

It Is Happening Here

The Second American Civil War in Fiction

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Introduction

As I write these words, the United States of America is going through a prolonged period of crisis. Election years are always troublesome affairs, as they are sure to excite both the fires of partisanship and a more general sense of despair. It must be recognized that even under the worst of contemporary circumstances, it is all too likely that almost half of all eligible voters will not be motivated or empowered enough to make their voice heard. One could safely consider this a crisis of representation, or of US democracy in general.

But this is just the first of the nation's ongoing problems; the global Covid-19 pandemic has proven even more disruptive. Besides the terrifying death toll, the necessary societal shutdown will make its effects known for years to come. Had there been strong federal leadership centered around strict quarantine measures and emergency economic relief, perhaps the US could have weathered this crisis successfully. As it is, it almost seems as if various parts of the government have gone to war with one another, claiming healthcare resources at each other's expense and often trying their hardest to return to a false sense of normality. Yet in complete contradiction to the wishful thinking of these officials, the US will likely have a long way to go before this crisis could be at its end.

Finally, there are the Black Lives Matter protests to consider. Unlike the illusory suddenness of the Covid-19 pandemic—which was unknowingly prepared by years of government incompetence—the brutality of US law enforcement had been a known factor for a far longer time. In this tumultuous moment (if not potentially at any time), it took only one more well-documented act of police murder to bring the Black community out into the streets, demanding an end to the institutionalized injustices which have subjugated them for centuries. There are prominent calls to defund and even abolish the police, and while some local victories have already been won, only time will tell what comes of the movement entire.

By now, one may very well ask why I am recapitulating this present context, when it would still be readily apparent to any contemporary future reader. My reason for doing so is twofold. First, I believe that because any work is the product of its creative circumstances, a basic acknowledgement of those conditions may facilitate its total understanding.

Furthermore, I suspect that the present state of US society may lend an unfortunate relevance to my own topic, one I neither anticipated nor desired. Whether it's through snarky social media posts or more dangerous political expressions, it seems like the central imagination of my thesis is increasingly seen as a plausible future for the United States. This speculative concept carries a simple but evocative name: The Second American Civil War.

In truth, my interest in the imagination of a Second American Civil War was not the result of the aforementioned events, at least not in their present form. For a while now, I have noticed this element as a recurring presence in various works of popular fiction. Indeed, it seems to me that this type of scenario been growing in frequency; while I have not quantified this growth, it remains a particular if not prominent strand within the spectrum of speculative North Americas. As such, I believe it worthy of analysis. If an awareness of context can help one understand a text, then I would suggest the reverse holds true as well. By studying contemporary fictions about a Second American Civil War (hereafter referred to as 2ACW fiction), I may come to learn much about their general function and relation to the present.

In this thesis, I will do exactly that. Taking on a variety of 2ACW fictions—most of them published in the last two decades—I will endeavor to connect them to pre-existing tendencies in speculative fiction. In this way, I will be able to show how the imagination of a Second American Civil War can utilize the tropes and techniques of other genres. Each chapter will discuss 2ACW fiction from a different literary perspective, including a couple of specific examples to elucidate my reasoning. While some of these examples may overlap between chapters, this further emphasizes that 2ACW fiction almost inherently exists at an

intersection of genres. Civil wars are complex historical events, often eschewing any singular reading of them. Their fictional depictions are no exception.

My study of 2ACW fiction begins in the realm of dystopian literature. After introducing the basic definitions of dystopia, I will proceed along its specific historical developments to a place where I might plausibly place 2ACW fiction. As I will indicate, this genre seems to descend from a relatively recent trend in dystopian fiction, one which is less totalitarian in its depicted scenario while also being more critical with regard to its possible resistance. Following in the footsteps of writers such as Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler, several prominent 2ACW works have tried to extrapolate and highlight contemporary political trends through the imagination of an entropically dystopian future. It is this latter term of ‘entropic dystopia’ which I will return to at the end of the first chapter, for I believe it represents one of the most relevant and distinctive features of the 2ACW genre as a whole.

The notion of an entropic and therefore temporal dystopia will serve as a lead in to the next chapter, which considers the role of time and history in 2ACW fiction in a more explicit fashion. This analysis begins more abstractly, building a basic connection between history and narrative off the literary theory of Hayden White. Even in such simple historiographical techniques as narrative closure and the contestation of interpretations, there is already the presence of moral or allegorical meaning. As I come to discuss works which are written like the histories of fictional ages, these elements must be kept in mind.

However, this chapter will also address a genre which uses the past itself as its speculative context: the alternate history. Even though stories of this type might take place in a highly divergent setting when compared to real US history, I will nevertheless argue that they exist as a product of past tendencies, as well as the present perspective which leads us to see those. Taken together, the temporalized nature of many 2ACW fictions will ultimately reflect a preoccupation with their contemporary context.

Finally, the third chapter is focused on journalistic works of 2ACW fiction, though this category may be interpreted in two different ways. Firstly, it denotes works which feature journalists as their protagonists, or are otherwise the result of fictional journalism. In this way, they take up some of the conventions of journalistic practice, such as a striving for objectivity (or else the notable absence thereof). Furthermore, 2ACW fiction may also itself be part of a journalistic project; by imagining the possibility of a Second American Civil War, one can come to see present dysfunctions that might lead up to such a scenario. The end of the chapter will discuss a prominent example of this approach.

All in all, this thesis will offer a general overview of the yet uncoded genre that is 2ACW fiction. By situating it at the intersection of various different genres and sources, I hope to impart a sense of both the variability and potential direction of this type of story. Much of what may be said about 2ACW fiction has not yet been written, not even in this thesis. But perhaps the present analysis can excite further discussion about this speculative scenario, both as a trope of fiction and as a potential non-fiction. This work shall have to be left to other volumes. For now, I shall turn to the first prominent influence on 2ACW fiction: dystopia.

Chapter One: 2ACW Fiction as Dystopia

This chapter will serve to establish a connection between 2ACW fiction and the genre of dystopia. In this endeavor, I will lay out a general history of dystopian writing, so as to determine exactly which of its tendencies are most compatible with that of a 2ACW scenario. Naturally, such a history must begin with a basic understanding of the concept of dystopia, which itself derives from the even more fundamental idea of utopia. Thus, here is where my analysis will begin.

A common approach to understanding the concept of utopia is to focus on the dual aspect which resides in its etymology. Taking its inspiration from two separate Ancient Greek terms, the term ‘utopia’ can mean both ‘no place’ (ou-topos) as well as ‘good place’ (eu-topos) (Vieira 5). When these definitions are taken together, the concept describes a society which is both a moral improvement on our own and, at least to some extent, otherworldly. As a derivation of the utopia, the dystopia is a concept which inverts the eu-topian while preserving the ou-topian, thus becoming an otherworldly depiction of a morally inferior society. Important to note is that these definitions are but the most general descriptions of their respective genres; as I will indicate in the following, there are many other attributes which will apply to their more specific subgenres.

When the dualistic typology of utopia and dystopia is applied to the general tendencies of 2ACW fiction, it becomes clear that this genre hews closer to the latter tradition than the former, even if it might contain elements of both. This is especially obvious when one considers the primary aspect of 2ACW fiction to be the imagined civil conflict itself, rather than any particular faction or location within it. Few authors would depict a Second American Civil War as a positive development in itself, regardless of its cause or outcome. Thus, for all intents and purposes, 2ACW fiction should be understood as an inherently dystopian genre.

From Classic Utopia to Critical Dystopia

With this basic determination out of the way, a more important question arises: what is the exact historical relation between 2ACW fiction and dystopia? Without such an account, dissecting any particular work for its dystopian resonances would be a hollow enterprise, lacking any sense of the literary context it emerged from. Thus, this section will provide a basic account of dystopia's history, considering the social and literary developments which help explain the emergence of 2ACW fiction. In my analysis, I will take up a basic historical framing which centers the immediate political context of a work, as well as the genre dialectic between utopia and dystopia. This approach allows me to explain both the major influences on this inherently political genre, and the manner in which its core attributes have changed in response. Then, as this development approaches the present, I will be able to point out exactly those sources to which 2ACW fiction owes its contemporary inspiration. Taken together, this section will offer a greater sense of this genre's dystopian attributes, along with the historical process from which these have emerged.

My work begins by addressing the 'classic' variety of dystopia, which may be straightforwardly interpreted as an "inverted subgenre of [classic] utopia" (Moylan, *Untainted Sky* 121). Like the works they are based in, these classic dystopias describe a designed, perfected, and generally imaginary society. The crucial difference is in their portrayal: unlike the virtuous paradise of a utopia, these places are portrayed as oppressive and totalitarian. Examples of this variety include George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. These works emerged as reactions to the authoritarianism of the twentieth century, objecting to both the despotic ideologies of fascism and Soviet socialism, as well as the general domination of humanity through science and technology (Claeys 271). Through their imagination of perfectly repressive societies, they warned of the dangerous potential

contained within modern society, a potential which would justify itself in the name of utopia. Thus, the classic dystopia became a dark mirror of the genre it had spawned from.

At this point, it is important to note that the genre of dystopia is not the same as that of anti-utopia. The latter category refers specifically to those works which take up a position against utopian dreaming itself; a dystopia, though often expressing the effects of a ‘wrong’ kind of utopia, does not need to reject utopianism as such. Whether the classic dystopias should be considered anti-utopian is a matter of active dispute. Some authors take the position that its rejection of totalitarianism translates into a more general antipathy towards “positive visions of the future” (Thaler 609). Others argue that these texts merely criticize certain forms of utopian thought, and that these pessimistic readings do not take the external motivations of the dystopias’ authors into account (Claeys 284, 282). Whichever interpretation is most accurate, what matters most in a historical context is the contemporary reception of these classic dystopias. Considered from this angle, it is clear that these works came to be “enlisted as proof of the uselessness of utopian desire” (Moylan, *Demand the Impossible* 9). Even sympathetic Orwell scholars admit that *1984* was ‘hijacked’ by conservatives, spawning a litany of pale imitations in its wake (Claeys 421, 453). Taken together, this anti-utopian sentiment was something that subsequent literature would need to respond to.

Inspired in part by the public’s cynicism towards utopian thought, several science fiction authors would helm the creation of a new, more critical utopian tendency in the 1960s and 1970s. While not denying themselves the core of the utopian impulse, they were still responsive to some of its honest problems and criticisms. A prominent example of these writings would be Ursula Le Guin’s 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*. In its subtitle alone, *An Ambiguous Utopia*, we find an expression of the self-critical attitude which informed Le Guin’s depiction of a far-future anarchist society. In general, it was an “awareness of the limits of the utopian traditions” which drove the formation of such works, leading to an

emphasis on the imperfect, conflicted, and processual nature of their imaginations (Moylan, *Demand the Impossible* 9, 42-43). And just as the classic utopia could be inverted into similar yet antithetical dystopia, so would this critical variety develop its own mirror genre. The critical dystopia was close at hand.

From a historical perspective, the critical dystopia emerged as part of the neoliberal turn in the 1980s. As the nature of Western capitalism began to change, the ideological leaders of this shift would take to utopian gestures in order to promote their deregulated free market societies. However, this era would also be marked by the pervasive doctrine of TINA (*there is no alternative*), which worked to impede any imagination of a non-neoliberal dystopia. It was this particular combination, the cooptation of utopia along with the closure of social alternatives, which produced the critical dystopia. At the core of this genre is “an embrace of openness”; whether through ambiguous depictions, acts of resistance, or enclaves of alternatives, the critical dystopia emphasizes a need and possibility for social change (Moylan, *Untainted Sky* 189). While we might call this a “stubbornly utopian” tendency, what matters is that the critical dystopia foregrounds the imagination of social alternatives as such, thereby eschewing the totalitarian futility that is all too common in its classic forebears and neoliberal contemporaries (Moylan, *Untainted Sky* 199, Claeys 290).

Within the lineage of the critical dystopia, there are two sources I would like to bring up in particular. The first is Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Set in a world where the United States government has been overthrown by far-right Christian extremists, this work takes place in the dystopian successor state of Gilead. This new regime is ordered according to a strict patriarchal class system, one where women’s rights have been especially curtailed. The eponymous Handmaids are female servants of the male ruling class, stripped of their original names and forced to bear their children. From this description, the feminist themes of the novel are clear, and it is often analyzed as part of a wider genre late-

twentieth-century feminist dystopia. Importantly however, the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale* contains significant acts of social resistance, be they personal or collective. Furthermore, by placing Gilead within a bounded territorial context, Atwood creates the possibility of an external social alternative (Moylan, *Untainted Sky* 163). While its status as a critical dystopia is a matter of dispute, these ambiguating elements show that *The Handmaid's Tale* should at least be regarded as an antecedent to the genre.

As a clearer example of critical dystopia, the second source I mean to discuss is the *Parable* series by Octavia Butler, a duology of novels consisting of 1993's *Parable of the Sower* and 1998's *Parable of the Talents*. Both works are set in a near-future United States, a society which is reaching the point of collapse thanks to rampant climate change and unrestricted corporate capitalism. At the beginning of the series, its main protagonist is a black teenage girl named Lauren Oya Olamina, who lives in a gated community on the outskirts of Los Angeles. As she faces the dangers of a deteriorating environment, Lauren comes to develop a progressive belief system known as Earthseed. This philosophy regards God as the apathetic presence of change, which can be shaped by humanity to prepare its ultimate destiny among the stars. Earthseed forms the basis for Lauren's personal journey, as well as the series' position as a critical dystopia. In its religious resolve, there is the necessary alternative to the malaise which pervades the rest of the novel. By focusing on the struggle for Earthseed's utopian destiny, a project beset by all the dangers of its deteriorating environment, the *Parable* duology exemplifies the essence of the critical dystopia.

Based on the history of dystopia I've laid out above, I believe that 2ACW fiction should be seen as a further example or extension of its critical tradition. Part of my reasoning relates to its inspirational lineage: in works like Butler's *Parables* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the theme of US American domestic conflict is already present, even if it is

not foregrounded. However, a stronger connection between 2ACW fiction and the critical dystopia can be found by comparing the latter its classic antecedents.

As I have indicated before, the dystopias of the mid-20th century tended towards a critique of contemporary authoritarianism, depicting their ideal societies in a most heightened and totalitarian form. Even if their authors did not intend these works to be wholly anti-utopian, their generally enclosed narratives left little room for more positive social alternatives.¹ By contrast, the critical dystopias center the contestation of potential visions of society, such as Olamina's Earthseed and Gilead's theocracy. Whether these visions are to be established or disestablished, it is the struggle to do so which constitutes the critical dystopian narrative. In this, I recognize a compatibility with 2ACW fiction; while a Second American Civil War could develop from a totalitarian environment, it is itself an example of political contestation. Thus, because of this shared focus on the theme of open conflict, I consider the 2ACW genre to stand within the tradition of the critical dystopia.

A Parallel Evolution: The Entropic Dystopia

Until now, I've confined my analysis of dystopian writing to its political-structural elements, specifically the manner in which these developed from a 'classic' into a more critical form. Yet to fully understand the connection between this genre and 2ACW fiction, I must now turn to a second, more subtle development in the imagination of dystopia. Here I refer to the evolution of this genre's speculative element, the 'ou-topos' which grants any utopian or dystopian work its sense of unreality. The following section will lay out the history of that aspect, leading eventually to the exact subtype which might best befit the narrative demands of 2ACW fiction. Much like before, this exploration begins in the genre of utopia.

¹ This observation applies primarily to Orwell, see Moylan, *Untainted Sky* 163.

In accordance with the etymology of utopia, its fantastical aspect has traditionally been expressed as a spatial transformation, such as in Thomas More's original *Utopia*. Inspired by the writings of Columbus and Vespucci, the Renaissance utopias expressed the perfected otherness of a New World. However, with the Enlightenment came the end of Europe's age of exploration, its potential replaced by the understanding that humankind could remake the world through reason and science (Koselleck 86, Vieira 9). Accordingly, there was a shift in the nature of utopia's imagination, a 'temporalization' which turned the focus of this genre from space to time. Thus the u-topia became a u-chronia, a journey to faraway lands replaced by a vision of the distant future (Koselleck 87). The introduction of such temporal speculation would prove to have a determining effect on the genre in years to come.

By the late 19th century, the uchronic model had become the predominant form of utopian storytelling, forming the basis of important works by Bellamy, Morris, and Wells (Sargent 34). This trend would go on to inspire the classic dystopias, which took to depicting the dangerous rather than the hopeful potential of a 'rationalized' future. By its title alone, *1984* is a clear example of how the primary means of social imagination came to be temporal rather than spatial. But this was not the end of the process. For as the classic dystopia turned critical, so too would its speculative aspect be affected.

As discussed in the last section, the critical dystopia arose as a product of 1980s neoliberalism, a political movement which both coopted utopian language and opposed the imagination of social alternatives. The fall of the USSR further enhanced this claim to ideological monopoly, leading to hubristic proclamations that history itself had reached its end in the global triumph of liberal capitalism (Fisher 6). Taken together, despotic totalitarianism seemed like a thing of the past; the politics of the future would be a matter of technocratic adjustment rather than radical institutional change.

Naturally, this shift in the dominant narrative would have significant effects on the imagination of dystopia. On a superficial level, the central role of authoritarian state terror was replaced by the more diffuse danger of free market capitalism (Claeys 495). More importantly, the impression of history's ending came to problematize the instituted future of the classic dystopias. Even if they had extrapolated their dire scenarios from present trends, their totalitarian modes of government now seemed implausible. Thus, the authors of most critical dystopias turned to a different kind of temporal relation. Instead of political institution, they would center social destitution. Theirs would be entropic dystopias.

Here is where I introduce my own contribution to the categorization of dystopia. As I see it, the entropic dystopia is a late-twentieth-century augmentation of the earlier temporal form, exchanging its instituted futures for depictions of societal breakdown. Its history parallels that of the critical dystopia, both types being the product of the neoliberal turn. Generally speaking, most critical dystopias are also entropic dystopias. Conversely, because the decline of an established social order creates the opportunity for its contestation, nearly all entropic dystopias will be critical dystopias too.

In my definition of the entropic dystopia, I take significant inspiration from Mark Fisher's concept of 'capitalist realism', which denotes the manner in which contemporary capitalism impedes any imagination of a social alternative (2). In the absence of any serious ideological challenger, the source of dystopia must lie in the extrapolation of present trends; this leads to narratives where oppression persists in the deterioration of existing institutions, rather than the creation of any new ones.

A good example of a capitalist-realist (and thereby entropic) dystopia might be taken from Fisher's own analysis of the 2006 film *Children of Men*. This movie is set in a near-future world where the entire global population has been rendered infertile for over 18 years. Amid a worldwide state of war and depression, the United Kingdom remains as one of the last

functioning governments on Earth, though it has turned to draconian measures to keep out or intern all immigrants. What is remarkable about this situation is that Britain's authoritarianism is not the product of some extraordinary ideology; unlike Orwell's English dystopia, this one might at least claim to be a liberal democracy (Fisher 1). With its citizens lacking in hope for the future, the only triumph this authority can offer them is the maintenance of the status quo, though this itself comes at an increasingly steep price. It is in this kind of destitute authoritarianism that the entropic dystopia may be found. In the world of *Children of Men*, the brutality of the nation-state is merely the banal reality of a broken society.

Besides the political ennui of late capitalism, another important influence on the entropic dystopia is found in the societal effects of anthropogenic climate change. Environmental themes have been a part of the dystopian genre since at least the 1960s, though these early works were mostly concerned with false fears of overpopulation (Claeys 461). As the genre evolved and a more proper understanding of climate change was popularized, this imagination has turned to more general visions of environmental catastrophe (Claeys 489). Such a tendency may be recognized in contemporary works which blend fact and fiction, using the latest climate predictions to foretell total societal breakdown in the late 21st century. These narratives are essentially entropic for two important and interrelated reasons. First, global warming is an inherently gradual affair, a comprehensive ecological stress which produces its deteriorating effects over a long period of time. Secondly, the further development of climate change is mostly based in the inaction rather than the action of the world's governments. Only by continuing the current course of fossil fuel extraction and industrialized production do they endanger the habitability of our planet. If something beyond our climate is to change, if this real-life entropic dystopia is to be staved off, much radical and critical action will be required. Even in the most optimistic environmental narratives, too much will be risked before that happens.

At this point, it is important to emphasize that the entropic dystopia is not a wholly hopeless genre, a picture of decline without end. Much like the critical dystopias it often overlaps with, its setting often contains or reveals a space for social alternatives. After all, within the context of a collapsing social order, it only makes sense that some other arrangement would come to the fore. Even so, this alternative need not be a utopian or even preferable option; both the *Parable* duology and *The Handmaid's Tale* see religious extremists take advantage of entropic social chaos to advance their own interests. Taken together, the entropic dystopia will generally assume an attitude of 'melancholic hope': while it allows for the imagination of positive social movements, it doesn't deny the inherent danger of society's breakdown (Thaler 615).

Having explained the basic meaning of the entropic dystopia, I'd now like to explicitly connect it to the prospective genre of 2ACW fiction. Through its crossover with the critical tradition, the entropic dystopia already possesses those themes of conflict and openness which are vital to any civil war narrative. More specifically however, the notion of social destitution can aid the creation of a 2ACW setting in two interrelated ways. First, it can explain how the political stability of the United States may come to be compromised. Without a more gradual accumulation of crises tearing at the USA's social fabric, it would be hard to explain how any singular disruption could plunge the nation into open conflict. Thus, the slowness of social entropy helps to bring a given setting to the brink of its necessary disaster. Secondly, an entropic dystopia can more easily bridge the gap between the author's present and the imagined scenario. Because social destitution is the result of present problems intensifying, rather than any new ones being instituted, the resulting dystopia will have few essential differences from the author's own context. If a piece of 2ACW fiction is meant to parallel the present, an entropic dystopia would be the most appropriate fit.

In order to illustrate the connection between 2ACW fiction and the entropic dystopia, I will turn to a fiction which exemplifies it clearly: Omar El Akkad's 2017 novel *American War*. This work is set in the late 21st century, a time when the effects of anthropogenic climate change have ravaged both the social and physical geography of the United States. Much of its coastline has been swept away by the rising sea level, particularly in the American South. When a federal act threatens to prohibit the use and production of fossil fuels, part of this region rises up in rebellion, seeing an end to this industry as a fundamental threat to their livelihood. While the resulting war drags out for over two decades, it ends with a negotiated reunification and a final useless act of biological terrorism.

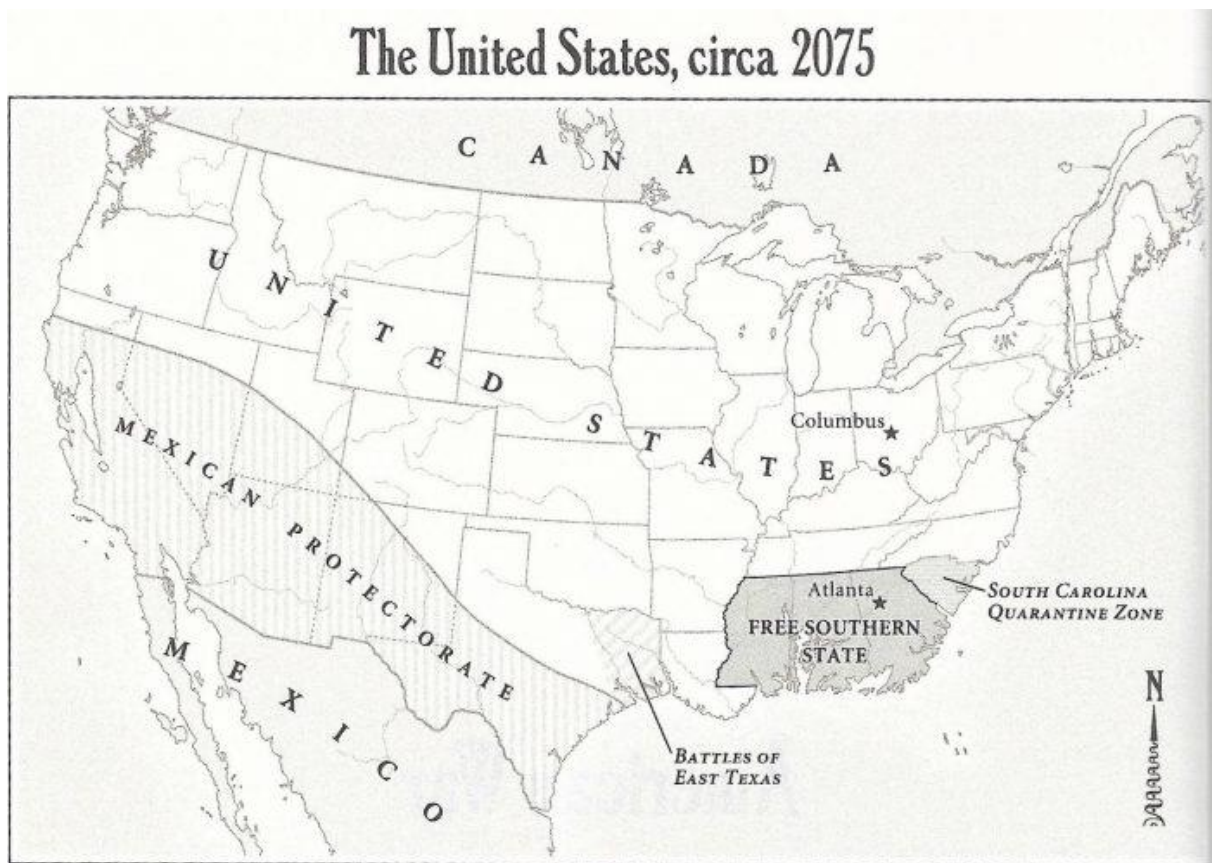


Image 1: Map of the United States in American War (Akkad 2)

What is remarkable about the fictional conflict of *American War* is that both its emergence and its resolution are gradual, entropic developments; while particular events may punctuate this history, it is itself the product of greater and more diffuse social disruptions. In

this, I would draw a parallel with the original Civil War. Even as specific crises such as Bleeding Kansas and the Raid on Harper's Ferry prefigured this later conflict, its deeper cause lay with the basic incompatibility between chattel slavery and its abolition (McPherson 7-8). When these interests could no longer be reconciled through political compromise, or defused through further colonial expansion, the stage was set for a domestic conflagration. I am ambivalent as to whether this makes the Civil War itself an example of entropic dystopia. Though this was a horrific struggle caused by a slow societal breakdown, such a determination might distract from the instituted dystopia which was Southern chattel slavery. By lamenting or overemphasizing the former, one may forget its necessity in abolishing the latter.

In this section, I have worked to establish the entropic dystopia as a natural extension of this genre's temporalized tendencies. While a dire look into the future has remained, it is now expressed through the acceleration of contemporary malaise rather than the danger of imagined institutions. This development emphasizes the idea that dystopian writing ultimately has its relevance in the present, extrapolating our current social trends so as to show what might go wrong if 'things go on like this'. As I will discuss in later chapters, this cautionary narrative may readily be recognized in some 2ACW fictions, which point to the possibility of a Second American Civil War precisely as a means of avoiding it. Even if the spectrum of 2ACW fiction is not completely defined by the critical or entropic dystopia, at least these genres all share a tendency towards themes of ambiguity, breakdown, and contestation. Thus, these elements will be sure to recur in my analysis ahead, with a basic understanding of them prepared by this origin in the development of dystopia.

Chapter Two: 2ACW Fiction as History

In the last chapter, I placed 2ACW fiction within a tradition of temporalized dystopias. But by its very definition, the connection between this genre and temporal storytelling runs much deeper. For example, the imagination of a Second American Civil War requires a basic understanding of the US historical context; even if one's scenario is not directly related to the original Civil War, a nominal affiliation is nonetheless established. Beyond this, notions of temporality also extend into the concept of civil war itself. Lest one miss the war for its battles, it should be understood that a 2ACW scenario is not a singular event, but a larger conflict extended through time. As such, the 2ACW genre is already predisposed to themes of progression, causation, and outcome, themes which together create an inherently historical narrative. If the last chapter served to establish 2ACW fiction as a form of dystopian writing, this one will connect to the making of history. From the form of content to the content of the form, I will show how historical analysis and fiction have influenced the imagination of a Second American Civil War.

My analysis in this chapter will proceed in three phases. First, I will give a theoretical account of the relation between history and fiction, one which centers on their common basis in narrativity. Through a historiographical understanding of how narrative is used to represent the past, a fruitful parallel may be made with its use in presenting 2ACW scenarios.

Following that, I will consider the structural use of historical writing in 2ACW fiction—how particular works use the styles and conventions of actual history to frame their speculative scenarios. Finally, I will offer a rough overview of how 2ACW fiction has been based in real and alternate history. By highlighting several prominent examples, I will illustrate the way in which imagined civil conflicts have sprung from the turbulent past of the United States, rather than just its uncertain present. Taken together, this chapter will chart a variety of interactions between history and 2ACW fiction, all of which find considerable meaning in their

contemporary deployment. Even if it eschews historical convention, the relevance of this genre is ultimately a product of presentism.

History and Fiction

To understand the confluence of historical writing and 2ACW fiction, I begin by comparing history and fiction more generally. What similarities and differences can be said to exist between these disciplines? Because this question might easily prove overambitious, I will focus my analysis by centering a prominent concept in the study of both concepts: the notion of narrative. In this context, narrative does not just refer to the telling of a particular story, but to storytelling as such. It might therefore be regarded as a ‘meta-code’, an almost universal method by which humans transmit meaning (White 1). Its presence within fiction can be taken as uncontroversial; little would remain of the domain of literature without its narrative form. However, the philosophy of history has seen a significant amount of discourse around the use of narrative, which ought to be dissected if one is to learn more of its general meaning. By understanding the purpose of narrative in history, its potential in fiction may be elucidated as well. Thus, my analysis starts in the domain of historiography.

In the coming arguments, I take my primary inspiration from the work of Hayden White, specifically his 1987 book *The Content of the Form*. The ‘form’ referred to here is narrative, which according to White should be taken as anything but content-neutral (xi). Regarding its use within the realm of history, he points to a basic ambiguity about the latter term. As Hegel once indicated, ‘history’ can be said to refer to both the past and the documentation of that past; the term captures form and content at once (White 29). However, when this relation between past events and their historical narration is considered properly, a great ambivalence arises. On the one hand, the use of narrative may appear unscientific, introducing an analytical framing which is too ‘literary’ or ‘dramatized’ (White 31-32). On

the other hand, the total absence of narrative reduces any writing about the past to the status of an annal or chronicle, formats which many historians take to be insufficient or incomplete (White 5). Though I do not wish to adjudicate this dispute, what matters is that both these perspectives implicitly accept the power of narrative. Whether natural or misguided, its presence makes a difference. The real question is what that difference might be.

Here is where White's expertise comes to the fore. In one of the many essays which make up *The Content of the Form*, he explains the use of narrative in historical writing by its introduction of moral closure. This argument begins by observing that the 'real' course of human events cannot be said to know any natural endings; reality itself always keeps going (White 23). The conclusion to any historical narrative is therefore a deliberate invention by its author, one which should be the result of a discernible motivation. According to White, it is a moralizing impulse which provides the general justification for narrative closure (23-24). Simply put, it is through ending a story that a lesson may be drawn from its content, and this is just as true for the particular interpretations of historians. In White's words: "Where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too" (24).

This notion of moral closure, so apparently essential to the discipline of history, also has important implications for the writing of 2ACW fiction. Much like a historical narrative, any 2ACW scenario creates a moral meaning through its particular temporal framing. By shifting the beginning or end of its narration, its ultimate message can come to change drastically.

A potent analogy may be drawn here to the original American Civil War, specifically the manner in which it has been narrativized from an abundance of different perspectives. For example, a work which mostly focuses on the start of the Civil War might lament the inevitability of its arising, the failure of compromise between North and South. Meanwhile, a

history which narrates the traditional 1861-1865 period as a whole might come to understand it as a triumph for the forces of abolition, marred only by the tragic assassination of the ‘Great Emancipator’. Finally, a book which takes the entire Civil War era into account (including its prelude and aftermath) might emphasize the liberation of Black people against the general regime of racist terror in both the antebellum and Reconstruction era US. Taken together, these different perspectives are at least partly informed by their chosen timeframe. While some of them are definitely wrong or clichéd, it is hard to say which if any framing of this period is exactly correct.

Staying within the realm of moral meaning, a more specific function of historical narrative is in the adjudication of contested interpretations. According to White, the narrativizing of historical events into a distinct sequence only makes sense if that sequence could be subject to some controversy; without such a possibility for contestation, there is no need for the authority of the historian (20). Once again, this observation might be elucidated by looking at the historiography of the American Civil War. Within this spectrum of interpretations, one prominent point of dispute is the main motivation behind the CSA’s secession. While some claim that the South’s principled adherence to ‘states’ rights’ was the primary cause of its enmity towards the North, others point to its slave-based expansionism as a more likely culprit (McPherson 8). In this, it doesn’t even matter that the former interpretation is blatantly and factually incorrect, the product of fallacious Lost Cause rhetoric; what’s important is that an alternative narrative has been imagined, leading to a dispute which must be historically adjudicated.

Until now, White’s account of historical narrative has implicitly revolved around its present relevance. The moralizing and justifying maneuvers of particular histories are always already caught up in present-day discourses; any meaning they possess must be appreciated in the here and now. This implication is further emphasized by the total relation between history

and literature, which White takes to be quite substantial. As he sees it, the presence of narrative within historical writing is irreducible to the events which make up its sequence, which otherwise would merely make up a chronicle (46). Indeed, the truth value of this narrative cannot be assessed in the same manner as its constituent events, for its function is a matter of literary allegory rather than scientific fact. Thus, while claiming a certain history to be ‘tragic’ or ‘farcical’ (to take up White’s Marxian example) may be a poetic rather than a literal judgment, its truth remains as surely as that of any other literary figuration (White 47). Only if fiction could be said to teach us nothing about reality, would the allegorical aspect of historical narrative be wholly invalid.

Before I move on to apply White’s methods to 2ACW fiction itself, I would like to address any lingering misconceptions about my use of his theories. First of all, I am well aware that the ‘linguistic turn’ which his work represents is not without controversy. An excessive focus on the literary aspects of historical practice might well reduce its legitimate scientific function, reducing the discipline to a bit of fanciful storytelling. At the same time however, it seems undeniable that the writing of history incurs a narrative element, one which can only be reckoned with through a literary perspective. Thus, instead of trying to direct this discipline one way or the other, one should acknowledge history’s position at the intersection of social science and the humanities. Of course, when it comes to the stylistic application of history in fiction, its literary aspects take precedent. This is why, in the context of 2ACW fiction, it must be discussed primarily.

Turning now to the realm of 2ACW fiction, it seems clear that the historian’s preoccupation with allegory—a common element of all narrative, according to White—should also be represented in this genre. However, when this genre is considered as an expression of allegory, a peculiar recursion arises. Here I refer to the way in which 2ACW scenarios often warn of themselves: while certain works may refer to present tensions as a prefiguration of

future discord, it's ultimately the depicted conflagration (or something much like it) which they try to caution against. Thus, the danger and its symbol are one and the same. While this does not trouble my conclusions altogether, since there is still that connection between literary figuration and actual meaning, it is remarkable enough to keep in mind as I discuss subsequent examples. In general, I'd say it places this genre among such literary functions as warnings or predictions, meanings which also apply to many historical narratives. Once again, a commonality is apparent.

In this section, I have worked to establish a basic theoretical connection between history and fiction, aiming to apply these parallels and commonalities to the specific realm of 2ACW fiction. As much as its use of historical conventions may wax and wane, the depiction of a 2ACW scenario always already involves the moralizing and allegorizing which White deems so essential to historical writing. If he is correct in considering the meaning of history to be partly poetic or literary, then surely 2ACW fiction could come to emulate this too. Taken together then, many if not most works of 2ACW fiction can be said to stand at a speculative intersection of history and literature. To emphasize this further, the next section will concern those works which take up the historian's methods most directly; in a way, they are trying to be the real history of a fictional event.

2ACW Fiction as Structural History

In the last section, I established a fundamental overlap between history and 2ACW fiction, centered around their common preoccupation with closure and allegory. This section will consider their parallels from a structural perspective, focusing on the way in which particular 2ACW fictions have taken up the literary conventions of historical writing. In this analysis, an important first observation is that any 2ACW scenarios depicted need not occur in the reader's relative past. Indeed, there are many ways in which ostensibly futuristic works

can make use of historical perspectives. Whereas some center their analytical features of interpretation and prediction, others take a quite literal dive into the past through the speculative technology of time travel (Liedl 293-295). However, this section takes a more restrictive view of the connection between history and science fiction, discussing only those works which directly employ historical modes of writing. While such accounts are by definition past-regarding, a specific fiction could still depict the future as the past by writing from an even farther future. This maneuver is common enough so as to merit its own term: future history (“Future history”).

In the present analysis of structural history in 2ACW fiction, my attention turns once again to Omar El Akkad’s 2017 novel *American War*. As stated before, this work depicts a Second American Civil War near the end of the 21st century, a second Southern secession caused by such factors as mass climate change and a ban on the production of fossil fuels. Whereas my earlier analysis was concerned with the contents of this scenario, my attention now turns to the manner in which it is conveyed. While much of the worldbuilding in *American War* is the product of a conventional third-person narrative, its chapters are also interspersed with the fictional excerpts of speeches, news articles, and (future) history books. These documents detail the larger world, but also offer an addendum to the events of the novel itself. Remarkably, almost all of them are supposedly written far past the setting of the main story, thereby assuming an implicitly historical attitude towards the Second American Civil War. Given the present topic, these are certainly worth talking about.

A prominent example of *American War*’s interludes is the one directly following its first chapter. This one describes itself as a ‘module summary’ excerpted from ‘federal syllabus guidelines’ (El Akkad 22). It can therefore be assumed that this text is primarily used for educational purposes, providing in this case a short overview of the Second American Civil War. Much like any history textbook, it begins by laying out the basic facts of this

conflict, such as its duration and the sides involved. It then goes on to present some of its direct and indirect causes, the general course of the war, and its final resolution. To the in-universe student who would have to read it, this short text would probably seem rather ordinary. However, from a meta-textual perspective, the excerpt can be said to end on an important cliffhanger. After relating the biological attack which took place on ‘Reunification Day’, a sour end to a bitter war, it is said that “the identity of the terrorist responsible remains unknown” (El Akkad 22). This is a mystery which reverberates throughout the rest of the book, resolving only when the responsible agent turns out to be one of the novel’s main protagonists. Taken together, this interlude can be said to serve a dual function in setting up the story of *American War*. Not only does it provide some basic exposition related to its 2ACW scenario—information that might otherwise be awkward to convey—but it also imparts a basic question which the rest of its plot can build towards. Thus, in spite of its neutral educational stylings, this simple summary is a perfect vehicle for the narrative needs of the novel.

Taking the epistolary snippets of *American War* as a sufficiently representative example, I can begin to ask after the general function of historical writing in 2ACW fiction. As noted before, it is surely remarkable that the use of this style persists even in works which are ostensibly set in the future. In explaining this matter, my initial reasoning is based in the notion of verisimilitude. Not only does the presence of in-universe documentation appear to extend this imagined world beyond the confines of its particular narrative, but their historical nature imbues them with the objectivity of the past. Since future-telling is a decidedly uncertain endeavor compared to the real and concrete evidence which can be found in historical writing, a narrative which leans into the latter discipline will naturally acquire its impression of finitude. The story such a work tells will appear to have already happened, its final interpretation presented as a basic and undisputed fact—sometimes deceptively so. But

even if a particular historical account is itself far from objective, describing the future as the past still grants it a distinct sense of reality and completion.

With the feigned objectivity of historical 2ACW fiction comes an important thematic aspect: inevitability. Even when a story is set in a highly speculative future like *American War*, the introduction of a faux-historical style can create an atmosphere of dread and destiny, the certainty of terrible happenings. In the case of *American War* specifically, the documentation of a 2ACW scenario based in energy politics is a grave reminder of a common and unceasing anxiety. Just as a history of nuclear Armageddon would have unnerved the average Cold War reader, so does the specter of assured climate destruction hang over this novel.

Within the context of these grand societal anxieties, it is important to note that the proffered Third World War between NATO and the Warsaw Pact never actually took place, a fact which potentially changes the way its historical imagination should be understood. At first, it might suggest that such apocalyptic fiction was wrong altogether, a false image exciting a useless fear. However, I do not believe the function of such fiction is or was wholly based in its predictive power. Instead, I see the purported inevitability of their historical framing as primarily a literary device, creating a motivational effect which far outranks its incidental and retroactive accuracy. From this perspective, it doesn't matter whether a particular future ultimately proves true; what's important is that its prediction affects the world at present.

Seen in this manner, historical 2ACW fiction takes on the mode of an after action report, evaluating a fictional cataclysm so that it may be avoided in the here and now. Even if they're not precise calls to action, future histories can be a guide towards a countervailing course; in the case of *American War*, this might mean a decentralized or regionally attentive program of climate justice, one which accounts for the endemic poverty and economic

dependencies of the Deep South. While I would refrain from calling 2ACW fiction an inherently didactic genre, this example shows that at least its structural-historical variant possesses such potential. In sections to follow, I will point to similar effects by other mechanisms; in general, the exploration of a 2ACW scenario can be said to offer significant insight into its own avoidance.

2ACW fiction as Alternate History

Thus far, I have confined myself to those stories which use history as a narrative style, rather than a collection of past events. This changes in the present section, as I will discuss a type of 2ACW fiction which is inherently based on the content of US history. At first glance, such a category may appear rather paradoxical: unless one is willing to engage in a serious amount of historical revisionism, how could a Second American Civil War take place in the past? I should therefore clarify that this section addresses examples of alternate history, a genre which uses the past as an inspirational springboard for its own speculative enterprise. By diverging from any familiar course of events, alternate history can bring the many social conflicts of the past to their non-existent fruition, thereby creating a collection of ‘civil wars that could have happened’.

In the following paragraphs, I will discuss several of these alternate-historical 2ACW scenarios, paying attention to both their collective forms and individual contents. As I will show, the meaning of these speculative narratives always relates to the context in which they are imagined. In this, there is an extension of White’s understanding of history: that the relevance of a historical narrative is found in its present allegory. This presentist perspective has been further echoed in the academic study of alternate history; in his work on Nazi-based alternate history scenarios, Gavriel Rosenfeld claims that writers of alternate history “invariably express their own highly subjective present-day hopes and fears” (10). While

other authors consider this aspect to be overemphasized, they still concur that “any writer may be politically engaged without their knowledge” (Liedl 58). Thus, whether wholly intentional or not, this section will evaluate the various examples of 2ACW alternate history by their contemporary impact or relevance.

However, before I come to discuss any actual 2ACW scenarios, I will take my first set of examples from alternate histories which diverge around the Civil War era. These works might serve as a sort of control group, introducing some of the general themes this genre might appeal to. Furthermore, they often already lead to a Second American Civil War as part of their altered trajectory. This is because one of the most prominent alternate Civil War scenarios, a CSA victory, is likely to predispose the (former) States of the Union to further conflict in their near future. A hypothetical second war between the USA and CSA would likely take on an embittered yet still fraternal character; this is the case in Harry Turtledove’s appropriately named *Southern Victory* series, where the competition between these states runs parallel to the major wars of the 20th century. Taken together, there are many possibilities for a Second American Civil War—or something much like it—to be excited by the First.

This is not to say that all alternate histories based on the Civil War must lead to a second one. Just as real history established a lasting peace in the US, other such equilibriums might have been achievable, for better or for worse. One such scenario may be found in Terry Bisson’s 1988 novel *Fire On The Mountain*, where John Brown succeeds in setting off a general slave revolt in 1859. As a result, the present-day South is a utopian socialist society named Nova Africa, a state which has rid itself of the social and racial conflict that was inherent to the previous regime. However, Bisson’s novel is more than just the unreal vision of a better future; by planting a history of the real world within its universe—itsself disguised as an alternate history novel named *John Brown’s Body*—his characters are able to compare and contrast. Ironically, they find the real Civil War and the subsequent of the US to be a

detestable suggestion, nothing more than “wishful thinking” for the few white racists which remain (De Groot 61). Thus, even as their world represents reality’s dream, its inhabitants would rather pretend that we are their nightmare.

Another example of ACW alternate history may be found in the dystopian mockumentary *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America*, which posits that a victorious South could have gone on to annex the whole Union. The resulting society is an unrestricted plantocracy, with the most heinous forms of American racism extending into the present day. Though its general plausibility is dubious, the satirical intent of *C.S.A.* is made obvious through its parallels with contemporary US culture. By showing the similarities as well as the differences, the insufficient nature of real history becomes apparent: more must be done to oppose this dark mirror, which only exaggerates what is already before it. All in all, the more ‘peaceful’ Civil War alternate histories still use their narratives as a means of social criticism. By presenting utopian or satirical alternatives to the present day, they implicitly frame the way real history should be understood and carried forward. Though their efficacy in this regard is disputed, their messages are hardly ever subtle (De Groot 73). When it comes to 2ACW fiction, narrative strategies like irony and allusion are sure to recur, since they are a potent means of addressing present issues through an alternate past.

From the many alternate histories which surround the first Civil War, my attention now turns to an even greater variety of 2ACW scenarios. Sorting them roughly by the main period of their narratives, the first work I mean to discuss relates primarily to the organized labor struggles of the early 1900s. While socialist radicalism had been a part of US history since at least the middle of the 19th century, it was only in the first decades of the 20th century that their revolutionary potential became plausible. Between the West Virginia Coal Wars, the First Red Scare, and the turmoil of the Great Depression, there were and are many opportunities to imagine a United States beset by actual socialist revolution.

My main example of this more socialist-revolutionary brand of 2ACW alternate history brings me into the realm of interactive entertainment, specifically to the 2013 video game *Bioshock Infinite*. Unlike most alternate histories, this work contains both a uchronian and a utopian aspect, taking place in the fictional floating city of Columbia. This anachronistic sky village is the project of Zachary Comstock, a charismatic prophet who worships the Founding Fathers as if they were Christian saints. As such, Columbia is dedicated to what Comstock believes to be the core values of the United States: puritanism, nationalism, and white supremacy. After this extremism brought Columbia into conflict with the United States government, the city seceded from the union and became a self-contained specter of the American ideal. It is in this setting that a miniaturized version of a Second American Civil War unfolds.

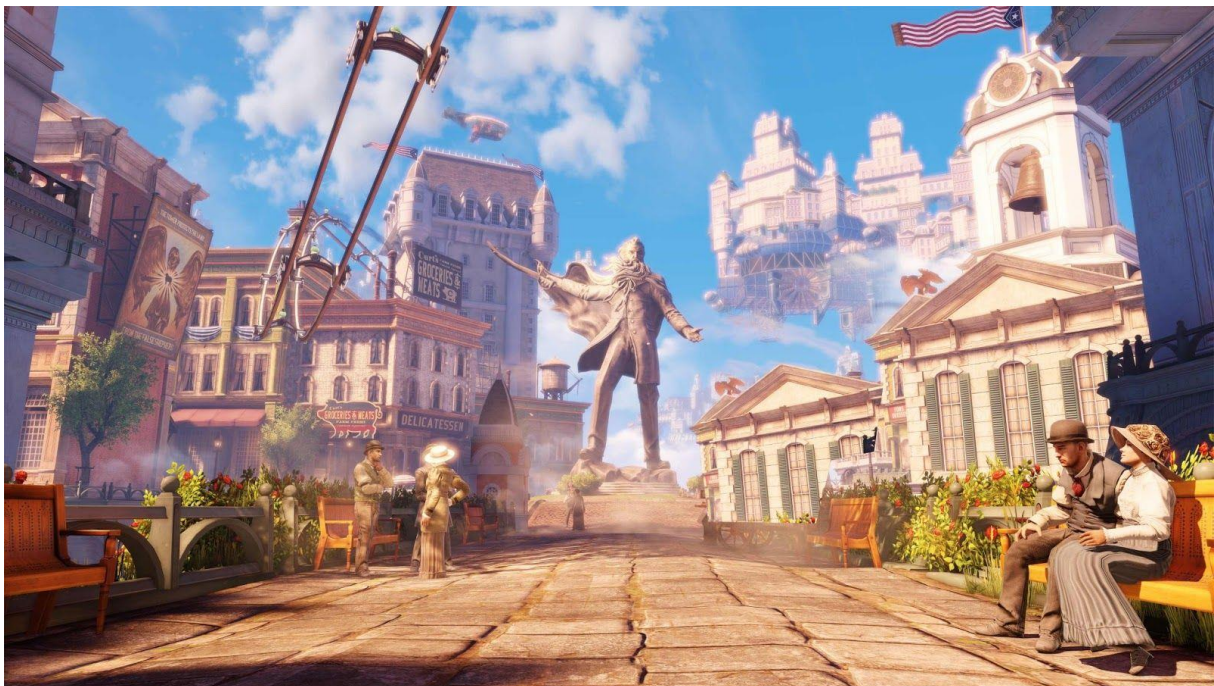


Image 2: *Bioshock Infinite's Columbia*

The opening hours of *Bioshock Infinite* present a pristine version of US American fascism, full of analogies to other right-wing extremist currents of that time and beyond. This journey through Columbia eventually brings the player to the domain of Jeremiah Fink, a monopolistic industrialist who much resembles the other robber barons of his time. Here the

larger exploration of US atrocity turns into a specific critique of plutocratic capitalism, portraying the exploitation of the common industrial laborer in a satirical but hardly exaggerated manner. This section also sees the proper introduction of the Vox Populi, an revolutionary socialist organization which is preparing a general uprising of Columbia's workers. Their central cause is perhaps best explained through the lyrics to their 'victory song', which plays as they prepare to storm Fink's factory:

They built a city in the clouds, they raised her up with joy
 Reflection of America, from Maine to Illinois
 But we were put in bondage, suckered by the rich man's ploy
 Until our chains were broken by the girl they call Fitzroy!²

The last line of the song makes reference to Daisy Fitzroy, the firebrand leader of the Vox Populi who eventually unleashes her faction's revolutionary fervor. The resulting conflict sees a great deal of brutality on both sides, with the Vox's outbursts much resembling the Red Terror of historical communist revolutions. Because of these atrocities, the game's main protagonist claims at one point that "the only difference between Comstock and Fitzroy is how you spell the name". This moral equivocation was much criticized upon the game's release, as it suggests that the violence of the oppressed is equal to that of their oppressors (Smith). Nevertheless, *Bioshock Infinite* provides a rare and valuable example of a more fantastical 2ACW scenario, a dystopian setting which highlights the social struggles of the early 20th century. Even if its effect on the rest of the country is minimal, the fight for Columbia is still essentially about the United States.

² A recording of this song may be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NmmNk4haLg.

Within the medium of video games, there is another prominent example of 2ACW alternate history, one which propels the imagination of this conflict towards the 1930s. Here I refer to the WW2 grand strategy game *Hearts of Iron IV*, or more specifically to its popular *Kaiserreich* modification. Much like other games of its genre, *Hearts of Iron IV* puts players in charge of a historical nation's government, free to pursue any military ambition of their choosing. What's remarkable about *Kaiserreich* is that it takes place in a distinct alternate history scenario, one where the Central Powers won the First World War. Not only did this victory assure German hegemony over much of Europe, but the resulting domestic unrest in the losing countries caused a succession of socialist revolutions, with both Britain and France now ruled by 'syndicalist' governments. By January 1st, 1936—the game's official starting date—these are just a few of the radical changes wrought by *Kaiserreich*'s intricate alternate history.

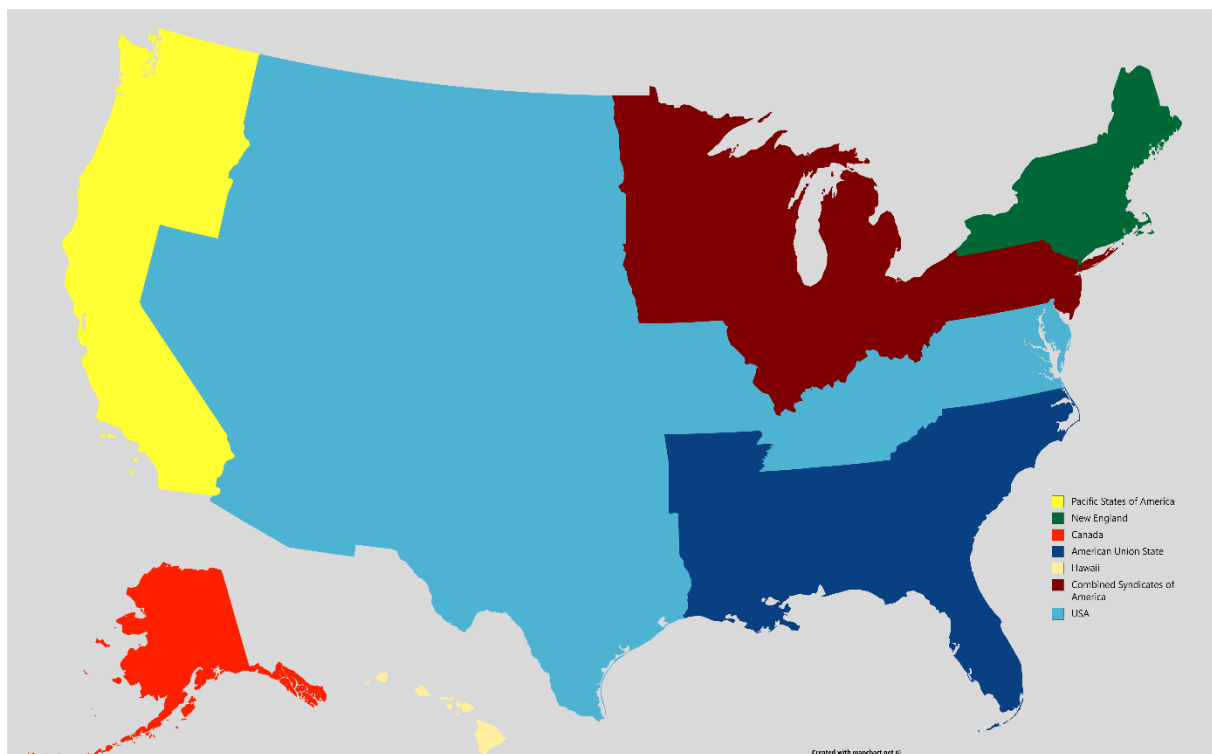


Image 3: Potential factions in *Kaiserreich*'s Second American Civil War

Considering my present purposes, the most important divergence in *Kaiserreich* is the increased instability of the United States. With the greater success of radical unionism abroad, both it and its reactionary backlash cause increasingly severe social tensions to rip at the fabric of the American nation. In the absence of the 1929 Wall Street Crash, this tumult is allowed to persist through two terms of an alternate Herbert Hoover presidency. Only in 1937, through the fallout of a controversial presidential election and a recent stock market crash, does the US finally plunge into its Second Civil War.

However, owing to the interactivity provided by the video game medium, the 2ACW scenario depicted in *Kaiserreich* does not know a singular course. This is the reason I cannot lay out the ‘standard’ narrative of this Second American Civil War; there simply isn’t any. Nevertheless, I can still offer an account of this war’s basic tendencies, as they are contained within the programmed structure of events. In *Kaiserreich*’s version of the Second American Civil War, the first and perhaps only certainty is that it will involve the United States itself. Even so, the start of the war will see the possibility for an internal coup, with general Douglas MacArthur taking over the federal government if he considers it too weak or traitorous. In this instance, an additional uprising of democratically aligned US officials will occur on the West Coast, thereby forming the “Pacific States of the America”.

Even if the US government stays democratic, it will still have to deal with at least one of two regional rebellions. The first of these is a Southern insurrection known as the “American Union State” (AUS), led by the charismatic and vaguely populist Huey Long. In real history, Long was the governor of Louisiana between 1928 and 1932, before serving as a Senator of that state until his assassination in 1935. Popular culture has long typified him as a potential demagogue; he was apparently the main template for fascist dictator Berzelius Windrip in Sinclair Lewis’ 1935 novel *It Can’t Happen Here*. However, his singular rule upon AUS victory is not a given outcome, as his presidency could be undone by either a

capitalist “Business Plot” or a fascist coup by the Silver Legion of America. These and other examples allude to the real and alleged history of the 1930s, and while most of them are exaggerated for dramatic effect, their roots of inspiration are more than apparent.

The second potential uprising is socialist in nature, a rebellion in the Midwest which calls itself the “Combined Syndicates of America” (CSA). Lead by the former journalist John “Jack” Reed— best known in real history for writing *Ten Days That Shook The World*—the CSA is a collection of trade unions which developed from the Industrial Workers of the World. Its aim in the Second American Civil War is to establish a revolutionary worker’s state, though there is strong internal disagreement on what shape this regime is to take. In the case of a CSA victory, its government will have to decide between roughly a ‘syndicalist’ and ‘vanguardist’ strategy; whereas the former makes reference to the radical unionism of the early 20th century, the latter trends towards the more authoritarian socialism of the Soviet Union and the later CPUSA. These elements speak to a clear interest in the history of US socialism, reflecting a longer factional struggle between its libertarian and authoritarian interpretations. Thus, even as the player participates in this alternate history, they are still immersed in real and contemporary debates.

The final faction which might split off from the US is New England. The secession of this Northeastern region (including Upstate New York) is primarily dependent upon Canadian backing. If left to its own devices, New England will most likely sit out the war as a neutral party until it is claimed and annexed by the winner. However, a player-controlled New England does get a chance to attain international legitimacy and thereby become the ‘true’ United States upon its own victory. While this is a rare outcome, it means that the end of the Second American Civil War can lead to the dominance of five different successor states, not including the political variety within each option. This is a remarkable amount of variety for a piece of 2ACW fiction, let alone a strategy game. What’s more, the variable nature of this

scenario means that between two and five of these factions may be involved in this conflict at once. Taken together, *Kaiserreich's* narrative diversity is the exclusive expression of its video game medium, creating a combination of immersion and interactivity which few other works could parallel.

Having now discussed several examples of 2ACW alternate history, what can I say about the general meaning of this subgenre? Based on the examples above, I consider the alternate history to be a playful inversion of works that are structurally historical. Instead of using the retrospection of history to create a false sense of inevitability, this genre treats the past with the same openness as the present. This allows it to explore struggles and tendencies which have been obscured by the actual course of events. Thus, even if there was no real Second American Civil War in US history, at least its past potential is now clear.

In deriving new fictions from past events, alternate histories are able to exceed the narrative space of historical reality. Whereas the allegories of historians must be compatible with the factual course of events, alternate history writers can tie the latter to the former, and may therefore be primarily driven by literary considerations. With this comes a further predisposition towards contemporary meanings: what does this altered trajectory indicate about the world in which it is written? In general, such a present-oriented purpose permeates all history-based 2ACW fiction; the narrative product of any environment always reflects and returns to it, and so it is with even the most speculative stories. From ancient past to distant future, it all comes down to the here and now.

To emphasize my presentist perspective further, the next chapter will discuss a 2ACW subgenre which is contemporary in its inherent form: journalistic fiction. As I will show, there are many ways in which journalism might be incorporated into 2ACW fiction, but they are united by their basic preoccupation with documenting the present.

Chapter Three: 2ACW Fiction as Journalism

As I indicated in the previous section on 2ACW narratives as historical fiction, a lot of works which superficially regard the past or future ultimately have their relevance in the present. In what is to follow, I will lay out a category of 2ACW fiction which takes an even more present-oriented perspective, specifically in the form of journalism. I will begin by analyzing some structurally journalistic works, those which employ themes and techniques of journalism in their worldbuilding. After that, I will discuss those fictions which deal with journalism more directly, imagining a Second American Civil War as part of a real documentary project. Taken together, this subgenre will lend a more immersive impression of what a Second American Civil War might mean to its world and its participants. Instead of the retrospective abstractions of a historical work, these fictions take a more immediate look at a yet unfolding civil conflict. Whatever they document, it is happening right now.

Journalism in 2ACW fiction

In exploring the presence of journalism in 2ACW fiction, I begin by explaining the general conditions of their intersection: how can a fictional narrative employ the techniques of journalism? At its most basic, journalistic fiction is concerned with the intentional documentation of contemporary events. This documentation could be the pursuit of an in-fiction character, but may also be realized through the specific style of the narrative itself. What is most important is that a given setting is not merely described, but also actively mediated; much like in a structurally historical work, the events of this world are a matter of interpretation and contestation. Indeed, the only real difference with the latter genre is that a journalistic fiction is concerned with more immediate and ongoing affairs. This means that the documentation of such events could itself affect them, a possibility which shall become apparent in the subsequent analysis.

On a side note, one could argue that the above definition includes all fiction based around diaries and journals, such as Octavia Butler's aforementioned *Parable* novels. I see no problem with this inclusion; not only does this particular work prefigure 2ACW fiction in general, but its 'journal-istic' style of storytelling contains much of the active immediacy that makes this category worth discussing. However, in my own choice of examples for this section, I will confine myself to fictions that hew even more closely to the discipline of journalism. This set begins with a comic book.

DMZ is a comic book series written by Brian Wood and illustrated by Riccardo Burchielli, published under DC's Vertigo imprint between 2005 and 2012. It is primarily set on the island of Manhattan, which has become a demilitarized zone (the eponymous DMZ) between the United States government and a heartland uprising known as the Free States of America (FSA). Its main protagonist, Matty Roth, is a news reporter who has become trapped in the DMZ while trying to document the daily lives of its remaining inhabitants. As he acclimates to his predicament, Roth learns that although the DMZ is undoubtedly a warzone, it also contains some resilient pockets of community and social experimentation. Thus it seems that despite everything, life goes on.

In his article on the comic, Georg Drennig explicitly compares the particulate communities of Manhattan with Michel Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia', a space of utopian contestation contained within a larger society (75). Even as the comic eliminates these possibilities through the ravages of the DMZ and the greater war around it, the melancholy of utopia remains. Near the end of it, Roth himself laments that the city he tried to depict as so alive is now dead (#51, 20). Nevertheless, he implores his audience to never let go of the memory of the DMZ, a Manhattan which was once so vital (#72, 3, 18). Because of this, I would place *DMZ* in the tradition of the critical dystopia, as well as being a piece of

journalistic 2ACW fiction. While it may end in tragedy, the comic's commitment to social alternatives is not sacrificed altogether.



Image 4: Roth declares his allegiance (Wood 19)

Beyond its dystopian roots, what can be said of *DMZ* in the context of journalism? Rather obviously, the clearest connection to journalistic themes can be made through the figure of Matty Roth, and specifically with his fight against the sea of sectarianism which makes up this wartime environment. This struggle might be compared to the tradition of ‘peace journalism’, a style of reporting which mediates conflicts in the hopes of resolving them (Peleg 2). Much like the DMZ itself, Roth could be seen as an intermediary between the warring parties, a figure who can bridge the gap that is Manhattan. However, as this third party increasingly asserts its own identity, Roth goes along with it, eschewing both sides of

the war for the sake of those caught in-between. In one of the comic's final issues, as Roth is arrested for his involvement with anti-USA factions, he declares his allegiance one last time: "Long Live The DMZ!" (see image 4). Thus, Roth has become something other than a neutral observer, or even a peaceful mediator. He is a partisan. Through this development and others, it is clear that *DMZ* is not just a story about the Second American Civil War; it's a story about the mediation of the Second American Civil War.

To get a grip on how the journalistic process might function more broadly, it would be good to discuss a work that operates wholly through these expressions, one which removes any access to an 'objective' overview of the fiction. It is in this context that I turn to *An American War* (AAW), a digital multimedia project conceived by M.W. Turner and published on the Deviantart online art platform. Through text, illustration, photo manipulation, and gif animation, this author provides the fictional evidence of a future 2ACW scenario. These sources range from wartime ration booklets to EU reports on American mass killings. Typically, every entry combines an image or animation with an in-universe text which explains something about it; the relative importance of these elements will vary between entries, though the density of information is weighted towards the textual portion. Overall, this documentation prioritizes verisimilitude over a straightforward narrative; nevertheless, through the progression of its various materials, a coherent and comprehensive setting arises.

Befitting its collage of digital sources, the world of AAW contains an intricate and diverse set of competing interests. Unlike the well-ordered affair of the first Civil War, where secessionist states combined neatly against their unionist enemies, the titular American War has created a factional patchwork reminiscent of present-day Libya or Syria. While I will return to this resonance later on, what is important to note now is how this sectarianism enables a great variety of different perspectives on the situation, one which a journalistic mode of storytelling is most able to express.

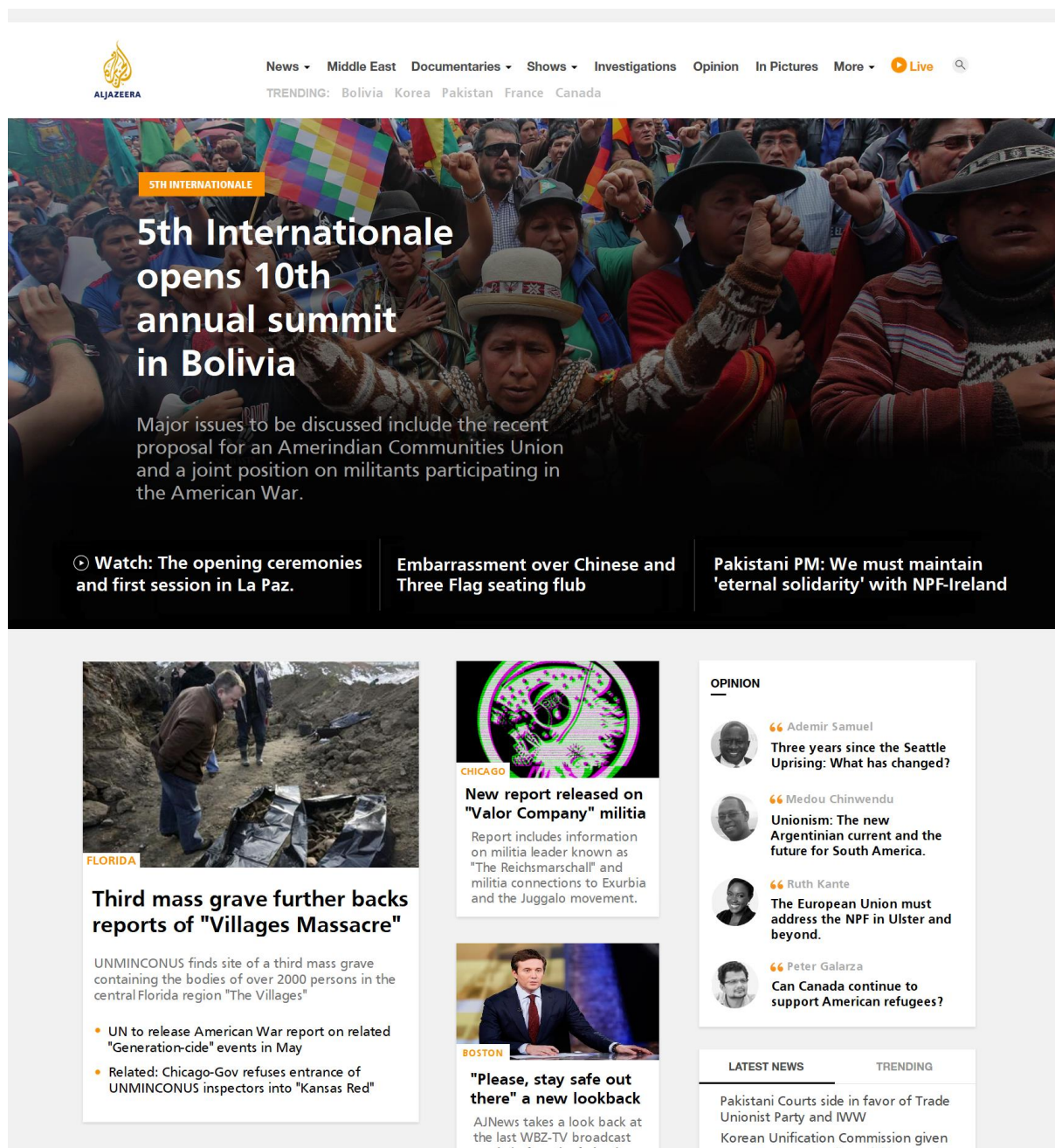


Image 5: “Al Jazeera News”

To give an example of AAW’s journalistic approach, I shall provide here a close analysis of one of its main installments. Thus I turn to “Al Jazeera News”, a photoshopped image of a webpage which clearly resembles the style and substance of the actual Qatari news organization (see image 5). While this is already a direct reference to the methods and messaging of journalism, what is of greater significance is the particular way in which the American War is reported. In this, one can see that the conflict itself has faded from the global

news consciousness; not only does the region not appear in the ‘trending’ bar, but the main section of the page has been dedicated to a summit of the ‘5th Internationale’ in La Paz, Bolivia. Clearly this event is taken as more important than the endemic violence of North America.

In spite of its marginal importance, several parts of this fictionalized webpage do make reference to the American conflict. Prime among them is a panel in the lower left corner, which tells of the discovery of a third mass grave in relation to something called the “Villages Massacre”. Based on the context of other entries, this latter event reveals itself to be a case of ‘boomercide’: generational killings which primarily target the elderly. Since the mass murder of a retirement community in Central Florida would certainly strike any contemporary reader as shocking, it is perhaps surprising that the fictional news article treats this event in a relatively conventional manner. It seems that this kind of atrocity has become somewhat normalized, at least to those reporting on them. Taken together, this piece creates a terrifying dichotomy between extraordinary events and their ordinary mediation.

The example of “Al-Jazeera” leads me to two important observations about journalistic 2ACW fiction in general. First, it reveals that the representation of real journalistic processes can augment a work’s realism. By taking on the style of a respectable news outlet, this fiction acquires enough credibility by association for its scenario to appear believable. Secondly, through the imitation of such formats, these narratives can also reflect back on the environment in which they are created. The apathy with which the Villages Massacre is presented in “Al-Jazeera” may seem callous when applied to Central Florida, but it closely resembles the clinical style of Western Middle East reporting. This speculative transplantation therefore reveals a shameful hypocrisy: if present media are willing to take such a dismissive attitude towards conflicts elsewhere, why should it not be tolerated in the

case of a war closer to home? This is just one of the ways in which journalistic 2ACW fiction can critically reflect on the way contemporary civil conflicts are reported and represented.

2ACW fiction in journalism

Taken together, both *DMZ* and *AAW* are excellent examples of journalistic 2ACW fiction, using their documentary style to effect plausibility and bias alike. However, while these works affect the techniques of news reporting in their presentation of a 2ACW scenario, they are not meant to be a part of the discipline of journalism itself. This is in sharp contrast to *It Could Happen Here*, the podcast which I will discuss in the present section. Created by independent journalist Robert Evans, this ten-part audio work is more than just a piece of speculative fiction. Acutely aware of the potential for a Second American Civil War contained within contemporary US society, Evans presents his hypothesis as a kind of fictionalized reality. By combining his real journalistic research with the fictional progression of a 2ACW scenario, he reveals the path to be avoided. As for how this work is structured and effected exactly, this I shall explain in the following.

When comparing a piece of 2ACW journalism like *It Could Happen Here* with its narrative alternatives, the first important difference is a change in medium and attitude. The podcast format allows this work to gain a personal if not intimate atmosphere, its quality becoming more dependent on the author's oratory abilities. In this instance, such a parasocial aspect also persists in transcript, as Evans makes sure to involve the listener in his own reasoning about a 2ACW scenario. Instead of presenting his imagination as a *fait accompli*, its construction is part of an active and present understanding, one which the listener is meant to involve themselves in. Taken together, these elements resemble the tradition of 'lifestyle journalism', a form of reporting which is seen as one of the present bases of longform audio

content (Dowling 122). By speaking directly at their audience, journalists like Evans are able to create an environment of immersion and interactivity.

The sense of audience participation inherent to *It Could Happen Here* is perhaps strongest in its fourth episode, where Evans discusses the way in which a Second American Civil War might be avoided. Not only does this part represent an implicit call to action for his audience, but its expedited release came as the direct result of their own input, as many desired a break from the despair which this piece had instilled so far. This example accords with the general manner in which journalistic podcasting exists within a ‘participatory culture’ of creators and listeners (Dowling 127). It shows how journalism in general—and this form of it in particular—can be more readily involved with the world than even the most present-oriented fiction. Thus, out of all the scenarios and formats discussed so far, this podcast is the most real and urgent one.

Beyond the elements which arise from its particular format, *It Could Happen Here* is also remarkable for its particular structure, both within its episodes and between them. At the start of almost every episode, a second-person narration immerses the listener into a short mood piece about the Second American Civil War: what would “you” be doing? These segments are not heroic action pieces, but rather quiet meditations on how most people try to maintain some semblance of normalcy in even the worst of times. Indeed, as this civil war is presented as inherently ambiguous, lacking both an obvious beginning and clear-cut factional divisions, who can say when normalcy is fully compromised? It is this sense of creeping dread which drives a lot of *It Could Happen Here*, an entropic dystopia more real than even Octavia Butler’s work.

After this narrative prelude, Evans will introduce the topic of that particular episode, which can range from US counterinsurgency tactics to the refugee crisis that’s likely to result from any 2ACW scenario. For a clear account of 2ACW journalism as such, one will have to

look to the first episode, where Evans both explains and justifies his podcast's premise. He does so by first acknowledging that a near-future American insurgency seems unlikely to many. However, thanks to his experience in conflict journalism and reporting on the US far-right, Evans has come to take this potential more seriously. Not only that, but his contact with relevant experts—from Civil War scholars to specialists in counterinsurgency—has revealed that more and more researchers are considering this hypothetical from an informed position. Thus, his primary question is not whether a Second American Civil War is possible, but rather what kind of form it would take.

As his opening narrations reveal, the 2ACW scenario of *It Could Happen Here* does not know the clarity or formality of the first Civil War, more so resembling the conflicts of *DMZ* and *American War*. To explain this, Evans turns to various recent examples of global civil unrest, with his narration as follows:

Older wars tend to have real clear beginnings. The US Civil War started with the capture of Fort Sumter. The Revolutionary War started with the fighting at Lexington and Concord. World War Two started with the invasion of Poland. But the Syrian Civil War didn't suddenly start so much as it evolved, from popular protests and clashes with police in the street, to brutal state repression of those protesters and, eventually, to a shooting war. And when that war started, there were way the fuck more than two sides: the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS, the YPG, and dozens of other groups all took different positions, many fighting against both the Syrian state and other rebel groups. It's a gigantic confusing mess. Any mass civil conflict in the US would probably look similar. (Evans 12:36-13:19)

As Evans goes on to describe, a Second American Civil War could begin as innocently as another mass protest, combining with economic crisis and police brutality to produce a pervasive urban insurrection that can't be put down completely. If rural America were to get involved—this being the topic of the second episode—the total disruption could be strong enough to make such a situation permanent. The construction of this central conflict, which further escalates throughout the rest of the podcast, shows how *It Could Happen Here* combines journalistic expertise with narrative speculation.

Though the form they take are fundamentally fictional, the imaginations of *It Could Happen Here* create a new perspective from which to regard reality. Owing to the ambiguity of the 2ACW scenario sketched by Evans, it is not clear when we might find ourselves in the early days of such a conflict. However, making this assumption can help us to elucidate aspects of civil conflict and social instability that might otherwise go unnoticed. For example, one should not discount the danger America's militia movements just because they have not yet taken on the role of an actual independent military force. If we only pay attention to such phenomena when they effect their terrible designs, it will be too late. This is why and how the positing of a future hypothetical can help the journalist investigate their world at present. Through the suggestion that it is already happening here, one at least learns of the various ways that it could happen here. That is this podcast's central achievement.

As I stated at the start of this section (and even this thesis), the relevance of 2ACW speculation is generally a function of the present moment. Journalistic 2ACW fiction is perhaps the clearest example of this purpose, as its authors and protagonists are immediately concerned with how this conflict has come to be, how it is now, and how it might ultimately resolve itself. When such a narrative is increasingly combined with real-world elements, this dire future is laid at the feet of its present-day audience: what will you do about it? This is a question which remains to be answered.

Conclusion: A Terrifying Awareness

It is through the particular emphases of the last section that I can now begin to offer some concluding remarks. At numerous points in this thesis, I have worked to indicate a connection between various kinds of 2ACW fiction and the present which produces them. However, thanks to such journalistic works as *It Could Happen Here*, there is now the suggestion that this connection is immediate: the Second American Civil War may have already begun. The reason I find this idea important—beyond its potential historical validity—is that it shows most acutely the way in which different forms of fiction can elicit a specific awareness about our contemporary circumstances. However, this observation is hardly exclusive to the works of the last chapter. Thus, I wish to spend this conclusion in contemplation of the awareness which each type of 2ACW fiction might grant us. As with the thesis in general, this work begins in dystopia.

The awareness imparted by dystopian 2ACW fiction can be said to know several aspects. First and most obviously, embedding a 2ACW scenario within the dystopian genre emphasizes its dour and frequently horrific nature. While this may be taken for granted as part of any war narrative, one need only consider the early jubilation of the First Civil War to see how people can trick themselves into thinking that war might be a good thing. In a wartime environment, even the most just cause will not effect itself peacefully, and the dystopian element is there to remind us of that.

However, this is not to say that the function of dystopia is depressing altogether. The critical dystopias which developed in the late 20th century took a less absolute stance to their imagined realities, and so were able to countenance the existence of internal alternatives. Even if these stories were not wholly hopeful in their convictions, at least they eschewed the totalized misery of their classic forebears. The enclaves of resistance they portrayed would

become a prominent trope of subsequent 2ACW scenarios; their patchwork logic may be recognized in such disparate works as *DMZ* and *An American War*.

Beyond this element of social fragmentation, the critical dystopias also paved the way for what I have come to call the ‘entropic’ dystopia. In this subgenre, it is social deterioration rather than totalitarian institution which primarily effects the given scenario. Its relevance for 2ACW fiction is hard to overstate; not only do civil wars inherently result from a breakdown in the existing social order, but the gradual nature of this dystopian variety makes it easier to project back into the present. If the Second American Civil War is depicted as an extrapolation of contemporary circumstances, then it inherently attends one to those present-day origins. Here, then, is already the impetus which spurs on more journalistic 2ACW scenarios. The presentation of a dire future serves as a reminder of our current calamities. It may even tell us what to do about it.

Much like the dystopian genre, the historical varieties of 2ACW fiction also elicit multiple aspects of awareness. On a more abstract level, they suggest that no 2ACW scenario may be regarded neutrally, as a simple collection of potential facts. Instead, their literary form always already contains the trappings of narrative, even in the definition of its subject matter. However, this should not be taken as some shameful failure of objective; it merely reflects a general pattern in how historical information is processed.

By specifically appealing to historical modes of narrative, a work of 2ACW fiction may achieve several insights at once. The temporal distance of the future historian’s perspective may allow for a more calm and comprehensive analysis of these imagined conflicts; perhaps their indirect causes lie in the more distant past of our own age. At the same time, such a work can also reflect the biases of its own setting, implicitly ignoring or aggrandizing the events of the past so as to serve its own narrative. While the resulting fiction might be a mix of truth and misconstruction, this is not essentially different from the

discipline it emulates. To me, the most tantalizing implication of this format is that the historical process is something that might be directed towards times other than the past. Thus, there arises a question: could one get ahead of history itself, and study the present from an imagined vantage point which knows what's relevant? Though the limits of one's subjectivity are impossible to transcend, at least the awareness of history's happening might attend one to the most long-lasting changes. That would be a valuable skill indeed.

As a final case of history-based 2ACW scenarios, I also considered the genre of alternate history. Though certainly involved with the practice of history itself, this was also a part where the specific contents of certain periods became more important. Its primary contribution to the larger genre of 2ACW fiction might very well be its ambiguation of past events. By treating US history as an open and yet unresolved space, capable of heading in a radically different direction, the malleability of the present is itself affirmed. Furthermore, the ability of alternate histories to call existing narratives into question helps to destabilize a false sense of security. As one learns that previous periods of US history could have broken down into a 2ACW scenario, the social instabilities of the present are immediately taken more seriously. Thus, past turmoil can prevent contemporary complacency.

Finally, I return to the journalistic variants of 2ACW fiction. As stated before, these works contribute the most present-tense understanding of 2ACW conflicts, going so far as to imply that one might already be happening right now. Beyond this, I would also consider their focus on factionalism to be a worthwhile contribution to the genre. By highlighting how the participants of a Second American Civil War would create a flurry of different and incompatible perspectives about their struggle, one can come to question the objectivity of real-life reporting on similar conflicts. A basic awareness of the mediation of conflict might thus be imparted, one which might help in disentangling the culture war which so often precedes or coexists with its more literal alternative.

I have now come to the end of my analysis. Surely, many things remain to be said about the genre of 2ACW fiction. But this shall have to be left to other volumes. I will admit that, at the start of this endeavor, I overestimated the amount of topics I would be able to discuss here. However, these questions might now provide fruitful avenues for further research. For example, another study might consider the real-life embeddedness of a 2ACW scenario. Much like in *It Could Happen Here*, I believe it worthwhile to look into the actual tendencies which are taking the US towards a Second Civil War. Not only could this help delineate the likely divisions of such a conflict, but it might provide some potential remedies to the dreadful escalation which would otherwise mark the coming years.

In the course of writing this thesis, both the fictional scenarios describes in this thesis and the contemporary crises of the real United States have increasingly convinced me of the potential for severe social cataclysm in this country. Thus, there is an urgent need for studies that reach beyond the literary realm, ones which concern themselves with the root of US social discord. In my estimation, such analyses will be likely to reach back to very founding of this nation, to injustices that have seen no recourse as of yet. If a necessary justice cannot be effected peacefully, if the powers that be will not yield before the demands of the disempowered, then I would not be surprised when these politics are waged by other means. In the end, preventing such conflict may not even be as important as the securing of justice. As the periods of Civil War and Reconstruction reveal, a false compromise is no peace at all.

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