forcibly from their female companions in a gesture that reinforces surprisingly dated gender roles, and all experience a struggle to choose between “safety” and “freedom.” Vaughan’s P.I. seems to recreate all of the ways in which this is harmful: he plays fast and loose with the safety of others, his inability to emote properly causes him to be emotionally reckless, he privileges economic gain over ethical propriety, and his job is his whole world at the expense of his family and personal relationships.

On the other hand, Vaughan and Martin’s collaboration also gestures towards what Daniel Worden has argued about the free market individualism of the HBO series, *Deadwood*: that, “From within aggressive individualism and the free market emerges ... an expansive and demanding sense of collectivity.”¹¹⁸ Despite all of the ways in which it is possible to draw P.I., Gramps, and their behavior back to these arguments about individualism and market interests in the contemporary moment, their insistence on the rights to personal safety, privacy, and independent thought create an unexpectedly communal environment. The last half of the series is devoted to Immelmann’s almost singular efforts to save his teenaged friend Melanie from becoming collateral in DeGuerre’s quest. The other characters, including the half-senile, defiant Gramps, rally together to help keep each other safe and to preserve the regained privacy that they lost when the cloud “burst.” It is difficult, maybe impossible, to say whether or not the world of *The Private Eye* is an improvement or an extreme decline from today. Regardless, the characters’ pursuit of a world that allows people to be safe, happy, and to coexist with

¹¹⁸ Daniel Worden, “Neo-liberalism and the Western: HBO’s *Deadwood* as National Allegory,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39, no. 2 (2004), 241.

advancing technology creates an unprecedented community, even in spite of the decidedly neoliberal preoccupation with individuality.

As Robert Neubauer rightfully claims in his Gramsci-inspired study, “Neoliberalism in the Information Age, or Vice Versa? Global Citizenship, Technology, and Hegemonic Ideology,” we should think of the “information revolution” and neoliberalism as ideological and necessarily intertwined.¹¹⁹ Neubauer explains:

While neoliberalism’s contemporary ascendancy has been widely commented on, less noticed has been the key role that informationism has played in its promotion. ‘Information’, notes Roszak, ‘smacks of safe neutrality.’ It has therefore proven to be ‘the perfect starting point for a technocratic political agenda that wants as little exposure for its objectives as possible. After all, what can anyone say against information?’ (Webster, 2006, p. 24) In painting utopian visions of the technologies without which global neoliberalism would be impossible, even while describing as teleologically inevitable processes which are in large part politically driven, informationism has vigorously promoted neoliberal ideology.¹²⁰

The decision to critique the internet *through* the internet demonstrates the ideological power that information technologies have in our moment and the scarcity of alternative options. I do not believe that the acknowledgement and critique of our tech-centric

¹¹⁹ For the purposes of this paper I am using “ideology” as it is described by scholars like Foucault and Barbara Fields. For these scholars ideology represents an exercise of power that requires participation and affirmation from the party on whom this version of policing is exercised. Ideology, by this estimation, also requires that an associated thought or action be performed without conscious intent and as part of daily life in a given historical context; it must be part of “common sense.” As Foucault puts it: “This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word ‘subject:’ subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.” Foucault, Michel. Faubion, James ed. “The Subject and Power,” *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume 3 ‘Power,’* (New York, New York: New Press, 2001), 331.

¹²⁰ Robert Neubauer, “Neoliberalism in the Information Age, or Vice Versa? Global Citizenship, Technology, and Hegemonic Ideology,” *Triple C (Cognition, Communication, and Cooperation): Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 9, no. 22 (July 2011), 201.

lifestyle embedded in *The Private Eye* is totally undermined by its presence on a digital platform. However, Vaughan and Martin's work certainly demonstrates the difficulty in critiquing or finding the "outside" of neoliberalism when, as the creators themselves acknowledge, it is much more profitable to just go along with it. On one hand, the comic and its critical message may reach a wider audience this way. Alternatively, the creators concede to and support the economic and ideological models of U.S. neoliberalism in privileging the Internet and its greater financial incentive.

Principal to the success of the contemporary tech-market, which Martin and Vaughan both utilize and critique, is the utopian message that is often attached.¹²¹ This is important to Neubauer's study as well and he explains that:

As direct descendants of Daniel Bell's writings on *The End of Ideology*, they have long painted utopian visions of an era in which political economies of symbolic data embedded in global telecommunication networks eliminate the inequities of the industrial age. This new world, argue the informationists, has rejected material scarcity in favor of knowledge based economic growth, negating the class conflicts of the industrial era along with the ideologies fuelled by them.¹²²

In many ways, an association between utopia and science has been imbedded in U.S. self-conception since the 18th century. The emergence of Enlightenment rationality and intellectualism as a valid, pseudo-spiritual alternative to superstitious, organized religion heavily informed government precedent, social practice, and foreign policy and became a primary component of national ideology. Since then, industrialization, technology, and exploration/expansion of all kinds have been conceived of as idyllic quests to create a

¹²¹ Similar mantras are associated with science fiction and American neoliberalism—according to Foucault, "American liberalism appears not just, or not so much as a political alternative, but let's say as a sort of many-sided ambiguous global claim ... *It is also a sort of utopian focus that is always being revived.*" (my emphasis) Foucault (2001), 218.

¹²² *Ibid*, 195.

more perfect world (with the U.S. at the forefront, of course). It follows logically then that the majority of science fiction that was critical of rapid scientific development in the twentieth century formulated its critique through imagined dystopias.

Fredric Jameson's framing of the Utopian impulse figures any text that attempts to eliminate history in order to eradicate perceived injustices and failures as operating under a utopic assumption. According to this construction we can think of critical dystopias, like *The Private Eye*, as utopically motivated. The political question that Jameson sees driving his study of this narrative genre is:

... how works that posit the end of history can offer an usable historical impulses, how works which aim to resolve all political differences can continue to be in any sense political, how texts designed to overcome the needs of the body can remain materialistic, and how visions of the 'epoch of rest' (Morris) can energize and compel us to action. Indeed, in the case of the Utopian texts, the most reliable test lies not in any judgment on the individual work in question so much as in its capacity to generate new ones, Utopian visions that include those of the past, and modify or correct them.¹²³

Though Jameson has notoriously ascribed utopic idealism to xenophobia and racism by this same logic, it is a useful paradigm for understanding representations of post-apocalypse under neoliberalism. Vaughan's digital comic demonstrates a degree of utopic success under Jameson's formulation

One of the major thrusts of this thesis has been to discuss these popular comics as embodying, to various degrees, the mechanisms of neoliberalism even while they strive to be critical. *The Private Eye*, despite the discontinuities I have noted, makes the most successful run at a truly transgressive message. This may be due to the specific goal of the comic to wade through the murky waters of information technologies, utopianism,

¹²³ Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, (London, New York: Verso, 2005), xv.

politics, and daily life in our current moment. In this later project Vaughan's fictional world exists (specifically and only) because of the destructiveness of information technologies and the utopian rhetoric that is often attached to them. Locating the apocalyptic source in a single insidious entity, particularly one which is so deeply connected to the project of American neoliberalism, is more pragmatically critical whether or not Vaughan realized or intended it.

Though Vaughan claims to not know precisely his own stance on advancing technology and personal privacy, the comic seems to offer a median alternative. The community that springs up around P.I. and the struggle to manage extreme privacy standards and the innately human desire for intimacy, friendship, and companionship, may model a way to be in any world – even the contemporary U.S., despite the individualistic, materialistic, and market-driven values which devalue, or at least complicate, interpersonal relationships. Utilizing the full capacity of the medium, Martin creates a fully elaborate and impossibly detailed future that we could actually imagine, and Vaughan populates this unbelievably real world with characters whose affects, mannerisms, and values might really grow logically from our contemporary, late-capitalist moment. According to Martin, “We are both afraid of the Internet,” and this fear is relatable for a large segment of the contemporary audience.

The success of neoliberal policy in a growing number of countries is often facilitated by the difficulty in conceiving rationally of the ways in which seemingly disparate institutions, and corresponding ideologies, are connected. Technology is an institution, like racial and sexual intolerance and national security, which is difficult to critique under neoliberalism because it's investment in an extreme free market, and the

compromising nature of this association, are not immediately apparent. Indeed, few are willing to say “technology” or “equality” or “safety” is bad. It is because of this ambiguity that many of the texts examined here and elsewhere manage to convey an *anxiety* about technology or locate the tech-apocalypse in the future; a pointed critique is difficult to locate and often perceived as dogmatic according to prevailing political sentiment. Or as Karl Marx pithily put it, “It will then turn out that the world has long dreamt of that which it had only to have a clear idea to possess it really.”¹²⁴

The Private Eye takes one of these unrepresentably complex issues, the “tech-revolution,” and reveals its damaging investment in politics and economic benefit, unsettling the utopic rhetoric with which we associate it in real time. Further, it reimagines our relationships with one another and the ideologies that govern “difference” in the U.S. through its rearticulation of familiar genres like film noir, detective stories, and science fiction with more nuanced characters and a healthy dose of satire.

¹²⁴ Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge (1843). Quoted from Jameson (2005), 281.

Chapter 6: Death, or, “The Ecological Crisis.”

*when one knows he's going out, can we
blame him for shoving the voltage up?*

-A.R. Ammons, *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (1974)

When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, “Come.” I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him. Authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth.

-Revelation 6:7-8

Of Dürer’s horseman, Death is the most apparently insidious (Fig. 1). With a sunken face, boney limbs draped over an equally emaciated steed, and mangled, claw-like hands and feet, Death is truly and obviously frightening. Set in the foreground of the scene, and wielding a trident, Death funnels those in his path into the mouth of Hades; even a king is not immune to Death’s whim in Dürer’s imagining. The lack of ambiguity and non-discriminatory violence of Dürer’s rider on a pale horse, provides a useful parallel to representations of environmental catastrophe in American popular culture. In recent decades, “The Heat Death of the Universe,”¹²⁵ and innumerable versions of environmental apocalypse have featured in film, literature, television, and comics. Like Dürer’s creepy, inevitable, and equal-opportunity Death, this version of the end of the world is so palpable because of its basis in reality and the near-impossibility of fighting

¹²⁵ This particular concept of planetary death begins in the 1850’s with William Thomson, 1st Baron Kelvin who took the theories of heat as mechanical energy loss in nature (the first two laws of thermodynamics) and applied them on a universal scale. With the addition of input from later scholars, this theory hypothesizes that the universe will inevitably lose its ability to sustain processes that require energy, resulting in universe-wide maximum entropy.

it. And preoccupation with environmental catastrophe, like preoccupation with death, propagates anxiety and “catastrophism” for individuals as well as cultures.

The potentially negative effects of catastrophic thinking are widely discussed by scholars of apocalyptic representations as well as behavioral therapists and psychologists. The statistics and details vary but what is known for certain is that Americans suffer from anxiety disorders on greater scales than ever before. The American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (DSM) reported in 1980 that 2-4% of Americans suffered from anxiety disorders. In 1994 a survey suggested that about 15% of Americans suffered from them and in 2009, the numbers had reached somewhere between 45-50%.¹²⁶ The rhetoric of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT),¹²⁷ a form of therapy used frequently to treat anxiety disorders and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) uses the phrase “catastrophic thinking” to describe that which causes people to exhibit symptoms of anxiety.¹²⁸ Preoccupation with catastrophe is not a mere trend in popular culture or artifact of genre fiction; it is a cultural shift effecting even our daily lives and psychological states, with alarming rapidity.

¹²⁶ It is important to note, however, that many psychologists attempt to temper concern about this dramatic increase with the explanation that we are getting better at diagnosing, not necessarily that it is more common. It does seem a bit modernistic to decry the state of civilization as the cause of psychological issues but so much evidence points to actual changes in ways of being in the world at the individual level.

¹²⁷ CBT is the result of the development of behavior therapy in the early 20th century, the development of cognitive therapy in the 1960’s, and the combination of the two shortly thereafter. There are variations on the concept, but the general practice is to have patients confront the sources of their anxiety, sit with their anxiety, and watch it come down naturally, in the hopes that knowledge that it will go away on its own aids with the frequency and intensity of future attacks. A comparable strategy is also used to treat OCD which is often a symptom of a larger anxiety disorder.

¹²⁸ For an example of this phrasing in practice, please see: Phillip J. Maerov, “Demystifying CBT: Effective, easy-to-use treatment for depression and anxiety,” *Current Psychiatry*, 5, no. 8 (August 2006). <http://www.currentpsychiatry.com/home/article/demystifying-cbt-effective-easy-to-use-treatment-for-depression-and-anxiety/c70cd2182688a505fdb9189339c8cc07.html>. In popular culture, the recent reality television series, “Obsessed,” (by the A&E Network) features Americans suffering from anxiety and OCD. They are treated by Cognitive Behavioral Therapists who employ this rhetoric of “catastrophic thinking” with every patient.

While an earlier chapter of this thesis considers the utopian impulse and potential, as described by Fredric Jameson, of dystopic and apocalyptic fictions, the alternative is just as relevant. And, arguably, more common. In the years following the Reagan era, exacerbated by the 2008 economic crisis, citizens of the United States have experienced the simultaneous growth of anxiety disorders as well representations of catastrophe, violence, and death of all kinds. On this topic Sasha Lilley states in the introduction to *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth*, “The appeal of catastrophism tends to be greatest during periods of weakness, defeat, or organizational disarray of the radical left, when catastrophe is seen as the midwife of radical renewal. Such political despair is understandable. It needs to be resisted nonetheless.”¹²⁹ In a recent comic book series, *The Massive*, Brian Wood, Garry Brown, Dave Stewart and a rotating team of artists and colorists explore literal environmental catastrophe and the types of “catastrophic thinking” and behaviors that obsess our late-capitalist moment. Drawing on issues in politics, global conflict, weapons technologies, and nationalisms, as well as environmentalism and activism, this ongoing series reflects the variations on death and catastrophe unique to the American neoliberal era. And, unlike most environmental apocalypses, this version may represent a shift away from the counter intuitive catastrophic thinking that Lilley warns against.

The Massive follows a marine conservationist group called Ninth Wave that forms just before “the Crash,” a year long period of environmental and climate changes that devastate human infrastructure, give rise to catastrophic violence and conflict, and kill

¹²⁹ Sasha Lilley, “Introduction,” *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 8.

millions. As Jamais Caisco points out in the introduction to the first trade paperback (Vol. 1):

The (perhaps intended) irony here is that nearly all of the fictional disasters posited as part of the year-long *Crash* parallels the kinds of real-world problems we could very well see over the course of the next century, even absent a *Crash*. Rising seas, lack of access to basic necessities, collapsing transportation and economic networks—all frighteningly possible ... In our world, *Ninth Wave* would be fighting the same kinds of fights, but in the world of *The Massive* the problems can't be waved away as something for future generations to worry about.¹³⁰

And, the world of *The Massive* may not be far in our future. The time period of this fictional world is not made explicitly clear. However, the creators do stretch back into the 1980's and 1990's in flashbacks in order to develop the pasts and younger lives of characters in their 40's and early 50's, suggesting a time frame in the first issue of about five years from today.

Unease and vulnerability in the face of environmental degradation represent a driving force in this post-devastation world. This concern is definitive of the contemporary in art, academia, and politics and has been the subject of a good deal of interest in recent decades. "Sustainability" figures highly on lists of burgeoning fields for young college students, contributes to the local economies in coastal communities in the Americas in its "ecotourism" form, and is trumpeted as a selling point for universities, restaurants, and other service industries. A particularly useful result of this preoccupation with "sustainable" measures has been the linking of planet-wide death with *current* human choices and behaviors, in contrast to the modernist imagined future mentioned in the introduction to this thesis. This is due in large part to the necessary realization, given

¹³⁰ Jamais Caisco, *The Massive Vol. 1*, (Dark Horse Comics, 2012).

the intensity of air and water pollution, continued and dramatic land erosion in coastal areas, the devastation brought on by increasingly erratic natural disasters, and threats to global food and water access, that we are connected to and dependent on our environment

At the same time, little has been done to counteract what scientists have essentially reached a consensus about – that Earth’s climate *is* changing, and not naturally, but because of human intervention and behavior. And though there is a large group of American citizens who refuse to “believe” environmental scientists on this count, it is ever-present in the cultural imaginary. Since the creation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change by the World Meteorological Organization in 1988, few policy-level changes have been enacted in the United States. Many countries including Denmark, Sweden, Austria, Germany, Bangladesh, which is already experiencing early symptoms of changes in climate and temperature, and several countries in South-Eastern Africa (namely Mozambique) have adapted to the need to avoid further damage on an institutional level. The United States and other late-capitalist countries (i.e. the United Kingdom), on the other hand, have not. Despite the aforementioned rhetoric of “green” policy, recycling, and sustainability that is so common, only small interventions have been realized. Adrian Parr describes this as a system of extreme capitalism. She explains:

Adaptability, modifications, and displacement ... constitute the very essence of capitalism. Capitalism adapts without doing away with the threat. Under capitalism, one deals with threat not by challenging it, but by buying favors from it, as in voluntary carbon-offset schemes. In the process, one gives up on one’s autonomy and reverts to being a child. Voluntarily offsetting a bit of carbon here and there, eating vegan, or recycling our waste, although well intended, are not solutions to the problem, but a symptom of the free market’s ineffectiveness.¹³¹

¹³¹ Adrian Parr, *The Wrath of Capitalism: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

Brian Wood's most recent series forces the viewer to literally see the devastation that contemporary scientists warn about. Importantly towards these ends, the artists place particular emphasis on the visual sequences that narrate and depict the events between "the Crash" and the horrific post-apocalyptic moment of the comic. Generally, each page of the comic is based on a single color or a single section of the color spectrum (reds and oranges and yellows and greens are especially common) with variations in shade and tone (Fig. 16). Occasionally, contrasting colors will be added in the clothing or appearance of the characters (most frequently when they are first introduced to the story) or to emphasize important aspects of the scene, like the big red star on a Chinese warhead in the second trade paperback.

The flashback explanations and scenes of early environmental collapse, however, adhere strictly to the one color rule. These moments bear a particular quality that is reminiscent of an intaglio print or pen and ink drawing, with thin, scratchy lines and shading created by hatching, cross-hatching, and stippling. They are also similar in quality and simplicity to a newspaper cartoon. The larger series draws on the heavy-handed, graphic style that I have described for many of the comics discussed in this thesis. These smaller vignettes, however, stand out. What is more, they are often rendered in abrasive shades of yellow and orange that are both impossible to ignore and difficult to look at (Fig. 17). Contrasting Vaughan and Martin's use of memory in *The Private Eye* as indicating deception, altered facts, and the complicating effects of news and popular media on the collective imagination, the creators of *The Massive* focus on individual memories of the past as anchors in an otherwise mysterious and confusing

present. Continuously looking back at what has led to the catastrophic present of the comic, on personal and cultural levels, prevents characters and readers alike from forgetting that this apocalypse was caused by human behavior.

Indeed, representing these moments as if they were photographs taken by journalists, a popular theme in post-apocalyptic narratives, results in these disasters appearing to be taken from real life. During an initial reading of Issue #1, for example, I was concerned that I might actually just be woefully behind on current events.

Comparable to the built environment created by Marcos Martin in *The Private Eye* and the journalistic quality of Wood's other series, *DMZ*, the viewer reads their own moment in these flashbacks to the period immediately following the Crash. And, as Thierry Groensteen has argued, the ability to shift among graphic styles in the comic medium not only allows variation in emphasis but variation in emotional and conceptual content.

Groensteen explains:

...any graphic style tends to make the reader overlook the fact that it is merely an arbitrary code once it is repeated from one image to the next. Its persistence makes it less noticeable, ensures that the emphasis will be on the subject matter, and reinforces a reality effect, which gives credibility to the story being recounted. Conversely, any break in the code reminds readers they are looking at a drawing, and so combats or weakens the fictional illusion. When an artist such as Milo Manara decided to have a little fun by drawing his characters in different ways within the same story, it was in the context of an album that explicitly declared itself to be an *exercice de style*, a meta-comic, a reflection on the laws of representation, all of which combined to call into question the principles of the 'great adventure' tradition.¹³²

The shift in style in *The Massive* indicates moments of heightened or changed emotion and calls into question the reliability of representations and narrative. A sense of

¹³² Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, Translated by Ann Miller, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), 114.

mystery, about “the Crash,” about the continued absence of *The Massive*, and about the crew members aboard *The Kapital*, is crucial to the series. Not knowing, not understanding, and the potential existence of forces beyond human control are the dominate currents underwriting the series.

In the early issues readers learn that the crew of *The Kapital*, the ship purchased by Captain Callum Israel with “blood money” as a vehicle and home for the activist organization, are a global group. Several characters are from different African countries, one is from Russia, and two are from the United States. All of them have shady, mysterious, incriminating pasts – Captain Israel and two other crew members met as part of a mercenary group called Blackbell, and two crew members, including the central female character, were child soldiers. While a group of converted mercenaries fighting horrible battles in a world without infrastructure sounds like a nihilistic depiction of the inevitable “badness” of humanity, the creators instead focus on the efforts of the main characters, all radical environmentalists, to improve the world in which they are stuck. In particular, the Ninth Wave targets whalers and corrupt individuals involved with the distribution of natural resources like water and food. This story is not just about how we are bringing about our own demise, but also how populations all over the globe might draw on reserves of compassion, empathy, and forethought to avoid dystopia and destruction, both before and after environmental collapse—an additional example of the sentimentality so common to this study. Indeed, the reference to Karl Marx with the naming of the important ship *The Kapital*, alludes to a belief in the ability of the average citizen, not necessarily the political leader, to critique capitalism and enact necessary change.

The creators thus demonstrate how art and literature have the potential to both reflect and refute cultural trends. German sociologist Ulrich Beck, for example, explains his concern with a desire to conceive of nature and human life as separate and mutually exclusive in the contemporary climate:

Environmental problems are not problems of our surroundings, but—in their origins and through their consequences—are thoroughly social problems, problems of people, their history, their living conditions, their relation to the world and reality, their social and political situations. The industrially transformed ‘domestic nature’ of the contemporary world must frankly be understood as an exemplary non-environment, as an inner environment, in the face of which all of our highly bred possibilities of distancing and excluding ourselves fail. At the end of the twentieth century nature is society and society is also “nature.” Anyone who continues to speak of nature as non-society is speaking in terms from a different century, which no longer capture our reality.¹³³

Beck’s conception of environmental problems as social problems emerges as a primary impetus for ecological investment in art and literature, most obviously in science fiction, but also in other genre fictions like comic books. A realization that the repercussions of humanity’s impact on the environment will be reaped in our own lifetime necessitates a reevaluation of our relationship to it. This is why Mark Fisher lists environmental catastrophe as one of the ‘Real’s by which the “reality” of late capitalism and neoliberal policy might be undermined. Though there are plenty of examples of capitalism’s attempt to absorb green ideology, Fisher points out the way in which environmentalism unsettles the neoliberal world view. He explains that, “The significance of Green critiques is that, far from being the only viable political-economic system, capitalism is in fact primed to destroy the entire human environment.”¹³⁴

¹³³ Quoted in: Timothy W. Luke, *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ecology: Departing from Marx*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

¹³⁴ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, (Winchester, Washington: Zero Books, 2009), 8.

According to literary scholar Ursula Heise, we should actually think of much science fiction as a form of eco-criticism.¹³⁵ Heise writes in the essay “Martian Ecologies” and further elaborates in *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* (2008) that one of the most valuable potentials of science fiction as critical text is its ability to imagine the globe as a whole - nationalisms, boundaries, and histories aside. This is a gesture in the same vein of Jameson’s discussion of SF literature as utopian and, I would argue, can be taken a step further in the post-apocalyptic text. The end of the world story not only imagines the world as a dying whole but potentially implicates collective humanity in its own demise. In particular, *The Massive* is an excellent example of the use of an apocalyptic frame to highlight the weight and vastness of the environmental problem. The crew is from all over the world, they live in a time where nation and “difference” are increasingly irrelevant, highlighting the equally shared burden of prevention and devastation of the problems only beginning to become clear in our moment.

Heise identifies two different strains of environmentalism in Euro-American science fiction that attempt to conceptualize the planet as a whole with eco-critical goals in mind: (1) novels such as David Brin’s *Earth* (1990) or Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990) that are concerned with the ways in which imagining a global community are mediated by socio-political factors and information technologies, and (2) works that deal with the question of global nature through displacement to other planets. The works discussed in this essay primarily fall into the first category. Though this format does not allow for explication of all available post-apocalyptic comics,

¹³⁵ Ursula Heise, “Martian Ecologies,” *Twentieth-Century Literature*. 57, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2011): 447-472.

several, including the recent *The Fuse*, fall into the second category as well. And *The Massive* represents an instance of Heise's "global community" that is able to be realized fully – through visual and written narrative.

In line with Heise's conception of environmental SF, Frederick Buell argues that contemporary literature represents a source of information about environmental crisis, a site of progressive education on the subject, and a medium for engaging with the issues of the current moment. In his survey of apocalyptic fiction, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century*, he writes:

It [the literature examined in Buell's book] represents an increasingly diversified ecological crisis-in-progress today, vividly dramatizes many forms of environmental and ecosocial degradation and seeing them as key determinants of contemporary life. Along with representing different kinds of damage to external nature, it portrays today's risks to the human body with ironic clarity and deep pathos. Further, it dramatizes a number of different versions of environmental crisis—as accommodationist nightmare, as the emergence of risk society, and as a nightmare of injustice, a nightmare of rich versus poor in an ecologically and socially degraded world. In addition, it is sharp-eyed about the way stalemated environmental politics adds to current dilemmas and it wisely agonizes over the possibility that nature traditions and feelings today are yielding to an intensified new siege. ... *one central focus is clear: as never before, literature today represents deepening environmental crisis as a context in which people dwell and with which they are intimate, not as an apocalypse still ahead.*¹³⁶

Buell and numerous like-minded scholars figure science fiction and other genre fictions as the site of this type of engagement. *The Massive* is representative of a parallel current in contemporary comic books as well. In contrast to the novel, and with even greater effect, *The Massive* does not just tell us about our moment and its relationship to the frightening apocalyptic landscape, it *shows* us.

¹³⁶My emphasis. Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century*, (New York, London: Routledge, 2003), 321-2.

However, the conclusion of the series complicates the impulse to define *The Massive* as rooted in a totally pragmatic or realistic context. The “mysterious” quality of the narrative culminates in a magical realist ending which reveals that Mary, the former African child soldier and love interest of Captain Israel, is actually a greater-than-human entity of some kind. In a gesture that recalls the Judeo-Christian stories of Moses and Noah’s Ark, Mary confides that “the Crash” was only the beginning of the true end of humanity as we know it and that those like her have decided to liberate the planet of humanity. In light of this, she has made of *The Kapital* a vessel which will sustain human life and intends to lead the crew of *The Massive*, including her and the ailing Israel’s daughter, safely aboard (Fig. 18). The coexistence of environmental catastrophe, magical realism, and Judeo-Christian themes in a single narrative demonstrates what scholars have noted is the continued influence of older notions of apocalypse on contemporary iterations. As Lee Quinby explains, “...certain features of traditional apocalyptic belief continue to shape relations of power in the twenty-first century. Among these is the tendency towards moral absolutism built on stark divisions between good and evil. So, too, there is a sense of conviction that an apocalyptic scenario is unavoidable.”¹³⁷

Further, this co-mingling of apocalyptic narratives may indicate an attempt to historicize apocalypse and its ideological impulses. Reflecting the diversity of the characters and personalities that populate the fictional world, the apocalyptic moment of the series is equally complex, and even contradictory. It is possible, therefore, to see this

¹³⁷ Lee Quinby, “Apocalyptic Security: Biopower and the Changing Skin of Historic Germination,” In *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 18.

ending as problematizing our relationship to and fixation on varying apocalyptic stories at different historical moments. As Quinby has also noted:

Studying apocalypse in all its germinations ... helps highlight the varied, often contradictory, and resolutely violent parts apocalypse has played in both geopolitical and biopolitical history. ... The hope is that tracing the historical circumstances that empowered these various forms of apocalyptic belief fosters the kind of thought that can help engender other ways to govern ourselves, ways that grapple with and defy apocalyptic ways of living.¹³⁸

Thus, it is worthwhile to consider the confusing comingling of mysticism, Christianity, and scientifically based environmental catastrophe in *The Massive* as intentionally awkward. Indeed, the jolting blurring of genres in this case grants a hyperbolic quality to the conclusion that should be read as a problematization of our continued desire to locate the apocalyptic source outside of ourselves. The intentional ending of the world by those like Mary, rather than catastrophe as a logical conclusion to destructive human behavior, highlights the ridiculousness in continuing to look for scapegoats for impending ecological crises’.

The world and characters of *The Massive* further demonstrate the counterintuitive results of apocalyptic obsession and the infiltration of catastrophic thinking into daily life. As Keven Rozario explains:

The entertainment media and apocalyptic theology both tend to present politics and morality in black-and-white terms, treating the world as a place where ‘innocence’ is always imperiled and where retribution is demanded against violators of virtue. Both discourses privilege the sentimental and favor personal morality over political knowledge to such an extent that complexity can begin to feel like the last refuge of fools and the corrupt.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Ibid, 30.

¹³⁹ Keven Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 200.

The increasingly mysterious Mary is the most prominent example of how this plays out in the post-Crash world. The narrative begins to suggest around volume three that Mary is a representation of “Mother Nature” or “justice” or some confluence of the two, culminating in an image of her in naturally made clothing, standing among a group of First Nations people long before the birth of “America.” Mary is the source and subject of a variety of conflicts in which the “bad guys” and “good guys” are made incredibly clear and no defense is ever offered or entertained. As a mysterious, sexy, loving yet prone to anger partner to a conflicted, dying man, Mary’s characterization privileges this “uncomplicated” view of politics and ethics against which Rozario is cautioning. Further, despite her other-worldly origins, Mary provides the racialized counterpart to the struggling white male that is present in both *Y the Last Man* and *DMZ*. Like Zee Hernandez who provides mystical, spiritual, emotional, and sexual care, and who protects and guides Matty Roth in Wood’s earlier series, Mary is mother, lover, sister, friend, and guardian to Captain Israel in even more literal ways.

Thematically crucial to the world of *The Massive* and Wood’s storyline is the effect of political corruption before, during, and after planetary catastrophe. In Brian K. Vaughan’s early series (Chapter 3, *Y the Last Man*), political motivations and behaviors are ineffective, dangerous, pre-end times phenomena which only the nostalgic put stock in. And Vaughan’s main character, in particular, fits that description. In this much more recent version though, political motivations are a centrally toxic part of the world’s end. Having been a part of a trans-governmental mercenary group employed to “regulate” behavior and panic in the early years of the post-Crash world, Callum and his second in command Mag Nagendra (a Sri-Lankan man who nearly died as a child when he was

brutally beaten and thrown into the ocean by a group of foreign men attempting to poach what limited resources were left to the people in the Bay of Bengal region in 1984) are especially authoritative voices on the subject.

Alongside the Ninth Wave's defense of whaling populations and environmental concerns, the most prominent issue for the crew of *The Kapital* is corrupt politics and justice, particularly corrupt politics which are motivated by financial gain. As Captain Peter Hammarstedt writes in the foreword to "Subcontinental" (Vol. 2):

Prior to the Crash, Ninth Wave routinely harassed illegal whaling vessels in the Barents Sea, using innovative tactics, like the deployment of propeller entanglement devices, to obstruct whale poachers from conducting their bloody business. In an altercation ... the whalers fire upon a rigid-hull inflatable belonging to the *Kapital*, in a desperate attempt to dissuade the direct-action conservationists. Captain Callum Israel asks his trusted chief officer Mag Nagendra, 'Since when does the whaling fleet take shots at us?' to which Mag replies, 'It's their seventh year of decimated profits.' Ninth Wave was considered a threat because they spoke the only language that those poachers understood—profit and loss.¹⁴⁰

This is true throughout the series when, for example, Mary joins a corrupt group transporting water across the Sahara Desert who plan to execute the women employed to drive the tankers once the delivery has been made. Many scholars who deal with the public sector in lieu of neoliberal policy in the U.S. focus on what and who is left aside when we look to private corporations rather than national governments for services and stability. Health care, social programs, and entertainment and media are among the most widely discussed in this way.

The relationships between environmental activism and pharmaceutical development and an extreme free market in which the government does not supply

¹⁴⁰ Peter Hammerstadt, "Foreword," *The Massive Volume 2: Subcontinental TPB* (Dark Horse Comics, 2013).

funding, on the other hand, tend to be treated with more hesitation. Indeed, Catherine Corson, for example, writes glowingly of the merits of the shift in environmentalist attitudes from anti-capitalism in the 1960's and 1970's to "its twenty-first century embrace of the market."¹⁴¹ This is because the ideology of these industries is predicated on the assumption that generating funding is one of the most lucrative ways of achieving humanitarian ends. This attitude has been called "The Charitable-Industrial Complex,"¹⁴² and represents one of the major ways in which a system that makes the wealthy wealthier and the poor poorer is able to justify its mechanisms and point to its "successes." As Peter Buffett describes it in a 2013 article for *The New York Times*, "It's what I would call 'conscience laundering' — feeling better about accumulating more than any one person could possibly need to live on by sprinkling a little around as an act of charity."

This tension embedded in activism in the neoliberal era, embodied most recently by the *Occupy* movement and crucial to the often controversial, critical writing of scholars like Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed Jr., is clearly of interest in the world of *The Massive*. Furthermore, its presence in the post-Crash world is yet another way in which this comic book asks us to see ourselves reflected in its catastrophe. Captain Callum Israel is an eerily familiar character and perhaps recalls the real-time struggles of Captain Paul Watson, founder of the Sea Shepard Conservation Society currently the subject of the A&E show *Whale Wars*. Like the roguish Israel, Paul Watson is not American but is from a country with a large white, English speaking population

¹⁴¹ Catherine Corson, "Shifting Environmental Governance in a Neoliberal World: U.S. Aid for Conversation." In *Capitalism and Conservation* (John Wiley and Sons, 2011), 109. Corson supports her positive review of U.S. environmental practice under late capitalism by focusing on the amount of funds given by the U.S. government towards rehabilitation efforts in other countries.

¹⁴² Warren Buffett, "The Charitable-Industrial Complex," *New York Times Online*, July 26, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/opinion/the-charitable-industrial-complex.html? r=0>.

(Watson is Canadian and Israel is South African) and is getting on in years. Both characters have garnered quite a bit of attention from the press, have been arrested and have been the subject of many lawsuits, and created activist groups that employ unconventional, occasionally violent, tactics. Watson is unclaimed by Greenpeace, which he supposedly cofounded at eighteen, and called a pirate, and he is a heavy point of reference especially since his success at insighting institutional change is debatable.

Wood and artist Garry Brown emphasize the complicated sense of ethics embedded in this form of activism through their complex character, particularly in the issues that make up the fourth collected volume. Israel has a rough past, struggles to lead and loses the majority of his once blooming group, makes impassioned and sometimes dangerous decisions, and is dying from cancer. Even some of his most well intentioned attempts fail or fail particular individuals, again recalling Žižek, Jameson, and Fisher's exclamation about the impossibility of imagining alternatives in the neoliberal moment. He is anxious to resume some semblance of a, now old world, order or sense of justice and visually recalls another era with 1970's style clothing and sunglasses and a shaggy hairstyle and beard. And while the trauma of these characters is obvious in their post-catastrophe world their symptoms: anxiety, self-doubt, nostalgia, misplaced emotions, confusion, helplessness, and even cancer are all common among PASD sufferers of our own time. Further, in name, Israel makes reference to a legacy of trauma in the geographical region of the same name as well as the United States' continued interference in global conflict. This reference contributes to a general criticism of the forms of neoliberal intervention and "activism."

Like many of the versions of apocalypse discussed in this analysis, the unfolding of narrative in *The Massive* privileges emotional content and personal narrative to move the story forward. This is achieved through text as well as lengthy image sequences depicting the central characters as children and at crucial moments in their lives. Unlike others I have mentioned, however, this comic book series does not leave aside the political and social implications of its catastrophe in favor of pure sentiment. And, while contemporary versions of environmental apocalypse are frequently catastrophic, inevitable, and particularly frightening given their potential realization, this series acknowledges this intensity while also gesturing towards some actual, pragmatic solutions. This series represents not just a cultural fear but also a global possibility.

Like Dürer's still-powerful representation of Death and the king who falls in his wake, Wood's comic book shows us what we fear the most and indicates the ways in which our national and personal mythos is compromised by this preoccupation with catastrophe. Unlike more common representations of environmental apocalypse, however, this particular series suggests some remedial potential in the prospect of building a community that disregards national and physical boundaries and which draws on reserves of compassion, rather than desire. A possible reading of the mixed-genre conclusion additionally suggests an effort on the part of the series' creators to complicate our relationship to apocalyptic scenarios, even as it disrupts the experience of the viewer. Therefore, *The Massive* should be read as both representing a salient, practical fear in its visual realism as well as the emotional and psychic trauma of life under neoliberalism through its jarring amalgam of apocalyptic genres and its strangely mystical conclusion.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

A primary goal for this study was to demonstrate some of the ways in which neoliberal politics has, and continues to, infiltrate contemporary literature and art. Further, I argue that it is necessary to think of contemporary neoliberalism as a traumatic event in order to fully comprehend its impact on the “American” individual and U.S. culture broadly. Indeed, unlike other moments of extreme change, “weakness,” economic crisis, war, and social unrest, U.S. neoliberalism is a traumatic experience that refuses to call itself such. In performing this investigation I hope to have revealed some of the mechanisms and venues by which neoliberalism has established a firm hold on contemporary U.S. culture, the ways in which this contemporary trauma facilitates changes on institutional and personal levels, and the reasons why this should be a disturbing realization.

Importantly, the texts chosen for this project represent post-apocalypses brought on by behaviors of our current moment. As I have suggested, these comics engage with significant cultural issues related to environmental catastrophe, economic policy, government [ir]responsibility, extreme individualism, and the psychological effects of life in our current moment. At the same time, all four of the series here analyzed reveal the continued legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment in the rhetoric of the contemporary moment and the difficulty inherent in an attempt at transgressing these powerful ideologies. Many of the representations of apocalypse in this study, which all deviate from the popular zombie narrative whose allegorical work has already been well-analyzed, represent both the desire for a structural alternative to contemporaneity and a frequent inability to fully realize that substitute. Alternatively, an explication of works

like *The Private Eye* and possibly *The Massive* reveals that pointed critique of facets of neoliberalism is not impossible. My hope is that through this analysis it is clear that dialogues enacted by fictional texts can be instrumental towards envisioning an “outside” to U.S. neoliberal culture. Likewise, it is my belief that the comic book medium in particular, as visual, narrative, and popular, represents a unique site for communication and dialogue about socio-culture issues. Or, as Scott Bukatman has described comic books, that they are “little utopias of disorder, provisional sites of temporary resistance.”¹⁴³

My choice of comic books for this inquiry also has to do with the medium’s seriality and what Bukatman has described as its animism. Indeed, he uses the term to describe the playfulness, the necessarily imaginative quality, and creation of an impermanent space in the world of serial comics.¹⁴⁴ The experience of reading a serialized comic, not a stand-alone “graphic novel” or single issue like DC’s Elseworlds series, is necessarily different from other single-instance art forms. Like Dickens’ serialized novels, the texts become imbedded in daily life through the process of waiting, reading, and anticipating the next segment. Unlike a novel, film, or painting, the serial comic can be incorporated into one’s sense of what is “common” through repetition and

¹⁴³ Scott Bukatman, *The Poetics of Slumberland: Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁴⁴While Bukatman uses the term for much longer running series’, such as traditional superhero comics and Windsor McKay’s iconic *Little Nemo: Adventures in Slumberland* which have decades-long lives, I believe the same concept can also be applied to comics with shorter runs. He describes the world of Little Nemo: “...it is an aesthetic space primarily defined through the artist’s innovations, an animated space that opens out to embrace the imaginative sensibility of a reader who is never farther than an arm’s length from this other realm, a space of play and plasmatic possibility in which the stable site of reading or viewing yields to an onslaught of imaginative fantasy; and it is an impermanent space.” (2012, 1). This analysis demonstrates a comparable sense of impermanence, possibility, and imagination in the comic books here examined, even as the creators often deploy problematic rhetorics according to the contemporary socio-political climate. The serial comic, as I have demonstrated here, is an especially, and uniquely, communicative medium.

habit. This, I argue, represents a regular point of entry for critical thought into a large, often young, readership and a potential to unsettle popular ideology which is sustained through its appearance as “common sense.” Scholars like Adolph Reed Jr. have explained why the overt forms of resistance and criticism that were instrumental in realizing civil rights goals in the 1950’s and 1960’s are no longer viable under American neoliberalism.¹⁴⁵ What is needed instead is pointed critique, regularly administered, in order to alter such a virulent ideology.

By the logic of this prescription alone it would seem that television and advertising might offer a similar possibility. An important difference between comic books and other daily pop-culture venues, however, is the relationship that comics have to economic pressure and material gain. It is certainly necessary for large-scale success in the industry to possess either a large enough readership to be published by a major company like DC, Marvel, Vertigo, Dark Horse etc., or enough existing fame in order to successfully web publish (i.e. *The Private Eye*). And, as scholars like Sean Howe and Bradford Wright have explained, the comics industry is often at the mercy of a specific, and narrow, demographic.¹⁴⁶ However, the issues of competition and scarcity operate differently in this industry than in others. With the entrance of the Internet into the mix, and the help of the blogosphere, social networking sites like Instagram and Facebook, and self-publishing platforms like Vaughan and Martin’s *The Panel Syndicate*, more diversity of writers, artists, and content is now possible than ever before. And, as

¹⁴⁵ Adolph Reed Jr. (2013).

¹⁴⁶ Sean Howe, *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 2012); Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

Vaughan and Martin have attested, striking out on one's own in the comic book industry can be even more financially lucrative than seeking traditional routes.

Additionally, even mainstream DC and Marvel publications have been utilized historically as sites for overt critiques of military action and war, racism, genocide, sexism, and specific politicians and political actions. I do not argue that all comics, or even just the comic books in this study, are intended as specific criticisms of U.S. neoliberalism. Nor am I convinced that comic books are sufficient for enacting institutional changes. My point here is that the separate (from novels, fine art, advertising, and journalism) history of the comic book industry as well as the form, growing readership (brought on by the increasing popularity of film adaptations), and publishing practices of the medium lend it a unique *potential*, as evidenced by some of the texts included in this essay. Though it should not be overstated, the economic reality of the comic book industry may not be as easily subsumed by the larger project of neoliberalism as others.

A final note on animism—Bukatman makes two important claims about the function of animism in comics: (1) that its playfulness entails a type of disruption that allows for a disturbance of conventional hierarchies and social orders and that (2) in appealing to children early on, the comic book industry has been able to justify “fantasies of metamorphosis and expanded possibility.”¹⁴⁷ Both of these claims suggest that the very nature of comics and cartoons is to disrupt, challenge, and displace conventions.

Bukatman explains, partly quoting Brian Sutton-Smith, that:

... ‘play is not about the building of various kinds of personal and social order but is instead a series of interruptions, inversions, and inconsistencies that effectively deflate the orderliness, hierarchy, and

¹⁴⁷ Bukatman, (2012), 13.

pretense of official social structures. The player, often a jester or trickster, shows that there are other meanings to life from those that are publically recognized.' ... but I would further argue that comics (and cartoons) themselves *are* the trickster. They do not simply present images of disorderly play; rather, when activated by the reader, they constitute a form of disorderly play.¹⁴⁸

Bukatman's estimation of the nature and potential of comic books supports my assertion that effective and insightful criticism of neoliberalism can be generated, and spread, through these texts. If legitimate critique in comic books is possible, then the positing of an alternative to our market-driven national ideology might also be possible.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 12.

Figures.



Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. 1497-98, Woodcut. (39.2 x 27.9 cm).



Figure 2. Ben Templesmith, from *Wormwood: Gentleman Corpse* (Vol. 2), 2010.



Figure 3. Pia Guerra and Brian K. Vaughan, From *Y the Last Man* (Vol. 1), 2002.



Figure 4. Pia Guerra, Cover Art. *Y the Last Man* (Vol. 1, no. 11), 2003.



Figure 5. Pia Guerra, Cover Art. *Y the Last Man* (Vol. 1, no. 1), 2002.

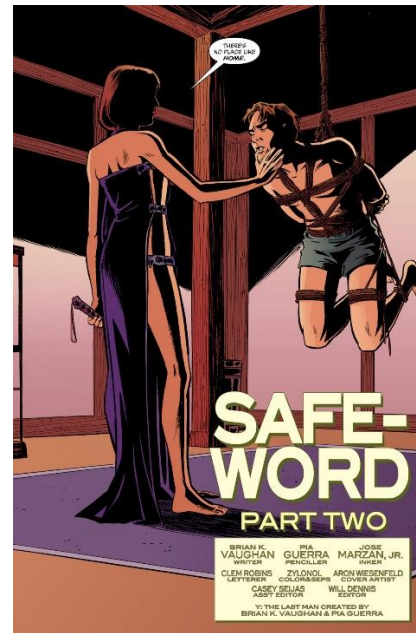


Figure 6. Pia Guerra, *Y the Last Man* (Vol. 4, no. 19), 2004.

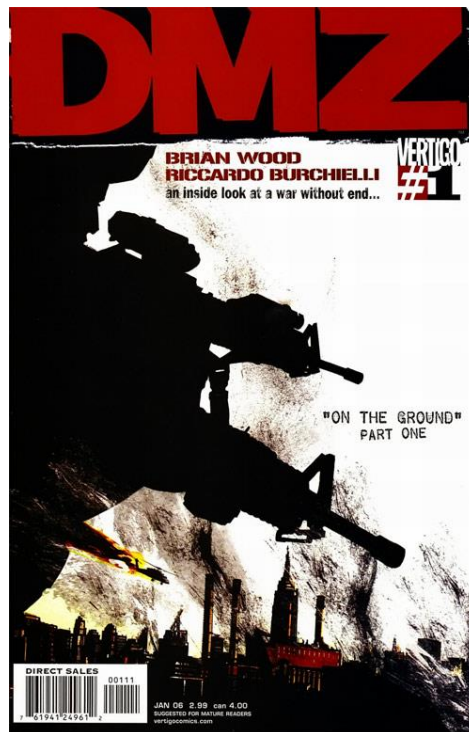


Figure 7. Riccardo Burchielli, Brian Wood. Cover Art. *DMZ* (Vol. 1, no. 1), 2005.



Figure 8. Riccardo Burchielli, Brian Wood.
From *DMZ* (Vol. 1, no. 1), 2005.



Figure 9. Riccardo Burchielli, Brian Wood.
From *DMZ* (Vol. 5, no. 3), 2008. Digital Scan.



Figure 10. Riccardo Burchielli, Brian Wood.
Cover Art. From *DMZ* (Vol 5, no. 5), 2008.

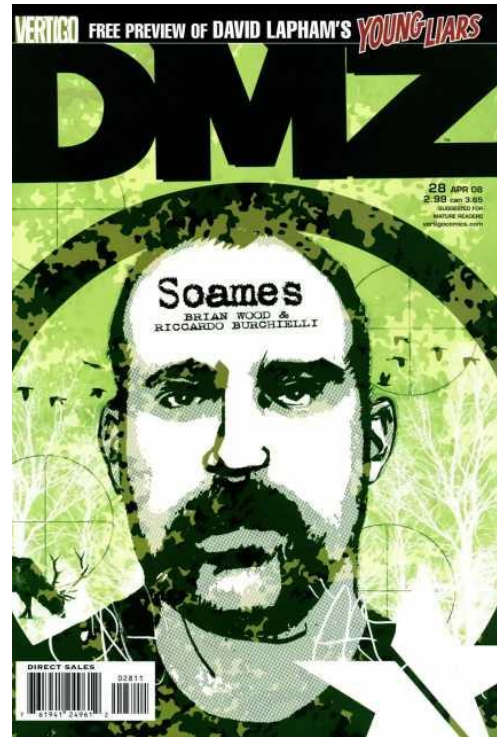


Figure 11. Riccardo Burchielli, Brian Wood.
Cover Art. From *DMZ* (Vol. 5, no. 6), 2008.

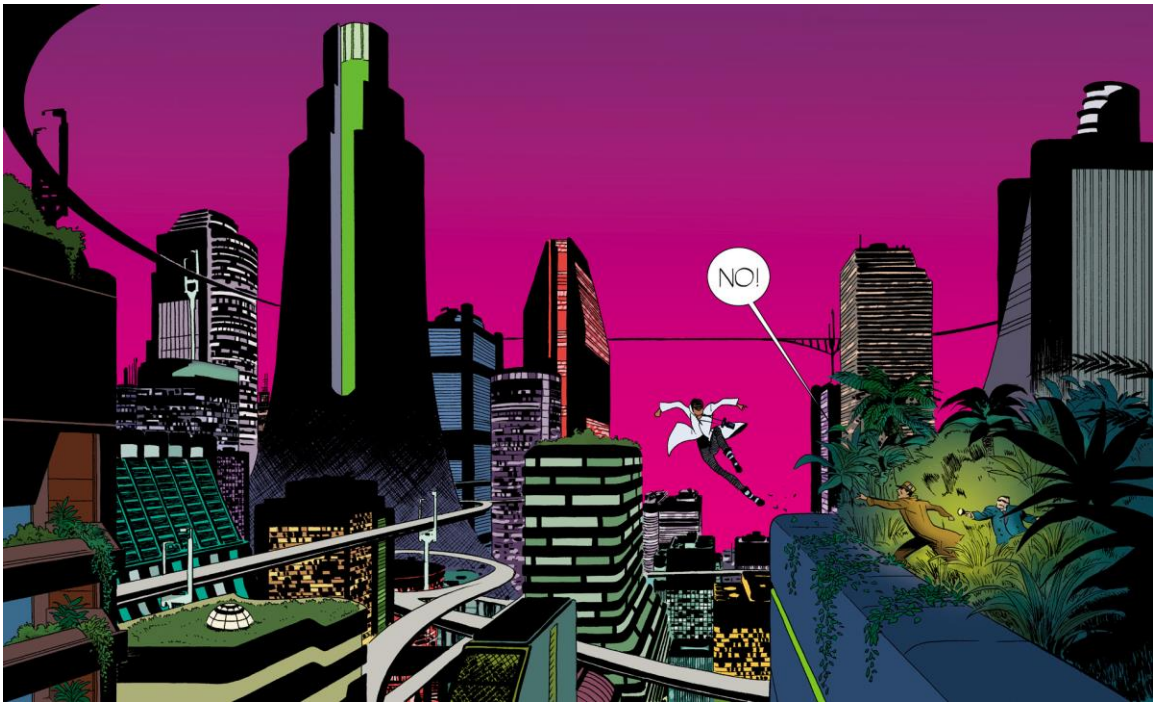


Figure 12. Marcos Martin, Brian K. Vaughan, and Munsta Vicente.
From *The Private Eye* (No. 1), 2014.



Figure 13. Marcos Martin, Brian K. Vaughan, and Munsta Vicente.
From *The Private Eye* (No. 1), 2014.



Figure 14. Marcos Martin, Brian K. Vaughan, and Munsta Vicente.
From *The Private Eye* (No. 1), 2014.

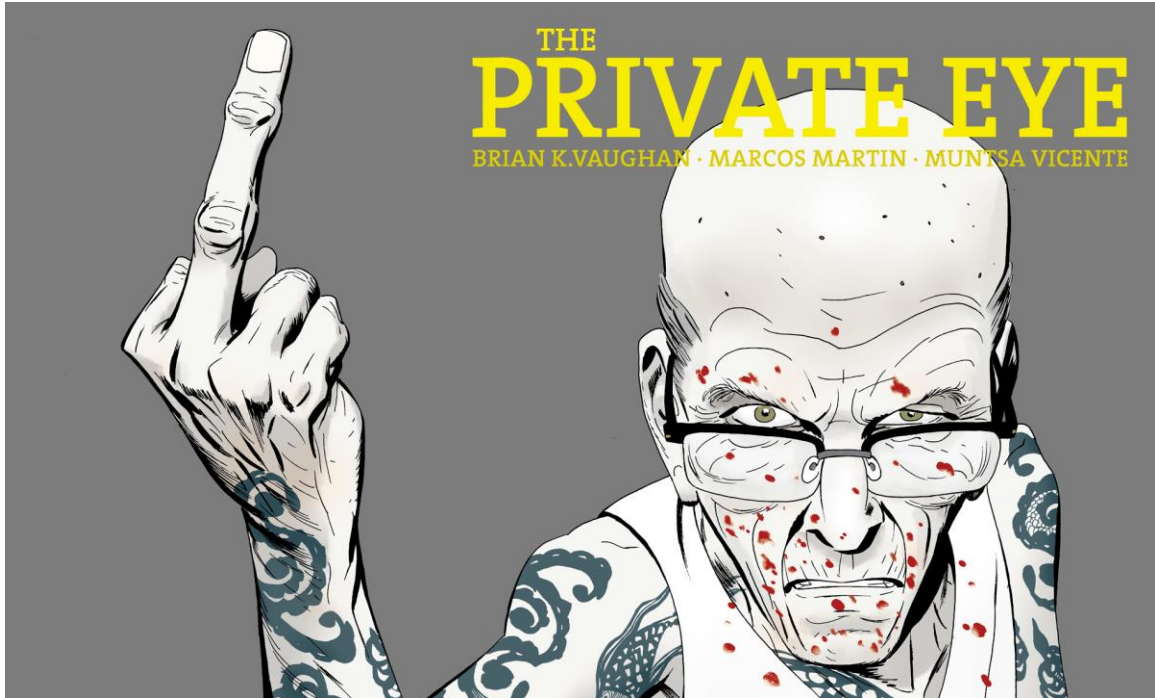


Figure 15. Marcos Martin, Brian K. Vaughan, and Munsta Vicente.
From *The Private Eye* (No. 8), 2015.



Figure 16. *Captain Callum Israel*. Brian Wood, Gary Brown, and Dave Stewart.
From, "Black Pacific," *The Massive* (Vol. 1), 2013.



Figure 17. Brian Wood, Kristian Donaldson, and Dave Stewart.
From, "Landfall," *The Massive* (Vol. 1), 2013.



Figure 18. Brian Wood, Gary Brown, and Jordan Bellaire. From, "Ragnarok," *The Massive* (Vol. 5), 2015. Digital Scan.

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