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Re-reading Borders and Migration: Post-apocalyptic Fiction and the Nation-State

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Re-reading Borders and Migration: Post-apocalyptic Fiction and the Nation-State

Steve Crawford

Introduction

This article attempts to find an alternative perspective from which to view recent narratives surrounding migrants and borders. This is undertaken through recourse to post-apocalyptic fiction, primarily, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992), a story set in a near-future where contemporary nation-states have disappeared, and where life is conducted almost simultaneously in reality and in the virtual-reality 'Metaverse'.¹ In particular, the article considers how this novel relates to broader themes within the genre, and how these themes might shed light on the recent negative turn in the migration narrative. The current Euro-American political cycle has seen a spike in right-wing populist rhetoric and agendas: UKIP and Brexit in the UK; the Front National and Marine Le Pen in France; Geert Wilders, and his Party for Freedom, in the Netherlands; Donald Trump in the US; Viktor Orbán in Hungary; and Jaroslaw Kaczynski and the Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland.² A shared theme underpins the politics and rhetoric of these politicians and movements: the demonisation of migration, and the need to protect the Western nation-states from parasitic infiltration by the migrant other.³ The West must secure its borders, the cultural purity of Europe and the US needs preserving at all costs: 'Only after we have held back the tide will it be worth talking about all the other issues [...] Is it not worrying in itself that European Christianity

¹ Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (London: Penguin Books, 1993); nominated for the 1993 British Science Fiction Association Award, and the 1994 Arthur C. Clarke Award.

² See BBC News, 'UKIP Needed to Stop Brexit 'Backsliding'', *BBC News*, UK Politics, 28 April 2017 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39742407>> [accessed 8 August 2017]; Michael Stothard, 'Marine Le Pen Launches Presidential Campaign', *Financial Times*, 4 February 2017 <<https://www.ft.com/content/a5519f64-eaeb-11e6-930f-061b01e23655>> [accessed 8 August 2017]; Gordon Darroch, 'Geert Wilders Found Guilty of Inciting Discrimination', *Guardian*, 9 December 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/09/geert-wilders-found-guilty-in-hate-speech-trial-but-no-sentence-imposed>> [accessed 8 August 2017]; Barney Henderson & David Lawler, 'Donald Trump: The 22 Wildest Moments of His 2016 Presidential Election Campaign - So Far', *Telegraph*, 31 August 2016 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/donald-trump-the-20-wildest-moments-of-his-2016-presidential-ele/>> [accessed 8 August 2017]; Luke Waller, 'Viktor Orbán' *Politico*, <<http://www.politico.eu/list/politico-28/viktor-orban/>> [accessed 8 August 2017]; 'Objection Sustained', *Economist*, 29 July 2017 <<https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21725575-governing-law-and-justice-party-still-aims-nobble-judiciary-veto-gives-rule>> [accessed 8 August 2017].

³ See Andrew Rettman, 'Poland: Election Talk on Migrant 'Protozoas' Gets Ugly', *EUobserver*, (14 October 2015) <<https://euobserver.com/political/130672>> [accessed 8 August 2017] (para. 5 of XXVIII).

is now barely able to keep Europe Christian?'.⁴ The rapid resurgence in populist politicians and online social movements across the European and US right-wing has been analysed from a range of academic perspectives.⁵ This article uses fiction to reconsider how such notions as borders and migration might be re-imagined; as well as suggesting how fiction might help us challenge the more unconscionable narratives currently employed by some right-wing politicians and populist movements. This broad categorisation follows established distinctions between populist politicians and movements, whereby politicians aim to foster *us* against *them* public discourse, on both domestic 'vertical' and transnational 'horizontal' planes; whereas movements seize on these entry points but progress into 'extremist' viewpoints unpalatable to mainstream discourse.⁶

Borders can be considered as markers between spaces, perhaps most recognisably as lines, drawn on maps, containing blocks of colour in geopolitical representations of our world. Boundaries might also be considered similarly: markers between spaces, garden fences or perimeter ropes of cricket ovals. Borders can also be perceived as marking transition points – or crossings – between statuses of humanity. The transitional purgatory separating the protected citizen and transient migrant, for example; shifting sands more easily crossed by the sympathetic refugee than by the calculating migrant. Migration – within the natural sciences – is a standard and uncontroversial fact. Many species of bird seasonally migrate, ensuring their survival, while simultaneously maintaining regional ecosystems. When applied to humanity, the label of migrant becomes controversial. Unworthy of the *pity* reserved for the refugee, migrants are instead open to portrayal as makers of unnecessary choices, thieves of indigenous opportunity. Politically and legally, they are neither domestic citizens, nor seeking the refuge of asylum.

⁴ Viktor Orbán, 'Those Who Are Overwhelmed Cannot Offer Shelter to Anyone', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 3 September 2015 <<http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/those-who-are-overwhelmed-cannot-of-fer-shelter-to-anyone>> [accessed 8 August 2017] (paras. 11-12 of XIII).

⁵ See Rogers Brubaker, 'Between Nationalism and Civilizationism', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40 (2017), 1191-1226; Nicole Doerr, 'How Right-wing Versus Cosmopolitan Political Actors Mobilize and Translate Images of Immigrants in Transnational Contexts', *Visual Communication*, 16 (2017), 315-336; Michael Hameleers et al, "'They Did It'", *Communication Research*, 44 (2017), 870-900; Michael Ignatieff, 'The Refugee as Invasive Other', *Social Research*, 84 (2017), 223-231.

⁶ Hameleers, p. 872; Brubaker, p.1192; Doerr, p.320.

As a result, the scientifically understood benefits of migration – known in the animal kingdom – get lost in the clamour of right-wing populist identitarianism.⁷

A starting point for literary analysis of the current populist surge, especially regimes such as those of Trump and Orbán, might be dystopian political satires such as George Orwell's *1984*.⁸ However, these works narrate life under such regimes. What if we take alarmist populist rhetoric at face value, and imagine the destruction of our Western society? Trump has been described as having 'employed apocalyptic and blood-drenched rhetoric' on the campaign trail.⁹ According to literary imagination – seemingly well suited to this task – what might life be like post this forecast apocalypse? A recurrent theme throughout works of literature that might be designated as post-apocalyptic has been the imagining of scenarios orchestrating a collapse of contemporary modern society, and the resulting fragmentation and disintegration of humanity. Indeed, the designation of post-apocalyptic, as a literary category, is traditionally applied to works within science fiction/fantasy and horror that portray the aftermath of an event which has destroyed what is understood as the contemporary modern world.

Regardless of the narrative devices used to articulate these depictions there are several common threads that can be encountered across different stories and between sub-genres. Two such shared themes are: 1) depictions of borders between people, or statuses of humanity; and 2) narrative devices causing migration of characters within stories. For the purposes of a shared frame of reference I suggest two exemplar novels. First, Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954), symbolic of narratives focusing on processes of transition, and borders, between statuses of humanity.¹⁰ This novel details the efforts of the main character, Robert Neville, to understand the nature and cause of a global pandemic. Second, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), the harrowing account of a father and son travelling through

⁷ In addition to the 'mainstream media' examples above, for an introduction to the hypocrisy of identitarianism see: 'Racists in skinny jeans', *Economist*, 12 November 2016 <<https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21709986-france-austria-identitarian-movement-gives-xenophobia-youthful-edge-meet-ib>> [accessed 8 August 2017].

⁸ Sales of this, and similar, works have seen dramatic recent increases: Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, 'George Orwell's '1984' Is Suddenly a Best-Seller', *New York Times*, 25 January 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/books/1984-george-orwell-donald-trump.html>> [accessed 8 August 2017] (para. 5 of XVII).

⁹ Brubaker, p. 1207.

¹⁰ Richard Matheson, *I am Legend* (London: Gollancz, 2001); a work that has influenced both 'vampire' and 'zombie' fiction, currently available as part of the *SF Masterworks* collection (Gollancz), winner of the Horror Writers Association 'Vampire Novel of the Century' Award (2011); it has also inspired a number of films, most recently: *I am Legend*, dir. by Francis Lawrence (Warner Bros., 2007).

desolate wilderness in the wake of an extinction event, and the attendant descent of the remaining humans into predation upon each other: a work representing literary depictions of migration as a central motif while also addressing subtle boundaries between statuses of humanity.¹¹ These two works are presented as archetypes due to their success as novels, but also their transition to cinema, where a shared visual representation is offered.

Borders and Migration: Limited to Literature?

This section analyses potential comparisons between post-apocalyptic narratives and contemporary right-wing rhetoric. When considering borders in these works, the distinction is a familiar one to us: between the human and the other.

They clanked past, marching with a swaying gait like wind-up toys. [...] Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves [...] and after that women, [...] some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites [...] fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each.¹²

The impure or infectious sub-human:

The flies and mosquitoes had been a part of it. Spreading the disease, causing it to race through the world [...] The bitings, the insects, the transmission from person to person – were even these enough to explain the horrible speed with which the plague spread?¹³

The sub-human, the ultimate contagion to the remains of society, needing to be restrained, possibly destroyed. These fictional narratives of post-apocalypse may seem stronger than prevailing rhetoric surrounding migrant crises, but they are not too far-fetched compared to the truths of the more unconscionable right-wing discourses currently circulating. Is it surprising that migrants are open to demonisation within our society?

It is common to post-apocalyptic literature that survivors of humanity are tasked by their authors with heroic journeys to promised lands or idealised safe-havens. The key difference between

¹¹ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Picador, 2009); winner of several literary prizes including the 2007 Pulitzer prize for fiction, also inspiring the 2009 film: *The Road*, dir. by John Hillcoat (Dimension Films, 2009).

¹² Ibid., p. 96.

¹³ Matheson, p. 76; Ibid., p. 77.

fiction and reality is those who are portrayed as ‘heroes’. Populist rhetoric portrays migration – seeking economic refuge – as villainous, threatening the security of Western states: states already supposedly groaning under the weight of protecting and maintaining their existing citizenry. This reversal of narrative positioning – between fiction and reality – leads to the demonising of those less fortunate others. The demonisation can extend as far as the rhetorical portrayal of migrants as sub-human; a contagion to be excised, while the embattled domestic peoples are defended by their populist/identitarian heroes. It can be seen, from even brief analysis, that current right-wing rhetoric easily maps onto post-apocalyptic narrative. However, does it have to emphasise the apocalyptic, or might this genre offer an alternative vision for a future, one where migration is not threatening?

Neal Stephenson and the Franchise-State

Turning to *Snow Crash*, how does the novel depict society? First, Stephenson’s work is set in an imagined near-future where the political environment is not one that we would necessarily recognise. A future that has moved beyond a key characteristic of modern society: the nation-state. References are made to an unspecified event that led to the collapse of contemporary politico-legal structures. Alongside the negation of the nation-state comes re-conceptualisation of borders:

The border [of The Mews at Windsor Heights Burbclave] is well lighted, the customs agents ready to frisk all comers [...] but the gate flies open as if by magic as the security systems sense that this is a CosaNostra Pizza vehicle, just making a delivery sir. [...] He probably does come in here all the time. Picking up [...] for important TMAWH people, delivering to other FOQNEs, Franchise-Organized Quasi-National Entities.¹⁴

Second, *Snow Crash* references migrations of people, indeed, migration is an ancillary narrative device within the story:

As the Raft moves through the Pacific [...] it occasionally sheds great hunks of itself. [...] When it gets to California, [...] a few hundred thousand Refus [will] cut themselves loose and paddle to shore. [...] That’s how Refus come across the Pacific, even though they are too poor to book passage on a real ship or buy a seaworthy boat. A new wave washes up onto the West Coast every five years or so, when the ocean currents bring [the core of the Raft] the *Enterprise* back.¹⁵

¹⁴ Stephenson, p. 14.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 255.

Stephenson's world, while having undergone a re-structuring of social order, is not a traditional post-apocalyptic setting. However, I would class the imagined environment as post-apocalyptic. The collapse of nation-state structures seems a suitably seismic event to fit this description, regardless of the process by which this might have occurred; especially as it seems to breed the traditional post-apocalyptic migration to a promised land. *Snow Crash* develops these ideas in a more nuanced fashion than usually found in the genre. In contrast to the total desolation of *I am Legend* or *The Road*, *Snow Crash* imagines a world devoid only of public national life; exploring themes surrounding the rise of all-encompassing commercialisation, in place of nation-states. The result is a world where migration is almost continuous, as people flee former state-socialist republics for commercialised safe-havens. However, migration – as a political issue – has lost all significance. As has the political itself. Migration is legally irrelevant due to the re-forming of 'states' on a franchise model, and the insignificance of territorial sovereignty that this breeds. Rather than territorially sovereign nation-states, Stephenson's people are citizens of franchise outposts, more similar to a drive-thru than a country: 'If you have not attained your Hong Kong citizenship, apply for a passport now! [...] Mr Lee's Greater Hong Kong is a private, wholly extraterritorial, Sovereign, quasi-national entity'.¹⁶

Perhaps the key difference between the world of *Snow Crash*, and traditional post-apocalyptic literary environments, are the recognisable representations of daily life, and the apparent rise of commercialisation or privatisation depicted. The familiarity of the 'everyday' in the story serves to remind us that despite an event severe enough to cause the disintegration of the nation-state model, the possibility for largely unchanged life remains:

A Deliverator can go into a Mews at Windsor Heights anywhere from Fairbanks to Yaroslavl to the Shenzhen special economic zone and find his way around. But once you've delivered a [pizza] pie to every single house in a TMAWH a few times, you get to know its little secrets.¹⁷

The sub-humanisation and imperilment of humanity – recurring genre features – need not be translated into populist rhetoric addressing migration and border crises. The imminent threat these events are

¹⁶ Stephenson, p. 92.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

sometimes represented as posing to our nations are unnecessarily crude and demonising. While the possibility of governmental disintegration exists, private life may remain largely unchanged, at least according to Stephenson's imagination, as laid out in *Snow Crash*.

The narrative device utilised by Stephenson to facilitate the continuance of recognisable daily life is the rise of all-pervading commercialism. To this extent it could be suggested that the depiction of society in his work represents the neo-liberal ideals of privatisation and globalisation as fully realised:

The hall had been done up with an imaginary street pattern. Two "highways" divided it up into quadrants, and all the franchise companies and nationalities had their booths along the highways. Burbclaves and other companies had booths hidden among [...] the quadrants.¹⁸

In a legal sense, the private has completely consumed the public. Governments have disappeared. Corporations now orchestrate day-to-day life. The result is what I have termed the franchise-state. When the importance of territorial sovereignty has been superseded, it would seem the world really is built upon fast food, or least the franchise business model of that industry: build them, plenty of them, and they will come.

The franchise-state can, I would suggest, be founded upon two principles. First, the lack of importance ascribed to territorial control. While the individual ownership of (private) property is still a feature in the book, the concept of the nation-state, and therefore the requirements for territorial demarcation and control, has been rendered irrelevant. Without traditional ideas of the nation-state, and the territorial control mechanisms that these require, citizenship has been detached from geographical location.

She has to find someplace to pull into. If she could find a Nova Sicilia franchulate, that would do it [...] Or a New South Africa, which she hates. [...] Hiro is black [...] Can't take him into New South Africa. And because Y.T. is a Cauc, they can't go to Metazania. "Mr Lee's Greater Hong Kong," Hiro says. "Half a mile ahead on the right." [...] "I'm a citizen".¹⁹

The result is freedom of choice. People, regardless of their particular spatial location, have freedom to choose their own national associations. Personal choice extends beyond citizenship, encompassing

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁹ Stephenson, p. 77.

all aspects of life: the location of one's home (and the company that provides the gated community in which you live); indeed, the very roads travelled are personal choices. Due to the conceptual removal of the territorial nation-state from the imagined environment, even one of the most basic forms of social association and identity is conducted on a personal level. People can choose from a plethora of citizenship options based upon their personal beliefs and values. On the contrary, within the contemporary system of territorial nation-states physical location dictates the national affiliation, the taxes we pay (or not), and the provision of public, and to a lesser extent private, services available to us. In a world without large-scale sovereign territories any and all services necessarily become private.

Stephenson's re-imagining of global social structures could be compared to contemporary embassy or consular networks; their provision of services of the nation-state, on a limited basis, to citizens who find themselves beyond the borders of their mandated citizenship. However, I describe the depicted situation in *Snow Crash* as the franchise-state because of its similarity to the strip-mall of American pop-culture. The vivid colours and blurred images of neon advertising displays are strongly invoked in descriptions of the 'loglo': 'As the sun sets, its red light is supplanted by the light of many neon logos emanating from the franchise ghetto that constitutes this U-Stor-It's natural habitat. This light, known as loglo, fills in the shadowy corners of the unit with seedy, oversaturated colors'.²⁰ This rich imagery leads to conceptualisation of the franchise-state in *Snow Crash*. Miniature outposts in physical space give access – for member citizens – to globally connected communities, assembled in shared spaces of values and beliefs, rather than in geographical proximity.²¹ The physical representations are closer to nodes of an interconnected network, than contemporary foreign diplomatic outposts, attempting to cling to principles of ambassadorial sovereignty. The operational management of individual franchise-states locales is conducted on a recruitment and targeted goal basis, as employed by contemporary franchise companies. 'Uncle Enzo reckons with the Mafia's emphasis on loyalty and traditional family values, they can sign up a lot of these entrepreneurs [...] The Mafia is betting that any smart youngster going into business these days will take note'.²²

²⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

²¹ Ibid., p. 77.

²² Stephenson, p. 136.

This marginalisation of the importance of geographical presence and continuity of delimited territory, leading to the irrelevance of national borders as we understand them, has a deep impact upon those who exist within the re-imagined landscape. Legal lines on paper maps, long a barrier to migration, are of no significance. Borders and territorial protection and management are irrelevant, as the notion of the nation-state and its attendant public sphere itself is irrelevant. Freedom of movement reigns supreme. Freedom of choice governs social affiliations such as citizenship. Stephenson's franchise-states are conceptual spaces, freed from the borders and territorial sovereignty of reality. The basic legal technology underpinning nation-states is the constitution; the following section questions how this idea might be re-imagined to allow for constitution of conceptual, rather than geographic, spaces.

Constitutional Territory, or Territorial Constitution?

The Oxford Dictionary of Law defines 'constitution' as: '[t]he rules and practices that determine the composition and functions of the organs of central government in a state and regulate the relationship between the individual and the state'; and 'constitutive theory' as: 'The proposition that the existence of a state can only begin with its formal or implied recognition by other states'.²³ When combined with considerations of territoriality, the legal mind thinks 'jurisdiction': '2. The territorial limits within which the jurisdiction of a court may be exercised [...] 3. The territorial scope of the legislative competence of Parliament'.²⁴ These definitions suggest legal conceptions of constitution, its authoritative jurisdiction, are interwoven with ideas of borders – reach and limitation – therefore, territory. As a legal scholar following these definitions, it might be concluded nation-states cannot exist without physical geographic presence. Therefore, 'constitution' is indivisible from territory.

References to government or Parliament – the UK's legislatively supreme branch of government – are recurrent through these definitions. When one contemplates directly the relationship between government and constitution the result, in legal theory, is the role of the constitution as the limitation of governmental power under law.²⁵ This does not help in disentangling *constitution* from territoriality.

²³ Jonathan Law and Elizabeth Martin (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of Law*, 7th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 124; *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

²⁵ Martin Loughlin, *The British Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Chapter 2.

A constitution will provide legal limitations upon governmental powers, within a designated territorial jurisdiction (a state). It will not challenge the assumption of the foundational claim of state government(s) to territory.

International law confirms this. The existence of states is governed by principles enshrined in the *Montevideo Convention* of 1933, article 1 of which states: ‘The state as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) a government; and (d) capacity to enter into relations with other states’.²⁶ It appears whichever level of legal thinking – domestic or international – is used to approach legal conception of the state, the requirement of territory is an absolute. Territory necessitates the troublesome notion of borders. Is there any hope of negotiating this impasse?

In critiquing the idea of sovereignty, and instead seeking a (disciplinary) *power* of the sovereign, Michel Foucault used the analogy of the shepherd, which is appropriate for our purpose.²⁷ Shepherds lead and manage their flock. Yet, while part of the group, shepherds are not full and relatable members of it. Sovereign governments of nation-states possess a similar legal status. This is also a presentation of sovereignty which those of a Christian tradition are preconditioned to accept.²⁸ The Bible presents Jesus as a shepherd of people. Even in utilising this seemingly well-suited analogy to the relationship between agents of governance, and the people they represent – a relationship that in a legal sense is managed by a constitution – the representation still implies a requirement for territory. Not only do shepherds manage flocks, but also the land where flocks are kept. Shepherds have responsibility for managing and protecting pasture-land and its borders. Shepherds must not only safeguard their flocks from invasive events, but maintain the boundaries to prevent their flocks from wandering off, and being lost. Even down to religious levels of cultural foundation we are pre-programmed to relate social formation, and cohesion, with territory.

²⁶ Article 1, *Montevideo Convention*, Seventh International Conference of American States (signed 26 December 1933, entered into *League of Nations Treaty Series* 8 January 1936): originally a regional agreement of the Americas, the treaty ratified what were already, and still are, viewed as universal norms of International Law. Ratification by the League of Nations, and subsequent practice, support this position.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, trans. by Graham Burchell, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 161-179.

²⁸ The importance of ‘Christian’ culture to Euro-American anti-migrant populist politicians and movements in fostering in-group vs out-group antagonism is well documented, see: Brubaker; Doerr; Ignatieff.

Conclusion

According to international legal and constitutional theorist Vidya Kumar, the etymological foundation of ‘*constitution*’ is simply that which is constituted, to paraphrase: a coming together.²⁹ This is supported by *The Oxford Popular English Dictionary* definition of Constitution as ‘1 an act or method of constituting’.³⁰ Does this have to be a physical process? Can it not be the meeting of minds, in shared conceptual spaces, instead of geographical ones? This is what the franchise-states of *Snow Crash* allow us to imagine. Given the ease with which parallels can be drawn between current right-wing political and social rhetoric and post-apocalyptic narratives such as *I am Legend* and *The Road*, is it so difficult to extend post-apocalyptic literary analysis to a critique of *constitution* and its interrelation to territoriality? After all, the borders of nation-states largely exist only as legal lines on paper maps, no matter how immediately recognisable a picture they form. On the ground, or from space, they are invisible; merely figments of our imagination. We must always remember that the world, whatever legal and political minds try to convince us, actually looks like satellite images: a blue and green globe, shrouded in wisps of white.

²⁹ Vidya Kumar, *Revolutionary Constitutionalism and International Law*, CeCIL guest lecture (University of Kent: 9 February 2016).

³⁰ *The Oxford Popular English Dictionary* (London: Paragon, 1998), p. 160.

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