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This is my first time presenting at the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment
I'm very happy to be a part of the panel "Speculative Extinctions: Imagining Environmental
Existential Risks"

My presentation title is:

No Profligates in the Wasteland: Nihilism and Neoliberalism in Post-Apocalyptic *Fallout—New Vegas*

Few settings spur conversations on nihilism and ecocatastrophe better than post-apocalyptic texts. Whether those texts be Hollywood blockbusters or straight-to-streaming distractions, speculative literature or videogames provide settings that project contemporary anxieties onto a wasteland, a desert of the real. Although there is much overlap across speculative fiction, the post-apocalyptic genre, much like horror, offers audiences safe ways to indulge in a host of anxieties; specifically, post-apocalyptic narratives engage audiences in end-times fantasies, which have a long tradition throughout history. While one might follow religious interpretations to discuss the origin and supposed comfort in knowing the end of the world or universe was part of a plan, nihilism complicates the well-worn Christian eschatology themes that advance the binary of the saved and the damned. Post-apocalyptic narratives also allow audiences to indulge in the end-of-history illusion (c.f. Jordi Quoidbach, Daniel Gilbert, and Timothy Wilson), which is a separate part of this work, but I bring it up for the audience to keep in the backs of their minds because there is a chauvinism and arrogance to indulging in that hope that one's generation is the last. Instead of conforming to the popular definition that considers nihilism the absence of interest in anything, let's keep nihilism productive and incorporate it in a critique that privileges relativism—not that we can't advance any solution—but that we should consider a variety of interpretations without resorting to the unproductive binary of inherently good or inherently bad. Such a binary closes access to any chance of considering the bigger

picture and allows retreat to mysticism, conformity, and fatalism. And, if we ever hope to reverse the continual destruction of the environment, a project this speaker feels is almost impossible, radical thinking and engagement that requires full scrutiny of the beliefs driving our behaviors are vital to raise awareness. Will they be enough to change behaviors? Doubtful.

This presentation is part of a larger work that examines the video game *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) for its reflection of neoliberalism. I'll try to focus on a manageable part of the larger work that deals with what nihilism may bring to our grappling with ecocatastrophe. My asides on doubting humans will reverse our ecocidal behaviors are not to privilege the popular definition of nihilism that reduces it to embracing futility; instead, those doubts are a recognition of the uphill battle to work both within prevailing capitalist structure for "market solutions" and work to expose the culpability of capitalism in ecocatastrophe. Before one can even begin to dismantle capitalism (if such a goal is, ultimately, necessary), people need to believe alternatives even exist. Following Brett Stevens theories of nihilism as an open heuristic not chained to the illusion of universality, I propose that post-apocalyptic texts offer audiences a chance to reflect on the cultural work they do. Stevens argues that "nihilism grows out of a conceptual seed: neither universal truth nor subjectivity exists. Both are human constructions designed to remove the fear of unknowns in our world" (p. 16). Stevens also claims, "nihilism recognizes reality as immutable and hopes to improve the quality of human thinking instead so we can more elegantly adapt to reality" (p. 20). Far from 'not caring,' Stevens advances, "nihilism denies value and purpose, and in turn denies any special role to humanity" (p. 21). Breaking anthropocentrism is vital to any chance the environment has: whether it be in the form of jingoistic manifest destiny or the assumption that a divine entity will protect humans, such worldviews undergird the ecocidal practices of *homo sapiens sapiens*, providing the illusion that an invisible hand will

protect the planet. Similarly, promoting capitalism's pursuit of individual self-interests, which supposedly also rely on an invisible hand, as the only viable economic/social framework ossifies the collective assumption—one that exists across the right-left political divide—that only market solutions exist to all problems.

Mark Fisher claims “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (p. 2). He attributes this to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek and presents readers with ‘capitalist realism’—that there’s no alternative to this system—and laments that even post-apocalyptic narratives still have capitalist systems. *Fallout: New Vegas* follows that pattern and exposes the vacuity of the wasteland, the illusion of late capitalism. Video games often have post-apocalyptic themes. In fact, the 1988 video game *Wasteland* inspired the main plot of the *Fallout* series—searching the wasteland for resources and clues. Video games allow for quite immersive experiences and push gamers to the limits of sensory overload. Although calling them the quintessential media of modernist ennui would paint too wide a brush and overgeneralize, very popular shooters, such as the *Call of Duty* franchise, especially when played online, require strict attention and punish gamers who want to reflect and be deliberate. Gamers quickly learn to “keep moving”: gather ammunition, kill the enemy, advance to the next checkpoint, etc.

The speculative, post-apocalyptic narrative projects contemporary anxieties about destruction into a variety of texts. What needs to be critically analyzed in these texts, to return to Mark Fisher's observation, is how they reproduce prevailing economic assumptions.

Post-Apocalyptic Economies

Post-apocalyptic video games rarely allow abundance outside of enacting cheat codes; instead, avatars engage the virtual economy for survival.

Even in the dying, decaying civilization that inhabits the wasteland, people still have jobs. Inn keepers, bar tenders, drug dealers, and prostitutes are some of the workers the Courier encounters. Surviving on scraps of past knowledge, the Courier makes deliveries, usually in the form of information, as a remnant of a forgotten commerce system. While the Courier's storyline motivation to get to New Vegas is revenge, one of the few "real" goals one can have in the virtual environment, New Vegas is a beacon of hope for the average person looking to get rich. And just as the real Las Vegas assumes the role of an oasis, therefore, making what's outside the desert, the alternate-history version Las Vegas of *Fallout: New Vegas* is the main destination. The Courier has no home, making New Vegas a perfect place to pass through on the way to finding those responsible for robbing him and leaving him for dead—the beginning of the game.

The real Las Vegas, entirely manufactured in an environment where it should not exist, lures tourists by selling experiences, hyperrealities of famous locations, packed together for tourists to experience more easily. Additionally, the individual casinos attempt, like shopping malls, to be totalizing experiences (Jameson, 39-40), meaning guests can do *everything* in a single casino. New Vegas takes artifice a step farther: besides being a setting in the video game's virtual world, a robot, aptly named Mr. House, runs New Vegas as a program of a past flesh-and-blood owner who now lives on as a corporation. Overall, the technologies of *Fallout: New Vegas* (with a few fantastical atompunk exceptions) are in a state of arrested development and lag behind real world contemporary technologies, yet NV is set well over 250 years in the future.

New Vegas is the pinnacle of civilization in the game and represents profligate leisure in a decaying world.

Neoliberal Wasteland

The wasteland represents the neoliberal view of the environment: it ultimately holds no intrinsic value and is a resource to be exploited and bulldozed. Ayn Rand best summarizes the neoliberal view of the environment in her famous proclamation for the necessity of pollution:

“In order to survive, man has to discover and produce everything he needs, which means that he has to *alter* his background **and adapt it to his needs**. Nature has not equipped him for adapting himself to his background in the manner of animals....man has had to manufacture things; his well-being depends on his success at production. The lowest human tribe cannot survive without that alleged source of pollution: fire....The ecologists are the new vultures swarming to extinguish that fire. (The Anti-Industrial Revolution,” 277)

Under the neoliberal paradigm, environmental protection is of little to no concern. Private property and development trump any concerns for wildlife, clean water, pollution-free air, or natural vistas. Land is to be used solely for human activity, for the economy. Ultimately, neoliberalism, along with other seemingly innocuous ideologies like individualism, American exceptionalism, and “freedom,” is an extension of anthropocentrism, which places humans on top. The neoliberal, of course, puts the wealthy even higher.

Ayn Rand’s anti-environmentalism from the early 1970s, long before scientists sounded the alarm on global warming and longer before contemporary corporations started recognizing that climate change will affect future profits (think of all the worried insurance companies that “insure” coastal properties are). However, developers still subscribe to the ideology of ecocide: land is only valuable for commercial goals—not environmental. A very recent opinion piece in the local newspaper *The Charlotte Observer* written by the Chair and Vice Chair of the Real Estate & Building Industry Coalition laments development restrictions of a proposed plan:

“Provisions within the plan imposing wider sidewalks and unrealistic tree preservation requirements limit the amount of developable land” (Banks & Hayden, 7A). The audience might find the opinion piece’s title “Let’s Get the 2040 Plan *Right*” as opposed to *correct* quite telling.

Although a city’s tree canopy isn’t enough to absorb the tremendous amount of carbon pollution in the planet’s atmosphere, removing those trees to house ecocidal humans displaces (or eliminates) the birds, squirrels, insects, etc. inhabiting the already stressed ecosystem. Wider sidewalks will also encroach on the ecosystem, but what’s not brought up by the developers is that requiring wider sidewalks (and even bike lanes), in theory, encourages walking and biking as alternatives to our polluting vehicles. However, if the market wants wider sidewalks, bikes lanes, and more trees, wouldn’t developers produce them? Brett Stevens explains that we need to look beyond blaming the developers to the real problem: *homo sapiens sapiens*, especially those in industrialized countries. Stevens observes, “We breed like yeast and every person wants a suburban home, two cars, large-screen television and three meals a day.... We expand, and this marginalizes nature, crushing ecosystems and replacing them with parks and *wasteland* in which only adaptive generalists like squirrels, sparrows, rats and cockroaches thrive” (14, emphasis added). Pitting environmentalists against developers ignores the somnambulist masses uncritically consuming and not demanding non-ecocidal sustainability (if such a plan is possible).

The Neoliberal Wasteland of Fallout: New Vegas

Fallout: New Vegas, set in the Mojave desert, a place not conducive to human life (consider that [Las Vegas hit 115 degrees on 16 June 2021](#)), reveals the neoliberal disdain for the environment metaphorically. The entire area is toxic, and the few species that exist attack humans. There are a few domesticated animals, but the mutated and aggressive molerats,

radscorpions, and even radroaches thrive in the wasteland. In some places, the Courier needs radiation protection. Also, nearly all food and drink, including the beloved Nuka-Cola, increases the Courier's radiation level and requires treatment, or the elevated levels kill. Although humans caused this wasteland through a nuclear war, it represents the contemporary capitalist view that anything that doesn't contribute to the economy is irrelevant. Therefore, the logic that we must tame the hostile environment for human "progress" is reflected in the desolate, unforgiving wastelands of the *Fallout* series. Once again, Ayn Rand provides the neoliberal argument against conservation: "Even if smog were a risk to human life, we must remember that life in nature, without technology, is wholesale death" ("The Left: Old and New," 170).

All video games in the series are set in post-apocalyptic versions of areas of the United States. Throughout these wastelands, avatars encounter the ruins of civilization, including atompunk-inspired billboards advertising products spoofing post-WWII fascination with atomic energy and war. Of course, nuclear weapons around Las Vegas aren't just from speculative sci-fi: in the 1950s, the US government tested nuclear weapons in the desert, and spectators in Las Vegas would gather to watch the distant mushroom clouds. Even under the threat of nuclear annihilation, Las Vegas still sold the experience (c.f. the PBS documentary *Las Vegas: An Unconventional History* [Stephen Ives and Amanda Pollak 2005] for more on the history of 1950s Las Vegas's fascination with "bomb parties"). Considering the actual history of Las Vegas and nuclear weapons, it isn't surprising that the most prosperous place in the wasteland is New Vegas.

Unfortunately, it's too late for the environment in *Fallout: New Vegas* or contemporary Earth (but I'd love to be proven wrong). Capitalism has a price tag on all aspects of life or ignored its intrinsic value or sustainability.

Ultimately, the Courier and the rest of the characters in *Fallout: New Vegas* reflect our contemporary trajectory to (even greater) ecocatastrophe. Although technology's arrested development keeps weapons primitive, except for the retro Atompunk lasers and blasters, a lagging culture clings to capitalist ideology for immediate survival as opposed to enriching the lives of people or the environment. It's not that technology can't help limit impacts on the environment; it's the capitalist push for growth, most notably through neoliberal deregulation and mass overconsumption, and citizen ignorance of the consequences that keeps us on the conveyor belt of profligacy. In a true wasteland, one must conserve limited resources—possibly in a cult-like devotion to conservation. The abundance that capitalism provides, excesses we accumulate in storage units and fat cells, derive from the environment, but consumers rarely recognize the impact their consumption and, then, waste have on ecosystems. Comfortably situated in our climate-controlled units (except for those who lose power during blackouts caused by excessive heat waves overtaxing the power grid) where we receive individually packaged goods, we ignore the health of the planet.

If we do venture out, we leave in our climate-controlled cars, burning fossil fuels as we, most likely, indulge in more consumption. We toss our excess garbage and think nothing of it. Planned obsolescence requires us to continually update our “necessary” devices, which contributes to the ever-increasing growth of e-junk. Humans are tool users, and we're also trash producers. Without consciousness and the will to act in order to slow or, seemingly impossible, reverse environmental destruction, ecocatastrophe is inevitable.

In the interest of time, I want to direct the audience to the work of Brett Stevens and his advocacy of parallelism and recognizing that “there is no single universal truth, or ideology, which can guide us” (14). He goes on to claim, “this is a struggle for survival against our own

bad impulses and illusions” (15). Also, Nolen Gertz’s work on nihilism, especially *Nihilism and Technology*, help recognize that focusing on the technological binary of good vs. bad ignores the values that brought about these technologies. For instance, blaming the drive thru at fast food restaurants for increased greenhouse gas emissions ignores that that system responds to the value of instant gratification, which is ironic considering people sit in those lines for long wait times, but, secure in their climate-controlled vehicle, what do they care? For more about neoliberalism being the prevailing western ideology—one that isn’t just a fiscal conservative position but is embraced by the right and left—see Jodi Dean’s work.

Getting citizens to re-instrumentalize themselves in order to reverse ecocide requires them, requires us all, to abandon anthropocentrism. Perhaps appealing to fear that our destruction of the environment will mean no more abundance—no profligacy in the wasteland—could convince us to change, but that wouldn’t disrupt the underlying goal of overconsumption and would continue to allow people to ignore the other (and declining) species that deserve a voice against the market ideology of neoliberalism. We are perhaps too removed from the environment to see impacts until it’s too late. When I present this to people, they unapologetically claim, “that’ll happen after I’m gone, so it isn’t my concern...it won’t even be my children’s concern.” Our behaviors prepare the environment, *our land for waste*, to become a wasteland.

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