



Reimagining the World and Redefining the Humanity: A Close Reading of the Various Aspects of the Post-Apocalyptic World Building in John Joseph Adams's *Wastelands 2: More Stories of the Apocalypse*

Dr. Indrajit Patra

An Independent Researcher and Ex Research Scholar, NIT Durgapur

ABSTRACT

The present work seeks to attempt a close reading of John Joseph Adams' edited anthology entitled *Wastelands 2: More Stories of the Apocalypse* (2015) to analyze how post-apocalyptic narratives demand not only a reimagination of the world but also a concomitant redefinition of humanity. The study attempts to show how post-apocalyptic anthologies such as *Wastelands* attempt to capture the complexities and nuances inherent in such a broad and varied phenomenon as post-apocalypticism. The study will attempt to show that this act of reimagination of humanity and redefinition of the world in a post-apocalyptic setting is made possible through a series of phenomena and events whose nature can be best understood by adopting the Derridean explicatory framework of 'pharmakon'. In the post-apocalyptic setting, phenomena such as time-traveling, visions of the end of the world and the universe, monstrous and transgressive proliferations, bizarre ceremonies and rituals, scientific experiments to reverse engineer nature, creation of non-human and chimeric hybrids etc. can be seen as examples of Derridean pharmakon which combine in them multiple possibilities like death and life, destruction of the past and creation of a new future, and the creation of an unrevivable present with the possibility of survival.

Keywords: post-apocalypse, narrative theory, speculative fiction, anthology, John Joseph Adams, Derrida, pharmakon, contemporary fiction.

Introduction

John Joseph Adams's edited anthology entitled *Wastelands 2: More Stories of the Apocalypse* (2015) comprises 22 short stories from over thirty renowned authors, among whom the likes of George R.R. Martin, Cory Doctorow, Orson Scott Card, David Brin, Junot Diaz, Ramsey Shehadeh are there. This is the second installment in his *Wastelands Trilogy/Series*, which comprises three anthologies — *Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse* (2008), *Wastelands 2: More Stories of the Apocalypse* (2015) and *Wastelands: The New Apocalypse* (2019). These anthologies help us analyze the meaning of what it means to be human in a world where nuclear wars, ecological calamities or even cosmological catastrophes have wrought untold havoc on mankind. *Wastelands 2* examines the precarious condition of humanity when it is pitted against such scenarios as nuclear holocaust, viral outbreak, cosmic disaster and even threats of alien attacks. Most of these works feature a setting where civilizational collapse or societal breakdown has already occurred. Humanity struggles to formulate meanings in a post-apocalyptic world where the past simply does not function like it is supposed to do in a pre-apocalyptic scenario. These works attempt to examine what it means to be human from various scientific, philosophical and psychological perspectives in the aftermath of a total societal and civilizational collapse. In the works of such eminent novelists as Kurt Vonnegut, Don DeLillo, William Carlos Williams, Robert Coover, Ezra Pound, Walker Percy, Louis Zukofsky and William Gaddis, apocalyptic themes have been employed and explored in various ways. Similarly, we also see how the works of such authors as Thomas Pynchon, Herman Melville, John Updike, C.S. Lewis, Ralph Ellison, William Faulkner, Susan Sontag, and Toni Morrison also employ apocalyptic themes.

Now, let us briefly examine the theme of post-apocalypse in various notable 21st Century science fiction novels. Maggie Gee's *The Flood* (2004) describes how the tsunami-like flood sweeps away both rich and poor alike in an extremely divided society. Here, the names of the cities are changed, and Hesperica reminds us of America and another unnamed town with its libraries, publishing houses, and opera houses remind us of London. Sarah Dillon, in her article "Imagining Apocalypse", observes that Gee's novel is driven by a "fear of the future – by an anxiety that the future promised a destruction more complete, more devastating than that which had just been experienced" (2007, p. 374). Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* (2005) combines three subgenres of fiction, namely, historical fiction, crime thriller and dystopian science fiction all in one. In the first part of the novel, we see how machines have awakened and intend to devour their operators and masters. In contrast, in the second part, we see a child psychologist answering phone calls from people who all claim to know where and when a child suicide bomber would cause mayhem. The third section shows how New York has turned into a virtual reality utopia where an android is employed to amuse clients with role-playing fantasies. Rafferty (2005) remarks that the book is, "in the sheer obstinacy of its wrongheadedness, itself an almost suicidal act of courage" ("Specimen Days: Manahatta My City"). Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) explores the themes of devolution of humanity where we see how evolution is running backward as humanity continues to make the human species primitive at an ever-increasing rate. Our devolution, Anita Felicelli, in her review of the novel for *Los Angeles Review of Books*, writes that "our devolution, as Erdrich imagines it, is not merely biological, it's political and social, as well" (Dystopian Dreams in "Future Home of the Living

God"). *The Book of Joan* (2017) by Lidia Yuknavitch explores a dystopian, post-apocalyptic world from a strangely novel perspective. Patra (2021), in his article, strives to show the construction of a post-binaristic, post-dualistic, ambiguous and amorphous framework in Yuknavitch's novel. Hope Jennings attempts to read *The Book of Joan* as an attempt to resist the tendencies of the dominant, Anthropocentric narratives from a theoretical perspective enriched by "feminist new materialisms and queer ecologies" (2019, p. 191). Heidi Hart remarks how the haunting musicality in Yuknavitch's dystopian work "forces readers not only to face future geo-catastrophe but also to imagine their own potential violence in times of drought, war, epidemic, and dictatorship" (2018, p. 31). Howard Jacobson's *J* (2014) describes how an anonymous country in an unspecified future is ravaged by an unnamed plague which is always referred to in the capitals as "WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED". Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) is one of the grimmest, bleak and relentlessly tragic portrayals of a post-apocalyptic world devoid of any hope or possibility and full of death and terror. Euan Gallivan in "Compassionate McCarthy?" (2008) uses Schopenhauerian philosophy as an explicatory framework for studying the post-apocalyptic atmosphere in McCarthy's *The Road*. Cooper (2011) reads *The Road* as an apocalyptic "grail narrative". *On Such a Full Sea* (2014) by Chang-Rae Lee is another attempt at portraying a thoroughly dystopian vision of a future. Ursula K Le Guin, in her review of Lee's novel writes how its setting is "a wild landscape, more or less catastrophically ruined or neglected, in which human settlements exist widely separated from each other and cut off from nature, other species, sometimes even the outer atmosphere". The action in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) takes place in a world ravaged by the fictional "Georgia Flu". Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* and Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* are two speculative fiction novels that imagines the changing condition of humanity in the wake of zombie apocalypses. Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, comprising *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013), features an ecological catastrophic event and describes the challenges humanity is forced to face in a post-apocalyptic world. When analyzed more specifically, 'the Waterless Flood' that is the central apocalyptic event around which the events of the trilogy unfold, is not an instance of a pure and unmediated ecological apocalypse, rather a consequence of unbridled bioterrorism. Phillips (2017) studies the concepts of collapse, resilience, stability and sustainability in Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy. Dunja M Mohr (2015) attempts to analyze the tropes of eco-Dystopia and biotechnology in Atwood's critically acclaimed post-apocalyptic trilogy. Chung-hao Ku (2006) endeavored to analyze the fine boundary between human and monster in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. *World Made By Hand* (2008) by James Kunstler is a post-apocalyptic narrative set in the post-oil USA. George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949) describes how academic activities such as writing journals and books can preserve history in a post-apocalyptic setting, thereby giving some continuity amidst a vortex of endless chaos and disintegration of both societies as well as individual. John Wyndham's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), describes how people who saw a meteor shower went blind. Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) portrays a situation where a group of people in Melbourne awaits the arrival of a deadly stream of radiation from the Northern Hemisphere. Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon* (1959) details a nuclear apocalypse unfolding due to the escalating tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union for over the control of the Middle East. William H. Katerberg, in his *Future West*, studies the role of apocalyptic myth in science fiction dealing with frontiers. Leigh (2008), in his *Apocalyptic Patterns in Twentieth-Century Fiction*, studies the role of apocalyptic themes in Afro-American science fiction. The article employs Derrida's notion of the 'pharmakon', which is mentioned in his essay "Plato's Pharmacy" (1981). Paulina Ambroży, in her article entitled "The Limits of Language as the Limits of the World" defines it as a paradoxical phenomenon which is "at once a carrier of death and a remedy, a poisonous trace of the irretrievable past and a source of human values and hope" (2015, p. 64). In the essay "Psychoanalytic Interpretation as *Pharmakon*", Piehl and Austin define 'pharmakon' as "an ancient Greek term for 'drug' that means both remedy and poison" (2013, p. 497). In the present study, the author attempts to show how various apocalyptic phenomena and humanity's response towards them can function as the Derridean pharmakon. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida asks, "How to comprehend in fact the discourse of the end or the discourse about the end? Can the extremity of the extreme ever be comprehended? And the opposition between "to be" or "not to be"? (1994, p. 10). Derridean 'pharmakon' can be interpreted as the answer to his own question, which carries the possibility of comprehending the generally impossible and incomprehensible nature of the end.

Redefining the Humanity

"The end of the world has already occurred", proclaims Timothy Morton (2013, p. 7).

The religious connotation implicit in the very term 'apocalypse' is unmistakable, and more specifically, this religious connotation is connected to Christianity. The original Greek word *apokalyptein* from which its English counterpart is derived suggests a 'disclosure' or 'revelation.' In New Testament's Book of Revelation written by John, the term 'revelation' is linked with disclosure of God's will, His providence and action in the Day of Judgment. As McGinn opines, apocalypticism believes "that the history of man has a discernible structure and meaning concerning its End, and that this End is the product not of chance, but of divine plan" (1979, p. 36). So, considered most narrowly, the religious undertones are inextricably interlinked with the term 'apocalypse'. However, in contrast to its original and more narrow meaning of 'disclosure', the term 'apocalypse' is now invariably used to refer to a "catastrophic change that results in the demise of old order and the creation of new one" (Moon, 2014, p. 4). As Paula Guran states in her 'Introduction' to the anthology *After the End*, the apocalyptic possibilities that science has helped us to speculate by manifold those that religious traditions across the world normally envisage, mostly limited to divine wrath or some predetermined prophecy. Science, on the other hand, gives us myriads of apocalyptic scenarios such as "impacting asteroids, rogue planets, solar flares, overpopulation, Y2K (obviously we lived through that one), the Large Hadron Collider seeding a black hole, out-of-control nano-bots consuming stuff, AI displacing humans, intentional or accidental biological catastrophe..." etc. to name a few (Guran, 2013, p. 5). Katherine V. Snyder, on the paradoxical nature of post-apocalyptic fictions remarks that "By portraying such cataclysmic endings and new beginnings, post-apocalyptic fictions . . . enable us to witness the unwitnessable and to survive the unsurvivable. Such fictions allow us imaginatively to rehearse the end, a rehearsal that itselfstands as both traumatic symptom and potential cure, as acting out and working through, as repetition and repetition-with-a-difference" (2011, p. 486). Ketterer states that the idea of apocalypse now implies "a dialectic, conflict, or tension of oppositions" (1974, p. 8). Since the apocalypse brings an end to the world as we know it, describing a post-apocalyptic world inevitably requires us to survive and adapt to the conditions of such a catastrophically transformed world. So, this section aims to study the various ways humanity seems to change to keep pace with the extraordinary ways in which the world around one seems to be transforming and posing new challenges at each passing moment. Seanan McGuire's "Animal Husbandry" is set against a viral apocalypse where a plague has caused a mass extinction among mankind. The

apocalyptic outbreak seems to have affected not just humans but also all domesticated animals as well even though it killed most humans. The previously domesticated animals "have turned feral in the absence of human custodianship" (p. 29). In the post-apocalyptic setting, survival is the primary aim for everyone who has managed to survive the plague. However, the condition of humanity seems to have undergone a racial change and now, even robbing abandoned stores for edible items seems like a virtue that would help one to survive in such a critical situation: "I've come to see looting as a sort of hopeful omen, a little piece of proof that the human race will manage to recover from what it's done to itself. I was less pleased to see that my would-be looters had focused their attention on the junk food aisles and cosmetics, almost completely ignoring the canned goods and well-stocked pharmacy. Maybe that was better for me, but it didn't bode well for the survival of the species" (McGuire, 2015, p. 30). The plague had been unforgiving not just to humans but also to animals, and the ones who could hide behind their masters were the ones who managed to survive. The pandemic has laid bare the inherent vulnerability of humanity. Without all the trappings of civilization, people become extremely susceptible to being wiped out by the virulence of nature. The narrator reflects that most of the people who have struggled so hard to outlive their natural span of life with the help of medicines are now placed in a dire crisis: "There are a lot of ways for people to die in the post-pandemic world; I've seen most of them. The human race was domesticated a long time ago, and like the cows that need someone to milk them, or the sheep too dumb to run away from a predator, the humans forgot how to stay alive without the trappings of their civilization. So, they stagger along, pretending they still have some quality of life while their teeth get loose from scurvy and their bowels get scarred by parasitic infections. Most of the people who lived through the sicknesses shouldn't have. They're just suffering now, without all the little luxuries they were so accustomed to" (McGuire, 2015, p. 39). In McGuire's work, we see that the civilizational and biotechnological 'trappings' such as medical facilities, improved healthcare, antiviral and anti-bacterial drugs etc., proved to be both the cause of the undoing of much of humanity as well as the catalyst behind the emergence of a post-pandemic future. This is how these civilizational trappings play the role of Derridean pharmakon, which acts as both death and cure. So, in a way, those who already died from the plague are in a much better situation than those who somehow survived yet were not meant to. This is a grim, gloomy and despairing portrayal of an unforgiving pandemic-caused apocalypse that McGuire portrays in her work. In the wake of such a pandemic, humanity appears to be comparatively less advantageous than most of the animalkind. In George R. Martin's "...for a single yesterday", we see how a group of people attempt to survive the nuclear apocalypse, referred to in the story as "The Blast". The protagonist is one musician named Keith, who tries his best to amuse others with his music. The story describes the horrific condition of a country post-nuclear holocaust: "There was nothing left to go back to. His cities were graveyards full of dead and dying, their towers melted tombstones that glowed at night. And the rats—human and animal—were everywhere else" (Martin, 2015, p. 41). The struggle for survival also becomes a struggle for staying human in such a situation, and we see how many members of the group have become inhuman with their actions. Keith is seen saying to Peter, "So you convinced everybody you're a tough guy, a strong man, real independent. And you gave up some of your humanity, too" (59). For Keith, his humanity is the last asset he will ever think of exchanging it for anything else. Keith proclaims, "I'll cling to my humanity, and fight for it if I must. I loved once, really loved" (59). In "Chislehurst Messiah" by Lauren Beukes, we see a single surviving protagonist is a 30-year-old man who has survived a pandemic that has claimed all people aged above 20 years. The disease was a horrible, hemorrhagic disease. In this novel, we see how grim, relentlessly gloomy and dark the outlook of the anonymous protagonist is. The narrator just walks through his protected areas and the areas around it, which are littered with the dead bodies of his friends, and he exudes nothing but cynicism, arrogance and hatred for all those who died. He could only think of his friends as the entitled ones who have been "Living off benefits, leeches on society. Breeding like cockroaches and sucking the life out of the country. Human scum, the lot of them" (Beukes, 2015, 69). Lauren Beukes' "Chislehurst Messiah" also appears in Paula Guran's edited anthology of post-apocalyptic short stories *After the End: Recent Apocalypses* (2013). This story is especially grim because of the snobbish, upper-class protagonist and his inhumanly delusional nature. Amidst all such relentlessly gloomy and grim portrayal of real-world post-apocalyptic scenarios, we see "Colliding Branes" by Rudy Rucker & Bruce Sterling acts like a comic relief of some sort where two friends can be seen discussing the far-future scenario where the universe itself might come to an end and how with the help of a hypothetical "black egg" they might devise some plan to prevent the cosmic apocalypse. This story was first published in the February 2009 issue of Asimov's *Science Fiction* magazine. Here, Rabbiteen Chandra, the woman and Angelo Rasmussen, the man, discuss what would happen in the wake of such a hypothetical Big Splat scenario where humans could get snapped apart in as little as seven yoctoseconds. Rabbiteen also speculates that during such a scenario, they might not have to endure the 'heat' of the actual apocalypse since their brain will not have time enough to reach such a grand catastrophe: "Thanks to our crude nucleon-based human bodies, we'll miss the hottest cosmic action since the start of our universe, fourteen billion years ago. But, Angelo, if we hug each other ever so tightly, our quarks will become as one" (Rucker and Sterling, 2015, p. 77). Angelo hypothesizes about the possible "Black Egg" where humanity might find some secure place to hide itself and survive the cosmic catastrophe: "Those in the know have an inside track to the Black Egg survival pod against the collapse of the universe. As major intellectual figures on the blogosphere, we should definitely be going there, right? Why should we be left outside the Dr. Strangelove mine-shaft bunker when the lords of creation have their own transhuman immortality?" (78). So, despite the inescapable doom, the Black Egg offers some hope amidst destruction since the very creation of Black Egg will accelerate the cosmic conflagration, but it will also help some portion of the humanity to survive the apocalypse. As such, it can be labelled as a Derridean 'pharmakon'. As the story nears its end, we see that for Rabbiteen and Angelo, reality and cyberspace have become virtually indistinguishable, and they can feel their imagined apocalypse already coming to overtake and overwhelm them. Angelo feels it most strongly: "The world was definitely ending, in fire and blood just as he'd always guessed, yet he'd finally found a woman meant for him" (82). Angelo attempts to transcend the end-of-the-world scenario with his love for Rabbiteen and imagines vividly how his world eventually is coming to an end while he is spending his final moments on this world with Rabbiteen: "His last night on Earth felt as vast and endless as a crumpled galaxy, while the full moon had gone the shape and color of a dry-squeezed blood orange. The clumps of sage were pale purple. The world Angelo inhabited had finally come to look and feel just like the inside of his own head. Incredible to think that he and Rabbiteen might be the last human beings ever to witness this landscape. It was as if they owned it" (83). Lorenzo DiTommaso elucidates how the term 'apocalyptic' is often conflated with the notion of the 'end of the world' and this is why any study of apocalyptic ideas are now being conducted with the aim of explicating the notion about the 'last things'. This is the primary aim of apocalyptic eschatology: "apocalyptic eschatology is one form of the study or doctrine of the 'last things'" (2014, 473). DiTommaso also comments on the oxymoronic nature of 'post-apocalypticism': "Strictly speaking, 'postapocalyptic' is an oxymoron. In the biblical mode of the worldview, the end time is a literal event, not a literary setting. Armageddon is the last battle; the final judgment is for all time. After the salvation, the narrative terminates; there is no sequel. There cannot be anything 'postapocalyptic' in the classic apocalyptic texts, or in the mode in which they are expressed" (2014, 496).

Berger (1999) and Curtis (2010) have tried to analyze post-apocalyptic philosophy as being completely different from that of apocalypticism. Angelo and Rabbiteen in "Colliding Branes" seem to live in a universe which will die according to the Ekpyrotic scenario and as such as a result of the collision of the cosmic branes, a new beginning will ensue following the end of the present one. Rabbitten and Angelo attempt to connect the human condition with the grand cosmic panorama of cyclic destruction and creation. They speculate: "It could be claimed that the once-distant branes were violently colliding, but that was a very male way to frame what was happening. If you laid out your twelve-dimensional coordinate system differently, the branes passed through one another and emerged reenergized and fecund on the other side of that event" (86). For Angelo, the destruction of the universe is like the part which is sold to the general public most aggressively while the generation of a new universe which will accompany it is ignored or overlooked: "It was like the urge to have sex, which was loud and pestering and got all the press, as opposed to the urge to have children, which was even more powerful, obliteratingly powerful, only nobody could sell that to men" (87). The we see how a strange, posthuman being named Cody comes to explain the intricacies of the Black Egg and ekpyrotic scenario in greater details to Angelo and Rabbiteen. Cody possesses large, golden eyes, giant, warped, origami tentacles, dark throat and a head like a toad. Cody explains, "Black Egg is a hyperdisk where the branes are riveted together via a wormhole link in the twelfth dimension. In this one special region—it's down my gullet—the branes can't collide. I know your primitive minds can't understand that. Think of me as a pine cone that protects a tree's seeds from the heat of a fierce wildfire" (92). In this story, we see how humanity and posthumanity seem to merge together to create a far-future scenario of speculative cosmic apocalypse. In the "Deep Blood Kettle" by Hugh Howey, we also come across an apocalyptic scenario engineered by some malevolent alien race. In the story, we see members of a farmer family are discussing among themselves how the aliens hit our world with a meteor every time mankind refuses to reduce their stock of weapons to half of what is at present and also give half of the planet to the aliens. In Howey's story, the threat of attack acts as the Derridean pharmakon which bears within it both the perils of extinction and the possibilities of a new beginning. Now, again we come back to the real-world scenario of apocalypse and its impact on humanity in "A Beginner's Guide to Survival Before, During, and After and Apocalypse" by Christopher Barzak. In Barzak's own words, "It's a very short story told in the second person point of view, almost in an instruction manual-like voice, about a person who lives through a period of great social change that leads to an apocalyptic scenario that forces him or her to become someone different in order to survive" ("Interview: Christopher Barzak, author of 'A Beginner's Guide to Survival Before, During, and After the Apocalypse' - Wastelands 2," 2015). So, this is a story of human change and the need to preserve humanity at any cost. Also, interestingly, it is the dystopian social collapse, rather than any nuclear or ecological or viral apocalypse that has resulted in the post-apocalypse scenario. Barzak begins his story with the following paragraph: "First, remember what it means to be human. Even when your country has turned against you, even when some other part of the world has been decimated (by bomb, by terrorist cells, by forcible entry and removal of dissidents to dark and forgotten chambers, by hurricane or tornado or tsunami), even then remember that you can retain your humanity if you continue to be humane" (2015, p. 150). This section seems to be one of the strongest sections in the entire anthology and conveys a lot about what it means to be human and how and why humanity needs to be cherished, preserved and protected at all costs. The narrator points out how during the period of post-apocalypse, the will to survive rather than to be human is what has contributed to the collective degradation and degeneration of humanity: "It is one of the most unfortunate aspects of being human, this drive to survive no matter what the cost" (Barzak, 2015, p. 151). The situation in the story reminds one of Jameson's ideas of 'historical amnesia, which refers to "the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social information has had, in one way or another, to preserve..." (Jameson 1998, 20). The narrator in Barzak's work affirms the redemptive power of prayer and ardent belief in a divine power which he feels hold the key to help one transcend the earthly calamity that has befallen almost everyone: "Pray, even if you don't believe in a god. It may help you to keep silent if you are speaking the language of angels, which can never be heard by human ears. It is the language of thought, plucked like rays of light from the sky and carried off to some other place, where you hope some higher power may hear you" (Barzak, 2015, p. 152). The narrator then goes on advising how keeping oneself distant from the general agonies of the post-apocalyptic world alone can give one the strength needed to survive: "Ignore the human howls of pain and starvation that pierce the early morning air. Ignore the disappearance of the animals that had occasionally blundered into your cave in those first few months after the bombs went off. Surely this is bad news. But what can you expect? This is the end of the world you're trying to live through. Animals may disappear. It is your job not to let yourself disappear with them" (Barzak, 2015, p. 152-53). Then the narrator suggests how one should relish in the past memories when such an apocalypse has not ravaged the world. These memories can help one connect with a past full of humanity and meaning: "When the world grows quiet, remember what it used to be like before the apocalypse, remember what it felt like to live in a town with streets on a grid, a tree growing strong and proud in front of each house. Remember the scent of your mother's rosebushes, and how she called them her babies. Remember how your father picked you up when you fell off your bicycle, and the asphalt of the street ate a chunk of the palm of your hand. Remember how he said, 'Shh, shh, it's okay, baby,' and try not to make any noise when you feel the tears falling down your cheeks" (Barzak, 2015, p. 153). In *Post-Apocalyptic Culture* (2008), Teresa Heffernan points out that no meaning can be formulated in a post-apocalyptic culture because all referents of the traditional past history have been destroyed. Next, in "Wondrous Days", Genevieve Valentine depicts the post-apocalyptic scenario that has unfolded in California as a man and woman can be seen walking through the city. This is another case of the nuclear holocaust where scientists lost control over their secret nuclear arsenal. The story was first published in "Descended From Darkness: Volume 2" by Yoko Matsushita. Stephanie Jacobs comments that the story "features a stark setting, a bleak and lonely vision of a future earth. Society is all but gone, and humanity holds on by a thread" ("Interview with Genevieve Valentine author of 'Wondrous Days' - Apex Magazine," 2010). Peter Y. Paik views "the disintegration of human society" (2010, p. 124) as a central idea in many contemporary politically charged post-apocalyptic fiction. In American apocalyptic literary critic Dewey's work *In a Dark Time: The Apocalyptic Temper in the American Novel of the Nuclear Age*, the trope of nuclear apocalypse in American apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives is studied. The story describes how a group of rogue activists and academicians named Point Zero hijacks the computer and takes control of the nuclear grid. After taking over, they even proclaimed that they were "willing to take drastic measures to force humanity to confront its own future and to work for the planet's survival" (Valentine, 2015, p. 159). The nuclear arsenal appears to play here the role of the Derridean pharmakon since it promises to bring an end to both human hubris as well as offers the possibility of a world free of nuclear weapons. The members of that Point Zero felt that it was the best time to do something radical since that was the time according to the Dark Road clock set by the Mayan civilization: "Someone from the think tank had gone on the news and explained the galactic alignment with a computer graphic. The planets had already lined up like a string of beads; nobody knew if anything would happen before they split, but you had to think that something could" (Valentine, 2015, p. 162). This Dark Road clock

reminds one of the Doomsday Clock, which measures the possibility of an anthropocene catastrophe, and many believe that we are now much closer to such a global catastrophe than we have ever been at any point in our history. John Joseph Adams, in *Wastelands: The New Apocalypse* writes, “Yet by any reasonable assessment, the world as a whole today seems closer to the precipice of the apocalypse than perhaps it has ever been. The Doomsday Clock—maintained by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists—shows that we are at two minutes to midnight...” (2019, p. 11). The same kind of religious fanaticism seems to be also at play in “Dreams in Dust” by D. Thomas Minton. In Wojcik’s *The End of the World As We Know It* (1997) and Gray’s *Black Mass* (2007), we see a detailed study of how religious connotations of apocalypticism are employed in science fictional works also. In Minton’s “Dreams in Dust”, a member of the cult-like Mechanist guild is seen trying to rejuvenate the now-dead oceans with some sort of technological intervention. In Orson Scott Card’s “The Elephants of Poznan”, we see how the elephants spread out across the planet after the plague ravages human civilization. In this story, we see how humanity is forced into a disturbing situation and comes face to face with its own animal instincts. Here, all the members of a group believe a woman to be the last living fertile woman, and each man gets three months to have sex with her before turning her over to others, and when the woman ill have her first baby, the group will know who the actual father to the new-born child is. Here, we see how humanity is trying to survive the imminent danger of total extinction as elephants continue to roam freely and occasionally come to where humans gather merely to observe. The anonymous narrator describes their situation thus: “Humans were no longer killing them for their ivory. The world was theirs. We were going to die—I, who was only seven years old when the plague came, am now past thirty, and many of the older survivors are already, if not at death’s door, then studying the travel brochures and making reservations, their Bibles open and their rosaries in hand. Were these males here as scientists, to watch the last of the humans, to study our death ways, to record the moment of our extinction so that the elephants would remember how we died with only a whimper, or less than that, a whisper, a sigh, a sidelong glance at God?” (Card, 2015, p. 199-200). With the onset of the apocalypse, as humanity continues to recede further into oblivion, it is the elephants who become the undisputed rulers of the new world. The narrator describes how he went on to devote his life towards studying the lives of the elephants in details, and he searched for answers to questions such as these: “what had happened to us, and what our cities might mean to them (elephants), our houses, our streets, our rusting cars, our collapsing bridges, our sorry cemetery mounds where winter brought fresh crops of human bone to the surface, white stubble on a fallow field” (Card, 2015, p. 201). When the narrator finally writes down the answers, he is no longer sure whether these are truths or just the imagination of his fevered mind now groping desperately in the dark for answers: “I write this now because I think I know the answers, or at least have found guesses that ring true to me, though I also know they might be nothing more than a man hungry for meanings inventing them where they don’t exist. Arguably, all meanings are invented anyway; and since I have no one to please but myself, and no one to read this who will care, except perhaps one, then I may write as I please, and think as I please, and reread this whenever I can bear it” (Card, 2015, p. 201). The author observes it is because humans themselves imposed among themselves artificially constructed barriers that increased discriminations and dissent further, and this had contributed to their downfall: “We human beings had reinvented ourselves, Homo sovieticus, Homo coprofabricus, or whatever the scientific name would be. A new species that never guessed how quickly it would be extinct” (203). In his book *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (2009), Hall analyses a diachronic history of apocalypse in Western culture. The narrator in Card’s “The Elephants of Poznan” finally realizes that the elephants are the true messengers of God whose sounds carry the songs of God, and it was we humans, blinded by our hubris and arrogance, who decided that we could take on, subdue and conquer those mighty godlike beasts. However, humanity proved to be wrong, and God chose to erase them with a plague to help his favorite creatures, i.e., the elephants to thrive and survive: “In human memory, we were supposed to dance with joy upon the horns and head of a great loving beast, our father, our maker. Our prophets were the ones who heard the voice of God, not in the tempest, but in the silent thrumming, the still small voice of infrasound carried through stone and earth as easily as through the air. On the mountain, they heard the voice of God, teaching us how to subdue the primate and become the sons of God, the giants on the earth. For the sons of God did marry the daughters of men. We remembered that God was above us but thought that meant he was above the sky. And so my speculation and imagining led me to this mad twisting of the scripture of my childhood—and no less of the science and history in the library. What were the Neanderthals? Why did they disappear? Was there a plague one day, carried wherever the new-made Cro-Magnon wandered? And did the Neanderthals understand what their woolly mammoth deities had done to them? Here was their ironic vengeance: It was the new, god-made men, the chosen people, who hunted the mammoths and the mastodons to extinction, who bowed the elephants of India to slavery and turned the elephants of Africa into a vast wandering ivory orchard. We men of Cro-Magnon descent, we thought we were the pinnacle. But when God told us to be perfect, as he was perfect, we failed him, and he had to try again. This time it was no flood that swept our souls away. And any rainbow we might see would be a lie” (Card, 2015, p. 213). In Card’s story, it can be said that the God-sent plague which destroyed the majority of the human population serves the function of the pharmakon since it erases the technologically advanced human race but paves the way for the emergence of a new human species who could live in perfect harmony with the natural world and its creations.

Reimagining the World

The lines in the story “Dreams in Dust” by D. Thomas Minton seem to set the tone and tempo for this section to see how the world has changed from its pre-apocalyptic state. In the story, a character named Faruk states that “The Earth is dead...Those who believe otherwise are chasing fantasies in the dust” (Minton, 2015, p. 170). In “The Revelation of Morgan Stern” by Christie Yant, we see how the narrator recalls that in a pre-apocalyptic world, people used to talk about various potentially catastrophic scenarios which could bring an end to the world in a light-hearted manner: “We talked about this sort of thing a lot, sometimes joking, sometimes serious: the trouble the world was in, and how it would eventually end. A biological accident, some virus cooked up in a lab; nuclear war, maybe a meteor strike” (Yant, 2015, p. 294). This reminds us of David J. Leigh’s catalog of various apocalyptic scenarios, which includes “an imminent end-time, a cosmic catastrophe, a movement from an old to a new age, a struggle between forces of good and evil (sometimes personified in angels and demons), a desire for an ultimate paradise (often parallel to an original paradise), the transitional help of God or a messiah, and a final judgment and the manifestation of the ultimate” (2008, p. 5). In Rudy Rucker & Bruce Sterling’s “Colliding Branes”, we see humanity reflecting on the cosmic story/history of the Earth’s death and the universe’s as well. In this regard, one may recall Lewicki’s comments on the prevalence and popularity of the theme of universal destruction in American fiction. He speaks of the need to study the “apocalyptic and entropic tendencies in American literature in order to explain the fascination of American writers with the vision of universal destruction” (1984, p. xvii). Rabbiteen

and Angelo, the protagonists in Rucker and Sterling's work, reflect: "Yet they'd never met in the flesh. Until today, their last day on Earth—the last day for the Earth, and, in stark fact, also for Earth's solar system, Earth's galaxy, Earth's Local Group galactic cluster, and Earth's whole twelve-dimensional universe shebang" (Rucker and Sterling, 2015, p. 75). The post-apocalyptic landscape will not be one of total hopelessness and gloom there, but a new universe will rise from the ashes of the old. According to this Ekpyrotic theory, "the fundamental constants of physics would change rapidly whenever two parallel membranes of the cosmic twelve dimensions were about to—as laymen put it—collide" (2015, p. 76). The cosmic catastrophe that is about to unfold in this story acts as the Derridean 'pharmakon' that holds within it the seeds of both a total extinction and the promise of a new beginning. Here, the danger of apocalypse seems to be placed in a distant future. We may say that this is an example of the dislocation of destinations in the post-apocalyptic setting. As Derrida remarks, "apocalyptic discourse can also, in dislocating destinations, dismantle the dominant contract or concordant" (1998, p. 159). The apocalyptic scenario which results from the collision of the higher-dimensional cosmic branes in the hyperspace is described in the novel in the following way: "There was frantic, incomprehensible activity all around them as if they were mice in the grinding engine of a merry-go-round. Like the maculated sun overhead, the planet's surface had come unmoored. Geological strata had gently unpacked like the baked layers of a baklava, sending the surface debris crashing about in search of new equilibria. Eerie pink sunlight glittered from the hearse's window as plucked from beyond the horizon, it tumbled past them, its hood and doors slamming rhythmically, bouncing up the slopes of the nearest peak. In ordinary times, the earthquake noise alone might have crushed their clinging bodies, but the booming of this planetary destruction was oddly muted and gentle. The fundamental constants had plateaued for a moment. A new order of gravity settled in, with everything that could come loose from the Earth being messily sorted according to its mass. Belatedly, a reluctant mountain tore itself loose and rose ponderously into the lemon sky. Rabbiteen and Angelo were floating a few score yards above the remains of the ancient desert—a patch of fine dust beneath a layer of sand with pebbles admixed, topped by bones, sticks, stones and target-range military rubble" (Rucker and Sterling, 2015, p. 89). Rosen opines how post-apocalyptic narratives "seek to get beyond the limits of time and space" (2008, p. 175). Since a post-apocalyptic narrative attempts to describe the unknown and the unnatural in terms of the known, the end of the world scenario is invariably one of the most fascinating aspects of their world building. Here, we see how the end of the universe itself is taken up as a subject matter for description. The possible implications and impact of such a universal apocalypse are being portrayed in terms comprehensible to human understanding. Genevieve Valentine's "Wondrous Days" shows the combined impact of the earthquake and nuclear apocalypse when the worst of both nature and humanity combine to produce an episode of extinction. In Valentine's story, the combined power of the earthquake and nuclear holocaust plays the role of Derridean pharmakon since it destroys the past and sows the seeds of a new future where humanity will be displaced from its central position. Here we see the narrator describe how "the earth snapped once from side to side, like a wet dog shaking off the rain, and my car flew into the rock face sideways because the road had spat it out" (Rucker and Sterling, 2015, p. 159). In Orson Scott's "The Elephants of Poznan", we see how Mother Earth herself strikes back against the mindlessly exploitative behavior of humanity by sending a plague that wrought total havoc on humanity: "There would be no recovery from this plague. Our extinction had not required a celestial missile to shatter the earth and darken the sky for a year; no other species shared our doom with us. We had been taken out surgically, precisely, thoroughly, a tumor removed with a delicate viral hand" (2015, p. 199). In the post-apocalyptic world, we see two couples roaming the dilapidated landscape, which the Earth now is following the plague, and they speak the language of the elephants. The narrator believes that it is no time for this new generation of humans to inherit the Earth like Adam and Eve did the Garden of Eden from God: "the idiom God had used one time to say, Multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it. We did the first; we did the last. Now, perhaps, this new couple in their new garden would learn the replenishing part as well. Only a few of us lingering beasts, of us the dust of the earth, would remain, and not for long. Then the whole world would be their garden" (Card, 2015, p. 217). The narrator states that he thinks that it was perhaps the elephants themselves who had created this new form of man so that they could eventually supplant the older race of humans who had no respect for nature or its variety of wildlives: "They had judged us, these beasts, and found us wanting. Perhaps the decision was born as grieving elephants gathered around the corpses of their kinfolk, slain and shorn of their tusks. Perhaps the decision came from the shrinking land and the drying earth. Perhaps it was their plan all along, from the time they made us until they finally were done with us" (Card, 2015, p. 212). In David Brin's "The Postman", the real horrors of apocalypse become seven more harrowing as a result of the indifferent and nonchalant attitude of the invitees to the dinner party in a couple's house. This story combines the elements of pre-apocalypse with post-apocalypse by depicting how it has become a pastime for people to time travel to the post-apocalyptic world and then gossip about it while remaining thoroughly indifferent to the catastrophes unfolding around them. The story begins in a profoundly post-apocalyptic note thus: "The Earth had spun six thousand times since flames blossomed and cities died. Now, after sixteen circuits of the Sun, plumes of soot no longer roiled from burning forests, turning day into night" (Card, 2015, p. 219). The story describes how the visitors could find entertainment in witnessing the apocalyptic demise of the Earth. There is a couple who even reportedly once saw the disintegration of the moon itself: "It too close to the Earth and split into chunks, and the chunks fell like meteors. Smashing everything up, you know. One big piece nearly hit their time machine" (292). The company takes users into different end-of-the-world trips where in each of them they could visit different apocalyptic scenarios: "The world suffers a variety of natural calamities, it doesn't just have one end of the world, and they keep mixing things up and sending people to different catastrophes" (Card, 2015, p. 291). These trips seem to perfectly exemplify what Wagar refers to in his *Terminal Visions* as "a heightened sense of the imminence of Last Things" (1982, p. 26). These carefully organized end-of-the-world trips play the role of Derridean pharmakon since they both combine in them the traces of an apocalyptic end and hope for a new future. In Rachel Swirsky's "How the World Became Quiet: A Post-Human Creation Myth", we see how humanity survived a series of apocalypses, namely, Apocalypse of Steel, the Apocalypse of Hydrogen, the Apocalypse of Serotonin, and both Apocalypses of Water, till the Apocalypse of Trees come to destroy them for good. Swirsky's short story actually is part of her original collection of stories entitled How the World Became Quiet: Myths of the Past, Present, and Future (2013). In Swirsky's story, following the final apocalypse, humanity agrees to a truce where they are to combine their DNA with the animal DNA and learn to live in harmony with mother nature. The story describes how a truce "was inked in blood drawn from human victims and printed on the pulped and flattened corpses of trees. The trees agreed to cease their increasing assaults and return forevermore to their previous quiescent vegetable state, in exchange for a single concession: mankind would henceforth sacrifice its genetic heritage and merge with animals to create new, benevolent sentience with which to populate the globe" (Swirsky, 2015, p. 386). In Swirsky's story, there are two pharmakons - the first pharmakon is the final apocalypse or the Apocalypse of the Trees, where we see how trees retaliate against the destructive and exploitative human civilization, thus forcing them to live in harmony with nature, and secondly, the agreement itself acts as a pharmakon which requires the humans to share their DNA with animals which results in the extinction of a greater portion of the original humans and

enables the creation of a new race of hybrid man-animals. Before the final apocalypse occurred, humanity's long-term goal seemed to be only "to wreak as much havoc as possible on the environment through carelessness and boredom" (Swirsky, 2015, p. 385). The sixth apocalypse was the most damaging one that laid waste to a great part of human civilization: "Humans laid the foundation for the sixth apocalypse in much the same way they'd triggered the previous ones" (385). Now, during the final apocalypse, both trees and humans both inflicted as much damage on each other as possible, which "decimated civilians on both sides, but eventually—though infested and rootless—the trees overwhelmed their opposition" (Swirsky, 2015, p. 385). This resulted in the extinction of mankind as we know it and, in its place, arose a new chimeric species possessing the traits of both humans as well as animals: "Mankind, as history had known it, was no more. The new hybrids wore bodies constructed like those of mythological beasts, a blend of human and animal features" (386). However, the story progresses as we see how the warmongering nature of humankind begins to emerge from beneath the hybrid appearances that these beat people now don. Humans continue to result in the extinction of the various subspecies of human hybrids. There are descriptions of hyena man fighting eagle man, and frogman fighting capybara man, "then tiger and spider and cockatiel men against snake and giraffe and ostrich men" (Swirsky, 2015, p. 387). In the story, "Tight Little Stitches in a Dead Man's Back" by Joe R. Lansdale, a nuclear physicist and his wife survive a nuclear apocalypse and see a world gradually but steadily transforming into a monstrous entity. The main character is the scientist himself, who refers to himself as Mr. Journal. In this journal, the narrator describes how monstrous plants grow that seek to ingest and subsume any living entity into itself and then produce their corpse-like flowers. The novel vividly describes the entire process by which these vines can turn any living entity into a "blooming corpse": "Thick vines sprouted little thorny vines, and these moved up the bank and touched the corpses. Then, with a lashing motion, the thorns tore into the flesh, and the vines, like snakes, slithered through the wounds and inside. Secreting a dissolving fluid that turned the innards to the consistency of watery oatmeal, they slurped up the mess, and the vines grew and grew at amazing speed, moved and coiled throughout the bodies, replacing nerves and shaping into the symmetry of the muscles they had devoured, and lastly, they pushed up through the necks, into the skulls, ate tongues and eyeballs and sucked up the mouse-gray brains like soggy gruel. With an explosion of skull shrapnel, the roses bloomed, their tooth-hard petals expanding into beautiful red and yellow flowers, hunks of human heads dangling from them like shattered watermelon rinds. In the center of these blooms, a fresh, black brain pulsed and feathery feelers once again tasted air for food and breeding grounds. Energy waves from the floral brains shot through the miles and miles of vines that were knotted inside the bodies, and as they had replaced nerves, muscles and vital organs, they made the bodies stand" (Lansdale, 2015, p. 401). These forms of unnatural and extremely transgressive proliferations are only possible in a post-apocalyptic setting, and these can be categorized as the Derridean 'pharmakon', since these bring both an end to the traditional modes of regeneration, growth and fertility, and open the door for the proliferation of more monstrous and uncanny forms of possibilities. This is how the post-apocalyptic narrative seeks to construct its world where the sanctity of the living and the dead, or between human and the non-human, seem to be non-existent. In the story "Monstro" by Junot Diaz, we see how a plague-like outbreak occurs when a black fungus-like thing starts spreading across Haiti. Here, we also come across a description of a nuclear detonation event that "turned the entire world white. Three full seconds. Triggered a quake that was felt all across the Island and also burned out the optic nerve on Dr. DeGraff's right eye" (Diaz, 2015, p. 455). In Maria Dahvana Headley's "The Traditional", we see a description of some strange gifts that a couple plans to give each other on their anniversaries. The story is set against a backdrop where a worm has begun to eat into every living man. Against such a scenario, the couple plans to have amazing sex: "Sex at the end of the world is a pornographic, ecstatic recitation of everything that has ever and has never existed, a naming of genus and species, taxonomies of winged creatures and those that slither" (2015, p. 434). In Seanan McGuire's "Animal Husbandry", we see a veterinary doctor traveling to Oregon following a pandemic that killed a large portion of the human populace. The doctor is looking for her missing daughter. Her daughter is seen bringing with her menageries of different sorts of animals. However, the plot eventually takes an unexpected turn. The daughter of the doctor states show she has come to know all of a sudden that a devastating pandemic has swept across the human race leaving most of them dead: "The world ended about fourteen months ago. Sadly, I missed this momentous occasion. I was home sick with the plague and was thus not allowed to participate in the grand pandemic which wiped out the majority of the human race" (McGuire, 2015, p. 31). The post-apocalyptic atmosphere in the post-pandemic world can be felt from the very beginning of the story as we see the doctor warning everyone to be careful while coming into contact with human remains: "If you must handle human remains, wear gloves and be prepared to dispose of your outer garments immediately afterward. Avoid closed-up spaces where people died, especially those which have remained moist. Diseases survive better in dark, warm, moist places" (McGuire, 2015, p. 29).

Conclusion

In the 'Introduction' to his anthology, John Joseph Adams writes, post-apocalyptic fiction is "about new beginnings and the end of the world *as we know it*". Through the present study, the author attempted to show how post-apocalyptic narratives compel us to challenge our traditional viewpoints and adopt new perspectives to understand better the ambiguous, complex and paradoxical nature of the reality that emerges from the ashes of the past. The author attempted to show that various recurrent apocalyptic tropes such as the nuclear holocaust, ecological catastrophe, viral apocalypse, outbreak of a pandemic, alien invasion and even cosmic collapse can act as Derridean pharmakon in a post-apocalyptic setting because while bringing the curtain down on the traditional past, these tropes also herald the emergence of an uncanny future full of transgressive potential and strange possibilities.

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