Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War

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Introduction

This study will range across continents and cultural forms and more than six decades, but it is anchored by Arundhati Roy’s assertion, used as this book’s epigraph,¹ that nuclear weapons² are white weapons, and that the virtues and vices of white people and nations are condensed in the figure of nuclear weapons. Roy’s proposition is explored from a variety of critical positions in Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War: Representations of Nuclear Weapons and Post-Apocalyptic Worlds, from inside and outside the perception of whiteness: how have nuclear weapons been read as representative of the scientific achievement, military superiority and responsibility of white Europeans and their descendants? How have they also been interpreted as manifestations of the destructivity, racism and recklessness of white civilization? As part of this process, Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War explores the ways nuclear representations in Anglophone literary, filmic and other cultural texts since 1945 have been pivotal sites for the articulation of racial, ethnic, national and civilizational identities. These texts are a way of making these identities coherent and legible, but the fact they must be produced means they cannot be taken for granted. Some of the nuclear representations studied in this book contest racial, ethnic, national and civilizational identities as meaningful and decisive ways of categorizing human life, and reveal them as insecure and disabling political compartments.

In this study, nuclear representations are defined as depictions of the following subjects: (1) the invention and use of the first atomic bombs; (2) the nuclear weapon testing and stockpiling of the Cold War superpowers; and (3) nuclear war (often referred to as World War Three) and life after such a cataclysm. Nuclear technology has been the subject of narratives of racial and national belonging and exclusion undoubtedly because its emergence (and deployment against Japan) was read by some commentators as an act of genocidal racist violence, and by some as the apex of Western civilization’s scientific achievement. These opposing perspectives are interpretative poles that have been central to nuclear representations. By posing white moral and technological superiority against the destructive technology it supposedly invented, cultural producers have cited nuclear weapons as evidence against white Anglo-Saxon supremacism. From this
through a range of media, from novels to poetry, short stories to film, comics to oratory, the terms that modern European imperialism depended upon – ‘civilization’, ‘race’ and ‘nation’, in particular – often recur in nuclear representations. Some of these representations, emerging when Europe’s empires were relinquishing direct control of their colonies, share the uncertainty that beset the colonial powers following the uneven and often violent decolonizing process. The historical congruence of nuclear representations and decolonization intimates the importance of this context to future visions of World War Three: tropes of genocide, technological and scientific modernity, and the (re)population of the planet are relevant to this apocalyptic subgenre of SF as well as being recurrent elements in colonial history. Several of the nuclear representations discussed reproduce the justifications of the modern imperial project. But an alternative tradition makes these justifications visible and demonstrates their corrosive, lingering presence in contemporary culture through the depiction of nuclear technology and its possible consequences. Significantly, the idea that nuclear weapons are used to buttress a racial order that privileges whiteness – an idea that prohibits non-white peoples from accessing such technology – remains a potent current running from 1945 until the present day.

Having raised this point to emphasize the importance of the themes in this study, I am mindful to repeat that my focus is literary, cultural and filmic texts. I am not seeking to explain how race and ethnicity have structured Cold War history. If I may be excused a brief aside, I do think such moments have occurred. Civil rights and Cold War historians have long understood that US foreign policy had to negotiate the American government’s response to domestic systems of racial discrimination, and vice versa. Recently decolonized nations whose populations had been excluded along similar lines by European imperialism followed the narrative of American desegregation closely, and the allegiances of these nations played an important role in the Cold War. When the black student James Meredith was not permitted to join the University of Mississippi in 1962, President Kennedy ordered federal marshals to force his registration through. This took place on 1 October 1962, after a night of fighting between demonstrators and troops. While not universally praised, Kennedy’s actions were widely perceived in the international press as evidence of his resolve to oppose racial discrimination. When the Cuban Missile Crisis took place three weeks later, the presidents of Guinea and Ghana denied refuelling
The subject of this book is not the mechanisms of history. The subject of this book is the way that representations of nuclear weapons and the world after nuclear war postulate meanings that are only fully activated when considered through the lens of race, ethnicity, nationhood and civilization. In many of the texts discussed, a primary consideration is whether the vestigial master narrative of white supremacy, the narrative of racial superiority that underpinned modern European colonization, is being resuscitated. I have in mind Fredric Jameson’s expression, ‘if interpretation in terms of [...] allegorical master narratives remains a constant temptation, this is because such master narratives have inscribed themselves in the texts as well as in our thinking about them’. For Jameson the interpretative act runs the risk of being an act of hermeneutic bad faith – the risk that the critic finds what they were looking for all along because they gathered up a series of texts whose selection is far from arbitrary, and consequently the reading of said texts confirming the ubiquity of the historical essence with which they were initially ascribed. Yet, as Jameson writes, one should not be too cynical about the act of interpretation. If the critical analysis of a text finds evidence of the historical trends it set out to discover, the success of the interpretation is not in itself a reason to reject the idea that texts allow one to think closely and critically about historical attitudes. The act of interpretation can sometimes be the imposition of a preconceived set of ideas onto a series of texts chosen precisely because they corroborate the hypothesis being tested, but it can also be credible because texts are inscribed by history and by master narratives. As a way of referring to an explanation of the movement of history and its future direction, Jameson’s sense of ‘master narratives’ is worth retaining. My usage here designates the explanation itself, specifically the master narrative of white supremacism that proved so useful to European colonialism and the settlement of North America. How do texts come to be inscribed by master narratives? What justification do I have in reading the master narrative of white supremacism and related narratives of settlement through the literary, cultural and filmic texts analysed here?

In answer to the first question, I acknowledge a debt to the work of Derek Attridge in *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), and J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event (2004) for his formulation of literature as an event performed by the text and by the reader. This ‘symbiotic relationship’ is especially important for the making of meaning in SF because of the demands placed on readers to accommodate the estranged
reality on offer. Attridge’s influence can be seen in the approach to literary texts and other media forms adopted in this book: meaning is understood to be produced in the moment when the reader (or viewer, or listener, or both) brings their horizon of experience and expectation to engage with a text. The text sets up the possibility of readings that are brought to life by the mind of the reader in a personal and unrepeatable way. This does not mean that the meaning produced between reader and text is so heterogeneous that it cannot be summarized or encapsulated by the critic. The fabric of a text undoubtedly encourages the production of certain meanings and discourages others. *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War* discusses novels, films, speeches, short stories, poems and popular culture in a manner that reflects this. I have attended to the meaning that is produced between the text and the reader, not least my own experience of this process, while accrediting how texts tend towards some reading experiences and not others. While allowing for the unexpected and unpredicted production of meaning, this study examines how texts set up channels of interpretation for readers to follow and reflects on the productive interpretations that can be made with and against those channels. One of the things commented on, then, is how these texts are inscribed by master narratives of race because of the deliberate intentions of the people producing them, as well as the figures of speech and thought surrounding the cultural producers in everyday life that get reproduced semi-consciously or unknowingly. Because the meaning of a text is made and re-made in its encounter with new readers, the master narrative of white supremacism (and indeed any other master narrative) might be discovered because a reader’s experience programmes them to activate such meanings. Different media forms are discussed alongside each other the better to discern shared patterns of representation – and where different production, distribution and reception contexts modulate those patterns.

As I stress, while the master narrative of white supremacism provides the interpretative spine of *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War*, exaggerating this framework risks simplifying and flattening the complexity of its articulation and the ways in which it is challenged. If the discussion of nuclear representations in this book was so fixated on the prominent subjects of race, ethnicity, nation and civilization that it excluded other factors determining the content and shape of texts, it would cease to be critical. It is not my intention to reduce down the meaning of these texts so they appear as entries in a public debate about race and nuclear weapons submitted in the category ‘cultural contributions’. In highlighting aspects that fit this book’s overall narrative, it is vital to appreciate that those features are generated by multiple and sometimes conflicting determinants: generic
expectations, the precedent of commercially successful texts, the weight of tradition, institutional considerations, material technologies of representation and political concerns quite apart from the master narrative tracked here.

Literary scholar Daniel Cordle observes in *States of Suspense: The Nuclear Age, Postmodernism and United States Fiction and Prose* (2008) that coming to terms with the repercussions of the nuclear context in cultural texts means addressing some pressing methodological questions: ‘Because it is suspense – anticipation of disaster rather than disaster itself – that defines the period, it is important to find ways of engaging with the psychological and cultural consequences of living with nuclear weapons that go beyond the simple delineation of depictions of disaster.’ *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War* considers several texts where an engagement with racial politics and the nuclear threat seems to be taking place beyond the level of explicit depiction, where the terms of reference are encoded in narrative, iconography and rhetorical figuration. Where my readings position what Cordle identifies as ‘non-specific motifs of [nuclear] anxiety’ within this book’s overarching interpretational touchstones, I have endeavoured to provide the contextual evidence (biographical details, historical corroboration) that makes such readings hold weight. In other words, I justify reading these representations as concerned with nuclear technology and race because they are explicit themes, or because additional evidence leads me to make a credible case to theme8 said texts in this manner. With this explanation in mind, post-nuclear-war texts such as Samuel R. Delany’s novel *The Jewels of Aptor* (1968) or Lorraine Hansberry’s dramatic ‘fable’ *What Use Are Flowers* (1962), published after her death,9 are not discussed. As interesting as they are, simply because they have been written by African Americans does not mean they are about race or ethnicity.

Various parameters have provided limits to this research. First, the nuclear representations studied here come from the Anglophone world and were created to be understood by English-speaking audiences. While I confer with texts whose original language is not English, and gesture to issues that are germane to the non-Anglophone world, they are not the focus of analysis. Second, the period of nuclear representations under consideration runs from 1945 to around 2001, with the first chapter surveying the period before 1945. In 1945 the United States dropped atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima (6 August) and Nagasaki (9 August) in order to force Japan’s surrender and avoid an invasion of the Japanese mainland. The year 1945 represents the end of World War Two and the acceleration of hostility between the USA, the USSR and their respective allies in the Cold War proper. Broadly speaking, 2001 is the cut-
off point for the texts discussed because the terrorist attacks on American soil on 11 September inaugurated a different era of nuclear anxiety. The final chapter in *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War* outlines how the War on Terror relates to the long history of nuclear representations, drawing points of connection and contrast with the Cold War period. Chapter 7 also discusses texts after 2001; in this instance that extension seems appropriate, since many of the writers were responding to India’s and Pakistan’s nuclear weapon tests in 1998. The full import of those tests, and the diplomatic standoff of which they were a part, required more than three years for writers to formulate and publish their literary responses.

Referring to the USA’s response to nuclear weapons, cultural historian Paul Boyer has modelled three ‘great cultural cycles, or waves’ of ‘intense political activism and cultural attention’: the first is August 1945 to the early 1950s, the second is the mid-1950s to the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963, and the third starts with Ronald Reagan’s election to US President in 1980 and ends in the latter half of the 1980s, when easing of aggression between the USA and USSR made ‘nuclear concerns [seem] passé and irrelevant’.

While many of the exemplary and most popular of the nuclear representations discussed here fit into that model, others do not. That should give an idea of the specificity of Boyer’s schema – it is designed to capture the peaks of nuclear tension and cultural production, but this study is as interested in capturing the ideas in texts that fall outside the main cycles.

### The Field of Scholarship

*Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War* has been nourished by the insights of critical theory, not least postcolonial studies and critical race theory, as well as SF studies, nuclear criticism, and Cold War cultural and literary studies. For this project, two key texts from SF studies have been Paul Brians’s *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895–1984* (1987), and I. F. Clarke’s *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars 1763–3749* (2nd edn, 1992). These extensive surveys of the future-war genre touch upon the themes of race, the legacy of imperialism and the history of nuclear representations, and *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War* will develop the connections they identify. This book joins Patricia Kerslake’s *Science Fiction and Empire* (2007), Adilifu Nama’s *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (2008), and John Rieder’s *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008) in placing a renewed appreciation of race and colonialism in the development of science fiction. It complements these studies: Kerslake and Nama do not focus on nuclear representations, and by starting in 1945, *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War* begins roughly where Rieder’s excellent study concludes. I offer an alter-
native to Rieder’s hypothesis that after the 1940s the theme of ‘natives being massacred by super-weapons’ in American invasion narratives was replaced with the fear of contagion and the surreptitious transposition of human life and inhuman substitutes. Admittedly, American neocolonialism is different in kind from its European predecessors, but Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War establishes how superweapons have an ongoing role in speculated conflicts between ethnicities, races and civilizations after 1945. Nuclear weapons, nuclear war and its imagined consequences are narrative devices underscoring the longevity of spectacular military technology in science fiction and its colonial and anticolonial perspectives – which is not to say such representations have not been joined by the invisible invasion motif, and Octavia E. Butler’s fiction is discussed later. Patrick B. Sharp’s Savage Perils: Racial Frontiers and Nuclear Apocalypse in American Culture (2007) tracks how American apocalyptic visions from the Civil War to 1959 relate to a social Darwinist version of the American frontier as a battle for survival where the (white) emissaries of civilization overcome the less developed forces of savagery. The 1946–1959 nuclear frontier fictions frequently depicted a corrupt civilization destroying itself in a nuclear war, enabling the survivors to rebuild civilization free of moral pollution. In noting the Darwinist and frontier dimensions of post-apocalyptic fictions, Savage Perils extends the insights made by M. Keith Booker in Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946–1964 (2001) and other SF scholars. Sharp’s position will be returned to in several ways, adding to and finessing his interpretations. Savage Perils hinges on relating the racial interpretation of nuclear weapons back to the master narrative of social Darwinism and the frontier, and while the literary and cultural history assembled in Savage Perils is illuminating, some texts can be read productively for their racial politics outside that context.

In the 1980s and early 1990s analyses of nuclear representations were dominated by the school of nuclear criticism, though this body of scholarship is little known in the twenty-first-century academy. Broadly speaking, nuclear criticism studied ‘the applicability of the human potentiality for nuclear self-destruction to the study of human cultural myths, structures, and artefacts’. It drew on research in SF studies and pressed new (or newly translated) theories of poststructuralism into the service of antinuclear activism. The proliferating concern (culturally and politically) with nuclear apocalypse in the 1980s was, seemingly, a situation that demanded the attention of academics. One of the most memorable areas of nuclear criticism was analysing the rhetoric used by politicians, strategists and the media. By revealing the paradoxes inherent within that rhetoric, and highlighting the role language played in normalizing the
nuclear arms race, nuclear criticism sought to contribute meaningfully to the antinuclear movement. By the early 1990s the Cold War was winding to a close and the USSR was being dismantled; as a consequence, the risk of World War Three was perceived to be ebbing, the compelling ethical context for nuclear criticism no longer seemed so urgent, and it quickly dwindled as a scholarly pursuit. Nonetheless, the unlikelihood of all-out nuclear war did not erase the perceived danger of nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorists or ‘rogue states’. It has been noted that a renewed nuclear criticism might play a role in research into cultural texts and current nuclear anxiety. The final chapter in Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War is work of this kind, elucidating how a long history of assumptions surrounding the Third World inform the iconography and rhetoric of twenty-first-century nuclear representations. Nuclear criticism studied nuclear war through several contexts: eschatology, gender, the psychological effect of potentially imminent destruction, the role of knowledge and technology in Western culture, and military and strategic history. In 1995, Ken Cooper’s book chapter ‘The Whiteness of the Bomb’ added race to this list. Self-identifying as white, Cooper writes, ‘To put the matter bluntly, the bomb was built by people like me for the protection of people like me’. Although I try to nuance this position, Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War returns to the writers Cooper identified, such as Langston Hughes and Ishmael Reed, and extends the connections he made between race, literature and nuclear weapons. To a greater or lesser extent, this book touches on all of nuclear criticism’s aspects, and while the tone may be less imperative, at several points I demonstrate the semantic heterogeneousness of cultural texts and the political implications of this – a classic nuclear critical move. The most important feature that distinguishes Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War from earlier nuclear criticism is that the political implications under discussion are primarily related to racism and postcolonialism, not antinuclear activism.

If nuclear criticism’s presence in the humanities is a small blip on the academy’s radar, a steady volume of research is being produced in the field of Cold War literary and cultural studies. Roughly beginning in the 1990s and growing in volume in the 2000s, this scholarship built on Paul Boyer’s By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age (1st edn, 1985; 2nd edn, 1994) and Stephen J. Whitfield’s The Culture of the Cold War (1991). Whitfield’s cultural history charts the political thought of the anticommunist movement and its dissenters from the end of World War Two to the early 1960s; its chapters on cinema and television indicate the usefulness of using those media to study the political sensibilities of the period. Aside from its intelligence, Alan Nadel’s Contain-
ment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age (1995) is of interest for forming a bridge between earlier nuclear criticism and later research into the cultural Cold War. Nadel’s thesis is that as part of the Cold War the USA tried strictly to delineate the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in terms of political allegiance, religion, sexuality and in relation to events and the narration of those events (history). Under the pressures of the era (including the nuclear threat), these boundaries collapse or are untenable, creating the conditions for the germination of postmodernism. Retaining the nuclear critics’ close attention to the material and rhetorical postures of nuclear defence, Cold War literary and cultural studies seems less interested in the fear of nuclear war and is more attuned to the Cold War of espionage, proxy wars such as the Vietnam War, and the role of culture in campaigns (ideological and institutional) against communism. As a particularly stimulating example of this kind of criticism, Adam Piette’s study of literature from the USA and UK, The Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam (2009), does fine work placing writers such as Graham Greene, Vladimir Nabokov and Allen Ginsberg biographically and literarily in the aforementioned contexts. Tony Shaw’s books British Cinema and the Cold War (2001) and Hollywood’s Cold War (2007) provide thorough case studies which elaborate the extent to which UK and US film production in the period was overdetermined by institutional apparatuses, governmental initiatives, public taste and the profit motive. In Music and Ideology in Cold War Europe (2003), Mark Carroll underlines the Cold War context surrounding classical music in early 1950s Paris: certain types of composition were claimed to signify the greater value of culture produced in the ‘free world’ compared to the more artistically conservative Soviet regime. Earlier examples of this trend – studying Cold War literature and culture without specific recourse to the nuclear threat – include Woody Haut’s Pulp Culture: Hardboiled Fiction and the Cold War (1995) and Thomas H. Schaub’s American Fiction in the Cold War (1991). The latter interprets the Cold War as a time of ideological readjustment, with literature, literary criticism and liberalism re-orientated as a result of the events of 1939–45. With more space devoted to the nuclear threat’s influence on formal technique and subject matter, Edward Brunner’s Cold War Poetry (2001) and Bruce McConachie’s American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War (2003) are more embedded in the nuclear critical tradition than some of these other works. As these examples attest, academic interest in the Cold War period is enormously high, and Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War will demonstrate the complex ways that ‘homefront’ debates over race, ethnicity and nuclear weapons related to the ideological battle being fought against the communist world.
Constructing ‘Race’, ‘Ethnicity’, ‘Nation’ and ‘Civilization’
in the Modern Period

Some clarification of key terms used in this study – race, ethnicity, nation and civilization – will be of use to the reader. In terms of race, theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah has indicated there is a long history of defining collective identities with reference to physical and mental characteristics, going back (at the very least) to the classical Greeks and the ancient Hebrews. However, the word ‘race’ did not enter the English language until the sixteenth century, when it carried several meanings: offspring in a line of descent (‘the race of Williams’), or a general term of classification (‘the human race’), or one’s inherited disposition. In early modern Europe, Christianity was used to explain human difference, but from the eighteenth century onwards the attempt to subdivide humankind into races made common cause with the overarching categorization project of Natural History, with Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae* (1735) proving seminal in both fields of knowledge. Some pernicious, recurring assumptions were present in Linnaeus’s writings, such as the characterization of Africans as ‘Crafty, indolent, negligent’. Following Linnaeus, scientists and scholars into the nineteenth century demonstrated the superiority of white people in matters of beauty and intelligence, drawing on anthropology, physiognomy, craniometry, craniology and phrenology. The idea that humans belonged to separate races and that some were better, purer and more intelligent than others hardened into an increasingly circulating scientific ‘truth’. In the 1850s Count Arthur de Gobineau hailed the Aryans as the purest and most superior strain of the white North European race; he was absolutely against any intermixture with inferior races, arguing it would lead to civilization’s decline.

In 1859 Charles Darwin proposed a theory of human evolution based on natural selection: when a species was better suited to its environment than another because of an inheritable trait, it was more likely to survive, reproduce and therefore pass that trait down to successive generations. Social Darwinists bent Darwin’s theory to explain human difference in a way that was racist and hierarchical, and applied these ideas to the management of human populations. Even Darwin wrote ‘the civilised races will almost certainly exterminate and replace […] the savage races’ in a matter of centuries. In the nineteenth century, as the United States spread across North America and European colonial rule was entrenched around the globe, North American and European race scientists were demonstrating the superiority of the white race. These race scientists, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unconsciously, were doing the ideological work of
white colonization, justifying white settlement across the world as the inevitable and righteous victory of an intelligent and deserving race against undeveloped and lazy races.\textsuperscript{27} With this in mind, race is not simply the theoretical or empirical extrapolation of biological fact. Race is constructed along the lines of discourse, as detailed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault – sciences \textit{produce} the phenomenon of race and make it epistemologically credible by generating and confirming hypotheses through selection of evidence.\textsuperscript{28} As Rieder’s scholarship has shown, science fiction as a genre emerged as European colonialism reached its apex – and ‘powerful, widespread racist ideologies’ were invaluable as the explanation and the engine of European colonialism and North American settlement. In complicated ways, science fiction texts deployed race as part of a signifying system delineating the permutations and limitations of human life.\textsuperscript{29}

By the last half of the nineteenth century, ‘race’ referred to subsections of humankind that had inherited characteristics from preceding generations, becoming discrete groups distinguishable by physical appearance and mental capacities.\textsuperscript{30} While I do not agree that humans belong to racial groups ascribed by nature with specific qualities and characteristics, I use the term ‘race’ in this study because, as a social category, it powerfully structures the way humans relate to themselves and other human beings. As critical race theorist Ian F. Haney López puts it, ‘Biological race is an illusion. Social race, however, is not […] Race has its genesis and maintains its vigorous strength in the realm of social beliefs.’\textsuperscript{31}

Given the poisonous history surrounding the idea of race, it is unsurprising that official data collection by contemporary state institutions uses the term ‘ethnicity’. Scholar Werner Sollors speculates that the rejuvenation of this term was a reaction against Nazi Germany’s fetishization of race in the 1930s and 1940s: ethnicity was ‘revitalized during World War II, [serving] as a more neutral term than the one in the name of which the National Socialists shaped their genocidal policies’.\textsuperscript{32} Ethnicity provides a way to register difference within the compartments of nationhood and biological race.\textsuperscript{33} Ethnicity represents membership of a distinctive group whose identity is not necessarily derived from physiology; rather, it may be defined by language or religion. \textit{Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War} takes ethnicity – ‘belonging and being perceived by others as belonging to an ethnic group’\textsuperscript{34} – to refer to differences that are intraracial. Undercutting biological determinism’s power, ‘ethnicity’ does not seem to do the same work as ‘race’ in prescribing the potential or character of a group’s members. However, it would be fallacious to suggest that ethnicity is a more mutable category because it is socially agreed upon rather than bequeathed by nature:
the notion has gained dominance that a ‘people’ is held together by
a subliminal culture of fairy tales, songs, and folk beliefs – the origi-
nal ethnic (‘völkisch’) subsoil of the common people’s art forms that
may culminate in the highest artistic achievements. As a result of
this legacy ‘ethnicity’ as a term for literary study largely evokes the
accumulation of cultural bits that demonstrate the original creativity,
emotive cohesion, and temporal depth of a particular collectivity.35

Ethnicity still interprets humanity as subdivided between discrete groups
whose signifying practices are expressive of that group’s innate and distinc-
tive cultural being. To take an example Sollors uses, literature is not a
window through which eternal essence can be seen; literature makes the
shared characteristics of an ethnic group seem automatic and self-evident
by supplying the repertoire of ‘imaginative and symbolic structures that
intensify (or, at times, even generate) group consciousness’.36 This book
shares the definition of ethnicity as a marker of collective identity that is
not grounded in physiological difference, but it also attends to its insta-
bility and the role of cultural production in making and unmaking its
coherence.

The distinction between race and ethnicity is an interpretative tool that
foregrounds the historical specificity of other key terms. One such term is
‘whiteness’, which pulls ethnic identities into a racial collective that is
homogeneous enough to justify generalizations by the race thinkers who
have a stake in its deployment. In the United States, the conglomeration
of ethnic groups – perhaps self-identified as Anglo-Saxons, Celtic Irish,
Italian and Russian – under the umbrella of racial whiteness made sense
to white supremacists keen to identify these groups as capable of assimila-
tion into American civilization. Knitting them together as white and
American continued to exclude groups deemed non-white and unable to
participate as full citizens in a modern democracy, such as Native Ameri-
cans, African Americans and Asian Americans. Historian David R.
Roediger’s The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working
Class (1991) identifies the mid-nineteenth century as a pivotal point in this
history. Until the 1830s, black and Irish Americans lived, socialized and
worked together, a relationship that decisively shifted as Irish Americans
came to ‘treasure’ their ‘whiteness’ and deny their affinity with black
Americans because that denial would ‘entitle[e] them to both political rights
and to jobs’.37 This is one example from a much longer historical narra-
tive, and historians argue it was only during the mid-twentieth century in
America’s suburbs (with its corollary, the erosion of ethnically distinctive
inner-city communities) that whiteness was bound together with
maximum cohesion.38
In his racial history of America’s working class, Roediger observes the ethos of capitalism-constructed ‘blackness’ as belonging to the pre-industrial world:

Increasingly adopting an ethic that attacked holidays, spurned contact with nature, saved time, bridled sexuality, separated work from the rest of life and postponed gratification, profit-minded Englishmen and Americans cast Blacks as their former selves […] Blackness and whiteness were thus created together.39

Novelist Ishmael Reed notes that ‘black American’ is a multiracial identity whose genealogy stretches back to Europe as strongly as Africa. Reed believes this blanket concept of blackness is inherited from plantation slavery, when, regardless of the race of the father, the offspring of female slaves would be deemed black and therefore the property of the mother’s master. The rape of female slaves by male slave-owners was widespread and white fathers would own their interracial children as chattel.40 After Emancipation, the percentage of African ancestry that qualified an American as black varied from state to state and across different historical moments. Virginia’s 1924 Act to Preserve Racial Integrity adjudged that any African ancestry legally situated that person on the black side of the colour line – commonly known as the ‘one-drop rule’.41 For Reed, there is a political stake in continued references to a uniform ‘blackness’: it reciprocates the supposedly homogeneous category of whiteness discussed above.42 The presence of ‘white’, ‘black’, ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ in this book is accompanied with the desire to trace how nuclear representations have been complicit in the political utility of whiteness and blackness.

At first it seems the modern nation state enjoys parameters that allow one to define it without ambiguity, to say ‘X is a nation’ and ‘Y is not’. Those parameters might include a government with sovereign command over the civil life of the country’s territory, physical limits demarcated by agreed-upon borders, a flag, a national anthem, a football team. With this in place, we can say ‘Mexico is a nation’ or ‘Finland is a nation’ and not ‘South America is a nation’. Tellingly, my phrasing ‘modern nation state’ indicates this idea of nationhood belongs most confidently to the modern period.43 Further, while my brief list prompts us to recognize the shared features that many nations possess, it is too simple to see the nation as a checklist of tangible points. In 1882 the French thinker Ernest Renan pointed out that traditional markers of national identity are ultimately insufficient to explain the modern nation state: France went on existing without its dynasty, geography is too changeable to be a cause, and neither religion nor language necessarily appears to bind nations together
My position takes its cue from Benedict Anderson’s seminal *Imagined Communities* (rev. edn, 2006), which suggests (in the modern period) the nation exists as an imagined collective. For Anderson, national print media such as novels and newspapers generated the imagination of national community. The experience of their shared consumption produced a sense that the consumer was one of many simultaneous consumers – and that community went under the name of the nation. Literary scholar Timothy Brennan draws attention to the etymology of nation, coming from the Latin *natio* and its meanings of ‘local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging’, indicating the kind of ideological investment that a nation’s members make in the national community: ‘a deep, [temporally] horizontal comradeship’. The rise of the modern nation state should be placed next to the dawning sensibility articulated by the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, for whom the *Völkgeist* (the spirit of a people) created a distinctive folk culture of which the nation was an expression. The idea of a nation and a people is projected into the past to stabilize their collective identity in the present, and after Herder, writers periodically pose the nation as organic and automatically emanating from its members. As with race and ethnicity, nationhood is not passively reflected in film, literature and popular cultural texts; ‘texts are [...] productive forces in nation-building enterprises’, but it would be erroneous to see the text as the sole constituent of the meaning of nationhood. ‘In this world of self-made ethnics and constructed births of nations it is important to keep remembering that rhetoric, texts, and literature are needed to naturalize these processes’ while avoiding the temptation to instate language as a constitutive essence ‘that would substitute for history, the individual, or the social realm’. There is a political importance to studying the cultural production of racial, ethnic and national identities, but the politics involved borrows its importance from these other contexts. It does not replace or compete with their importance.

Marxist theorists Immanuel Wallerstein and Etienne Balibar conceive of a complex, reciprocal relationship between nationalism and racism, where racism is part of nationalism, it supplements nationalism, and it exceeds nationalism. Racism is an ideological aide to lend national identity authenticity and purity, sometimes going under the guise of ‘ancestry’. Racism exceeds the nation state in relation to the inequalities of the world system of capitalism, whereby some geographical areas of production are privileged and ‘core’ and other areas of the world are disadvantaged and subordinate – ‘peripheral’. Racism is sustained by this disparity, expressing and promoting global capitalism’s axial division of
labour: mapping the economic eminence of disparate nations onto a racial bloc of whiteness unified those nations’ white populations, the better to lay claim to their shared economic interests. Wallerstein and Balibar reach for this conceptualization to understand why (in their assertion) racism is getting worse. The thinking about race and nation in Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War repeatedly attends to these terms’ deployment by governments and cultural producers to find a position in the world system of capitalism; for instance, the Indian government’s appeal to nationalism in relation to the May 1998 nuclear tests drew attention away from their economic policies, as discussed in chapter 7, and American narratives of post-nuclear-war invasion worked through anxieties about the US economy, examined in chapter 2.

In many of the texts discussed in this book, ‘civilization’ simultaneously denotes two concepts: first, the achievements of Europe and North America, and second, the history of human development, in whose name the West speaks, since its endeavours are self-promoted as exemplary. The capitalist democracies of North America and Western Europe identify themselves as existing on a continuum stretching back to Ancient Greece, a continuum constituting the journey of scientific learning towards refinement and perfection. In polemical terms, the film and literary scholars Ella Shohat and Robert Stam describe this as a journey from ‘Plato-to-NATO’: ‘Eurocentric discourse projects a linear historical trajectory leading from classical Greece (constructed as “pure,” “Western,” and “democratic”) to imperial Rome and then to the metropolitan capitals of Europe and the US.’ The term appears to be first used in the eighteenth century and is built onto the root ‘civilize’, which originates in the early seventeenth century. This idea of an advanced stage in the development of human society should be set in the context of the contemporaneous making of the modern world: ‘civilization’ legitimized why non-Europeans profited from being exposed to European culture and this history will become apparent as we examine how the word operates in the nuclear representations that follow.

The Structure of the Book

This study outlines two broad ways in which nuclear weapons have been seen as white: first, because the weapons themselves symbolize the achievements, atrocities and attitudes of European and American modernity, and second, because the post-nuclear-war future that such weapons could make possible is deemed to reproduce a (European) colonial or (American) frontier dynamic in which white Europeans and their descen-
dents defend and enlarge their societies at the expense of non-white peoples. Roughly speaking, the first section of this book discusses depictions of the world after nuclear war, where the latter trope dominates; in the second section, which focuses more on the invention of nuclear weapons, arms stockpiling and deterrence, the former issue of which race, ethnicity or nation is represented by nuclear weapons comes to the fore.

The first chapter, ‘Race, War and Apocalypse before 1945’, details premonitions since the late nineteenth century of an apocalyptic race war fought with the newest, most destructive technology. Where the perpetrators, victims and survivors of nuclear war are racially or ethnically marked in cultural texts, those markings often reflect perceived hierarchies of mental, moral and physiological difference. Historian John W. Dower’s comments on World War Two in the Pacific are relevant here:

The war words and race words which so dominated the propaganda of Japan’s white enemies – the core imagery of apes, lesser men, primitives, children, madmen, and beings who possessed special powers as well – have a pedigree in Western thought that can be traced back to Aristotle, and were conspicuous in the earliest encounters of Europeans with the black peoples of Africa and the Indians of the Western Hemisphere. The Japanese, so ‘unique’ in the rhetoric of World War Two, were actually saddled with racial stereotypes that Europeans and Americans had applied to nonwhites for centuries.55

The dehumanization of the Japanese shares similarities with the demonization of Jews in European culture. In its German nationalist interpretation, anti-Semitism ensured Germany’s racial hygiene in a war waged in the name of Heaven. Leading up to 1945, a torrent of future-war fiction was published in which victory went to the people most prepared for conflict and able to develop the most sophisticated new weapons (these narratives typically imagined future wars as fought between fundamentally incompatible ethnic groups). In the American permutation of this transnational literary genre, conflicts between Asian nations and the United States dominated. The incompatibility of Japanese and white American culture was interpreted by Allied officers and media during World War Two as follows: either we wipe out their civilization or they wipe out ours. The racism vocalized by the policy drivers of the USA’s Pacific war is one reason several cultural texts in this book have seen the dropping of atomic bombs on Japanese civilians as a racially motivated attack, despite the historical debate over the decision.

Chapter 2 addresses American novels and short stories where the polarity of the frontier is reversed, and the United States is pushed back or
recolonized after a nuclear war. In these texts, the post-nuclear-war frontier does not constitute the leading edge of civilization projecting west from white settlers on the American East Coast and from Europe before that. Instead, white American society survives uncertainly and is blinking out of existence. William Tenn’s short story ‘Eastward Ho!’ (1958) is a satire on the colonization of North America: whites are abused for being savages, unable to hold their drink or use firearms responsibly, and Native Americans scorn them. Native Americans have the material power to back up their racial chauvinism and are too powerful to be held to account by the United States when they break treaties intended to respect white territory. In witty, engaging ways, Tenn confounds the assumed righteousness of America’s settlement. Chapter 2 also discusses Michael Swanwick’s short story ‘The Feast of Saint Janis’ (1980) and Whitley Strieber and James W. Kunetka’s novel *Warday* (1984), which envisage a future where white Americans are technologically and financially bankrupt, sliding into totalitarianism and pagan ritual, and dependent upon the charity of Japan, Europe and Africa. I understand these texts as responses to the underperformance of the American economy compared to countries like West Germany and Japan. This is dramatized in the form of the unfair economic conditions imposed on the nuclear-devastated USA. In ‘Feast’ and *Warday* the social consequences of economic decline are crime and social breakdown, which leads to authoritarian policing and urban segregation in America’s cities. Yet, rather than see social breakdown and authoritarianism as a product of unregulated capitalism, totalitarianism is projected onto the foreigners who operate as symbolic interlopers in the USA’s financial sovereignty.

A recurrent motif of post-nuclear-war fiction is the use of Australia and the South Pacific as the location of human survivors. Chapter 3 traces the cultural history that has given this motif its potency. On the level of visual representation, there are profound continuities between the colonial past, speculated post-apocalyptic futures and certain (supposedly) barren and featureless geographical areas of the world, of which the Australian desert is a paradigmatic example. The adhesive connecting all three cultural spaces is the notion of the ‘soft place’, taken from Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* series of comics. This term refers to the way that post-apocalyptic space and precolonized territory are traditionally visualized as a flat, unmapped, bare canvas, on which heroic exploits can be acted out. Chapter 3 analyses the film *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), arguing that its representation of the Outback is evidence that narratives of colonial settlement continue to inform late-twentieth-century Western culture, although the film’s complicity with imperial assumptions about race, space...
and the civilizing mission is far from simple and coexists with the demands of concluding an action-adventure film trilogy.

The fourth chapter comments on several American films and novels from the 1950s, early 1960s and the 1980s, focusing on a major theme structuring interracial relations in the post-nuclear-war world: who is to have sex, and with whom? This is a crucial issue because the reproduction of the survivors will determine who will repopulate the United States (in some instances, the world). The narratives dramatize the conflict that ensues when some of the characters disagree with the racial ingredients out of which the Americans of the future will emerge. This chapter emphasizes the decisions made by survivors in choosing a mate for procreation; it uses Werner Sollors’s model of how American identities are held in tension between descent and consent relations to discuss the strategies used to explain characters’ decisions to reproduce ‘with their own kind’ – or not.

Chapter 5, ‘White Rain and the Black Atlantic’, explores the nuclear representations of the African diaspora and asks how cultural producers from the black Atlantic have seen nuclear weapons as a symbol of the destructive tendencies of a modernity claimed by and for its white citizens. The title comes from Caribbean poet Olive Senior’s reworking of radioactive black rain into ‘white rain’ in the poem ‘rain’ (1985), signifying the significance of racial whiteness influencing the decision to drop atomic bombs on Japanese citizens in 1945. Gilroy has suggested that black Atlantic writers, thinkers and performers have historically been characterized as within modernity but denied full access to it. The efficacy of black Atlantic critiques of nuclear weapons is that they bear the cultural memory of the exertion of terror and technology in the interests of white privilege.

‘Race and the Manhattan Project’, the sixth chapter, also analyses texts that consider whether the development of nuclear weapons buttresses racial hierarchies. This chapter explores a subgenre of the thriller novel that investigates accidents or murders at the military base at Los Alamos, New Mexico, where the first atomic bombs were built. Dexter Masters’s *The Accident* (1955), Martin Cruz Smith’s *Stallion Gate* (1986) and Joseph Kanon’s *Los Alamos* (1997) link the potential genocide represented by the birth of atomic weapons to the extermination of Jews in Europe. All three novels profess a tension between the multinational contributors to America’s atomic bomb programme and agents within the American state that seek to purge the Manhattan Project of its non-white or un-American elements. All three novels discuss the Holocaust as a barbaric act but warn that America’s atomic bombs are justified with the same rhetoric that the Nazis used: the enemies of civilization must be exterminated absolutely to
preserve our way of life. However, as the Holocaust recedes further into history, this subgenre of the historical thriller increasingly relies on racial difference to explain the physical appearance of characters and their function in the plot.

The seventh chapter concentrates on Ruchir Joshi’s novel *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* (2001) and its emergence in Indian history when nuclear weapons were a bold and highly visible way for India’s rightwing BJP government to signify national power and independence from other nations. This is the paradox of India’s late 1990s nuclear nationalism: the successful achievement of Indian modernity and the realization of its politically autonomous nationhood are projected through the act of emulating existing nuclear powers, some of which were the former European empires from which Hindu nationalism sought to distance India. While the focus is on Joshi’s novel, and its conjectured future wars between India and Pakistan (Mumbai is atomized during one nuclear exchange), several novelists originating from South Asia have drawn attention to the antimony of India’s nuclear nationalism, and this chapter draws on the novels and essays of Romesh Gunesekera, Arundhati Roy and Vikram Chandra in addition to Joshi’s novel. For these writers, the acquisition of weapons previously seen as white promotes massive conflict and interethnic violence. The Indian nationalism that was successful at the electoral polls was Hindu nationalism, and its programme of self-renewal was rooted in a tradition of paramilitary activity, the persecution of non-Hindu Indians and the demonization of Pakistan as an unstable aggressor. *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* yokes together the political rise of Hindu nationalism and Indian military belligerence, and reflects upon the contradictions of measuring cultural progress by the adoption of the former oppressor’s weaponry.

The final chapter of this study constructs a historical narrative from 1945 to the early twenty-first century, tracing the fear that the instability of the Third World will lead to a future nuclear catastrophe. That catastrophe is figured in two ways, either that World War Three will begin as a result of military manoeuvring in the Third World or ‘rogue states’ will enable terrorists to use nuclear weapons against a Western city. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, fiction writers and members of the scientific community argued that you stop a Third World War by preventing nuclear weapons falling into the hands of Third World nations. Chapter eight analyses how the language and imagery used assumes that nuclear technology is too complex to be used by formerly colonized nations, reproducing the notions of cultural sophistication embedded in the master narrative of white supremacism. The arrogation of representing
civilization that took place during modern European imperialism and the settlement of North America is worth attending to in the history of nuclear representations since 1945 because it continues to influence the language used in the War on Terror.

Notes


2. The historical use of the terms ‘atomic’ and ‘nuclear’ is complex, and they refer to the development in physics of atomic fission and fusion processes. Historically, until the mid-to-late 1950s ‘atomic’ is the predominant term for weapons utilizing this technology, after which ‘nuclear’ is generally preferred. Much more powerful weapons were being developed in the early 1950s; the first hydrogen bomb was tested on 1 November 1952, using nuclear fusion rather than fission. See Spencer R. Weart, *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA (1988), p. 155. I use ‘nuclear weapons’ to refer to either those more powerful hydrogen weapons or to nuclear and atomic weapons, in line with contemporary usage in which ‘nuclear’ is a catch-all term. I reserve the term ‘atomic’ specifically for the earlier stage of technology. The evolution of terminology from ‘atomic’ to ‘nuclear’ in the 1950s took place unevenly and often irrespective of the actual technology referred to. Certain cultural texts featuring in this book use ‘atomic’ and ‘nuclear’ interchangeably and I have tried to reflect the language used by the texts themselves.


26. Quoted in Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, p. 110.

27. Williams, *Keywords*, p. 249.


29. Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, pp. 97–98.


33. To give some idea of the complexity of these terms, ethnic identities can be subdivided by race and racial compartments can be subdivided by ethnicity. See Sollors, ‘Foreword: Theories of American Ethnicity’, pp. xxx–xxxv.


42. Reed, Wong, Callaghan et al., ‘Is Ethnicity Obsolete?’, p. 228.


