

Book Reviews

Paul Williams. *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War: Representations of Nuclear Weapons and Post-Apocalyptic Worlds*. Liverpool: Liverpool U Press, 2011. 278 pp. \$95.00 USD.

In *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War*, Paul Williams turns to an eclectic list of works—mostly novels and films, often but not always with a science fiction bent—under the intriguing premise that nuclear weapons and nuclear war are, and have always been, embedded with specific racial understandings. Beginning with the assertion, taken from Arundhati Roy, that “nuclear weapons are white weapons” (1), Williams looks to answer the questions, how have “nuclear weapons been read as representative of the scientific achievement, military superiority and responsibility of white Europeans and their descendants?” and “how have they also been interpreted as manifestations of the destructivity, racism, and recklessness of white civilization?” (1). Careful to delimit his study, Williams takes pains to clearly define what he means by race and ethnicity, and indeed what he means by “whiteness.” The result is an intriguing and provocative new examination of the discourses surrounding nuclear war, with concerns of race and ethnicity at the forefront.

Consisting of an introduction and eight chapters, Williams’s project is ambitious. The ordering of the chapters is not so much chronological as thematic. The first chapter, which deals mainly with American and British pulp science fiction novels and short stories, surveys apocalyptic literature that predates the advent of nuclear weapons in 1945. Williams shows how, for early sci-fi authors, future wars would be fought to maintain white dominance, with the concern being that “when whites and non-whites clashed, the unchecked population growth of non-whites could potentially eradicate white peoples” (33). The remaining chapters, then, offer several takes on the theme of how the advent of nuclear technology can be viewed as an instrument for maintaining white dominance. The earlier chapters focus on the United States (and, in chapter three, Australia) as a site of a nuclear apocalypse, where a nuclear event is already past tense. In these earlier chapters, race and ethnicity enter into the discussion in terms of repopulation and re-civilization, but “civilization” is still very much situated in the west. In the latter chapters, the focus shifts to the right to possess and develop nuclear technology. Race and ethnicity are again at the forefront, this time due to the west’s proprietary and paternal attitude toward the technology. The question becomes, “Who is responsible enough to have the bomb?”—and racial concerns are always just beneath the surface.

There is much in the way of strong scholarship present here. The observations in chapters two through four about the predominance of frontier

themes and imagery in post-apocalyptic literature are insightful, and the close readings, in particular those contained in chapter four, “Fear of a Black Planet,” are excellent. Examining a number of sci-fi novels and films from the 1950s, Williams shows how issues of great concern to the American public are played out in post-apocalyptic landscapes. In a reading of Philip Wylie’s novel, *Tomorrow!*, Williams argues that “social forces such as racism and poverty have pushed African Americans into decaying urban centres, and [Wylie] underscores the injustice of this situation by making the black community most vulnerable to nuclear attack” (112). In the film *The World, The Flesh and the Devil*, starring Harry Belafonte, the major dilemma is the great American taboo of miscegenation, where repopulation may involve an interracial union between Belafonte and a white woman. In examinations of these texts and others, Williams effectively shows the primacy of race when Americans imagine nuclear war.

While Williams’s scholarship is rigorous and his arguments well constructed, there are a few missteps. The third chapter, which considers the *Mad Max* films, is somewhat unclear in its conclusions: *Mad Max III* is both condemned for having a white male hero figure who is somehow anti-colonial, and heralded for having a black female villain character who leads a colonial civilizing mission. The fifth chapter perhaps overreaches. Williams tries too hard to make the response to nuclear proliferation by the black Atlantic (a term he borrows from Paul Gilroy) seem unified. He makes the important point that, for many writers of African descent who have known or witnessed oppression at the hands of western civilization, there is nothing ironic about this “enlightened” society producing a weapon capable of indiscriminate, total annihilation. However, representing members of the African Diaspora as a community united against nuclear proliferation overstates the argument. Nevertheless, the texts considered in this chapter, such as Langston Hughes’s neglected “Simple Stories” and the experimental poetry of Barbara Smith, attest to Williams’s claim that “positing the whiteness of nuclear weapons has provided a variety of opportunities for black Atlantic texts to explore the hypocrisies and tensions of modernity” (174).

Fittingly, Williams saves some of his strongest and most thematically current discussion for his final chapters. Following the end of the Cold War, discussions of nuclear war have shifted cultural ground, so to speak, pushing to the forefront the question of who has the right to possess nuclear technology. Williams illustrates how the quest for nuclear independence mirrors the quest for colonial independence. In chapter seven, “The Hindu Bomb,” Williams demonstrates “how South Asian writers have understood the possession of nuclear weapons . . . as being central to the Hindu nationalism

which achieved electoral success during the 1990s and 2000s" (203). In his final chapter, he explores Western films and novels that speculate on the bomb reaching "unstable" Third-World hands, noting that in many texts, "Third-World War is separated from Third World War by a slender hyphen" (225). This topical chapter works particularly well because it is willing to look at popular works—the discussion of the Arnold Schwarzenegger film *True Lies* is a highlight—for the assumptions about the attendant responsibilities of nuclear technology that they imply. The West, which created the nuclear problem, currently holds the vast majority of existing nuclear weapons. Ironically, even hypocritically, it now considers itself the only region responsible enough to have such weapons. *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War* shows that this notion is not only historically suspect but also almost comically predictable, as the speculative works Williams studies repeatedly demonstrate. Given the current furore over the possibility of a nuclear Iran, Williams's book could not be timelier.

Matthew D. Kriz