Un-American Dreams: Apocalyptic Science Fiction, Disimagined Community, and Bad Hope in the American Century, by J. Jesse Ramirez

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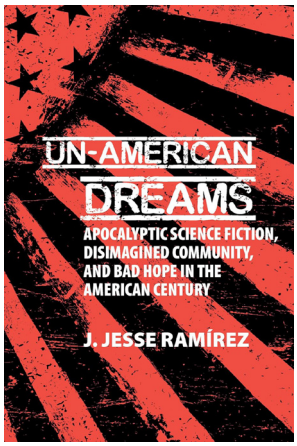

An alternate title for J. Jesse Ramírez's provocative study of 20th century apocalyptic narratives could arguably be *Apocalypse: This Time It's Personal.* Ramírez refers to himself as "a child of apocalypse" in the preface: "I was born on the east—that is to say, brown—side of San José, California, when it wasn't just the Capital of Silicon Valley but also the PCP Capital of the World. It was the beginning of Reagan's Morning in America and the last decade of the Cold War" (ix-x, x). Reflecting on his own recurring dreams of apocalypse, Ramírez asks a question that will haunt each subsequent chapter and its reckoning with American end-time pop culture: "Why, then, do I always come back?" (ix).

The short answer is that for the apocalyptic dreamer, apocalypse is beside the point. Apocalypse, in its current usage, is impossible to imagine and represent because it requires knowledge of a world in which humanity as we understand it no longer exists. Put another way by historian Paul Boyer, "'The only adequate television treatment of nuclear war […] would be two hours of a totally blank screen'" (207). Ramírez's real focus is pseudo-apocalypses, which he defines in his introduction on "The Uses of Pseudo-Apocalypse" as "speculative negations of the postwar United States that situate the reader and viewer in relation to what cultural producers think America is and can—and cannot—become" (8). The selection of primary texts spans the years 1945 to 2001, corresponding to what some identify as the American Century, from postwar triumph to post-9/11 homeland. These are also the years when, in Ramírez's assessment, science fiction became a staple of American popular culture, no longer limited to the niches of pulps and comic books. "For apocalyptic sf was the shadow cast by the brilliance of American superpower," the author writes, "the bad conscience of the shift from 'empire' to 'century,' the negative that gestated like an alien parasite in the gut of the positive" (5).

Ramírez devotes much of Chapter 1, "The Last American: *Earth Abides*, Speculative Anthropology, and Settler Utopianism," to the titular novel by Berkeley English professor George R. Stewart. Critical reception of *Earth Abides*, published by Random House in 1949, reflected a growing respect for science fiction after its futuristic fantasies turned to reality with the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Praised by *The New Yorker*, Stewart's novel tracks the human survivors of a deadly plague. The plague disrupts a human world overtaken by technology and thoughtless consumption, "the definitive flaw in the national character whose speculative transcendence is motivated by pseudo-apocalypse" (45). But digging more deeply, Ramírez discerns the persistence of racial hierarchies within Stewart's ostensibly post-racial utopia: his white protagonist Isherwood "Ish" Williams sees his mixed-race wife Emma more as a pragmatic resource than an equal in this new world order, and this order itself depends on erasing the Indigenous past from the land that Ish hopes to resettle with his "Tribe," the name used to designate Ish's surviving group. Writes Ramírez, "the novel's concluding image of the plague survivors as a tribe of white Indians proves that it's easier to imagine the end of civilization than the end of the white desire to 'go native'" (49).

In Chapter 2, "The Revelation of Philip K. Dick," Ramírez assesses Dick's status as an apocalyptic author by considering three of his novels: *Dr. Bloodmoney, or, How We Got Along after the Bomb* (1965), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), and *VALIS* (1981). While popularly associated with dystopian films like *Blade Runner* (1982—adapted from *Androids*) and *Minority Report* (2002—adapted from his short story), Dick emerges here as something of a utopian. The World War III of *Dr. Bloodmoney* features survivors who eschew corporate capitalism for the more modest prosperity of small business. "Dick doesn't roll history all the way back to pre-capitalist modes of production, as George Stewart does," Ramírez notes, "but his hope is equally damaged, equally bastardized by a capitalist realism that can imagine the future only as the sacrificial return to a 'regular' and outmoded past" (98). And the religion of Mercerism, so central to Androids, connects with Dick's own personal relationship to Christianity, which informs his later work and spirituality. While acknowledging that "Dick's presentation of Mercerism is far from uncritical," Ramírez also observes, "It was the Pauline spirit of reformation that activated Dick's sense that another Christianity, one beyond the neo-fundamentalisms of the evangelicals and the tired orthodoxies of the churches, was possible" (101).

Ramírez turns to film in Chapter 3, "National Insecurity in *Night of the Living Dead*." The influence of George A. Romero's classic (1968) can still be felt by fans of zombie films today. According to Ramírez, Romero's influences included an unlikely source: American Cold War civil defense: "the national security state's project to reeducate and train the US population for the ever-present possibility of nuclear war was itself a speculative fiction that peddled the illusion that nuclear war is survivable because it's basically the same as conventional war" (115). But the resilience required for disaster preparedness does not account for the racial tensions between survivors captured by Romero. The presence of Ben, a black survivor of the zombie apocalypse, reveals the blind spot in what Ramírez calls "national security sf, which, like civil defense itself,

took the white suburban family as its model and segregated African Americans in the cities that would have been targeted first in a nuclear war" (126). Ben's exclusion from civil defense is made clear when he is killed by a member of a white rescue party. "Whereas national security sf celebrates the defeat of the un-American and the return to normality," Ramírez writes, "*Night* implicates this bad hope in the renewal and preservation of an American Century whose security is founded on racist violence" (136).

Chapter 4, "How to Bring Your Kids up Alien: Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy," considers its subject in the context of the Reagan years. Science fiction blockbusters like *Star Wars* (1977) and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) reflected the values behind Ronald Reagan's successful presidential campaign: "Reaganite hegemonizing mobilized popular-cultural representations of Americanness that fused neoliberal economics with traditionalist ideologies of family and race" (142). The Reagan campaign's sanguine attitude toward nuclear weapons inspired Butler to compose her trilogy of novels—*Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989)—in which the survivors of a nuclear war must breed with aliens in order to survive. Ramírez observes, "pseudo-apocalypse gives Butler an alibi for speculating about whether sexual reproduction with a radically different form of life can alter the otherwise intractable hierarchy that founds Reagan's America" (147). While Butler today is credited with building sf worlds that are more inclusive than those of her more canonical peers, Ramírez engages with her complex legacy as an apocalyptic dreamer who seems to connect hope for humanity's future on traditional reproduction: "Butler never fully overcomes reproductive futurism. Xenogenesis's bad hope is in some ways anti-queer, a heteronormative wish fulfillment that makes homosexuality and other antinormative desires useless and unthinkable. On the other hand, the radical otherness of alien sex serves as a pretext in Xenogenesis for speculation about queer sexualities and futures after the American Century" (148-149).

Chapter 5, "Waiting for the Martians: *Independence Day* and the Second American Century," tackles one of the most iconic sf blockbusters of the 1990s. Ramírez credits director Roland Emmerich with imbuing the 1996 film with "global Americana" (184). When an alien invasion threatens the entire globe, our heroes unite under an inclusive banner that looks suspiciously like American imperial hegemony:

> The aliens are represented as an undifferentiated horde with dark skin, oval eyes, unintelligible forms of communication, and blatant disregard for national borders. Second, human international unity is represented as an extension of America's internal racial harmony. This second unity grounds the first; the United States can represent universal humanity because it's already a nation of nations, the united races of America. (194)

Readers of Ramírez's meticulous ideological autopsy will never hear the film's signature speech—when President Thomas J. Whitmore (Bill Pullman) equates alien defeat with "our" independence day—in the same way again.

In his conclusion, "Pseudo-Apocalypse after the American Century," Ramírez uses 9/11 as a kind of test case for the ideas in his previous chapters. This is by no means a trivializing thought experiment; for some witnesses, the scale of the attacks could only be processed in terms of Hollywood. "September 11 was movielike," Ramírez reflects, "not simply because the attacks were visually similar to disaster movies; more importantly, our déjà vu was rooted in apocalyptic sf's rituals of disimagined community. […] And in the event's aftermath, when the attacks became a pretext for the United States to wage wars of imperial renewal in Afghanistan and Iraq, 9/11 repeated apocalyptic sf's utopian motivation" (206).

While not necessarily a book only for specialists, the curious generalist should have a solid command of theory, Marx and Lacan in particular. It's tempting to invite the general reader into this dense but rewarding study of sf apocalypse. Americans continue their apocalyptic dreaming, if the post-pandemic "normal" and the 2024 election cycle is any indication. The persistence of this dream—the apparent impossibility of imagining a future without it—suggests that, far from being a divided nation, we aren't divided enough.

Pedro Ponce teaches writing and literary studies at St. Lawrence University. His latest publication is *The Devil and the Dairy Princess: Stories* (Indiana University Press), winner of the Don Belton Fiction Prize and a finalist for the 2021 Big Other Book Award for Fiction. His reviews have appeared recently in the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, and in *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*. He is the 2024 winner of The Tom La Farge Award for Innovative Writing, Teaching and Publishing.