Michael Bérubé

Giving Up

Abstract In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this essay examines a variety of visions of apocalypse and civilizational collapse, asking how we can imagine a world without us (as in Alan Weisman's book of that title), or whether we will merely eke out a post–climate disaster existence like the one predicted in Ursula K. Le Guin's 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*.
Keywords apocalypse, dystopia, survival

In a critical scene in *The Matrix*, Cypher (Joe Pantoliano) journeys solo into the Matrix to meet secretly with Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving). He has already made clear, in a conversation with Neo (Keanu Reeves), that he regrets not taking the blue pill and remaining in the Matrix; now he plots to betray his crewmates on the *Nebuchadnezzar*—and possibly the entire human resistance holed up in Zion, deep under the surface of the ruined planet. Cypher and Agent Smith meet in an upscale restaurant, where Cypher is enjoying a large steak, medium rare, and some red wine.

> "Do we have a deal, Mr. Reagan?" Agent Smith asks.
>
> "You know, I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss," says Cypher.
>
> "Then we have a deal?"
>
> "I don't want to remember nothing. Nothing. You understand? (Agent Smith nods.) And I want to be rich. You know, someone important . . . like an actor."
>
> "Whatever you want, Mr. Reagan." (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999)

American Literature, Volume 92, Number 4, December 2020
DOI 10.1215/00029831-8781007

The scene slyly suggests either that (a) Cypher was granted his wish and was reinserted into the Matrix as an actor named Joe Pantoliano or (b) Cypher was granted his wish and was reinserted into the Matrix as an actor named Reagan. For most working actors, I suspect there is also a more rueful joke available in the idea that actors are usually (uniformly?) rich and important. Cypher's desire suggests that he is shallow and self-absorbed, certainly shallow and self-absorbed enough to betray his comrades and give up the fight against the machines, which he has waged for nine years while eating runny slop and living in close quarters with crewmates who seem not to like him. And I don't want to fail to acknowledge that killing one's crewmates is bad. I would even go so far as to say that it is wrong.

But is it wrong, under the circumstances, to give up? Cypher gives us a number of reasons for his decision, the food and living conditions among them—as well as the conceivably racist complaint that he resents having to do what Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) tells him to do. But neither he nor anyone else questions the goal of the war against the machines: to win *what*, exactly? The same question haunts *The Matrix*'s sibling franchise, the *Terminator* trilogy and its many spinoffs: if indeed the Earth has been rendered an uninhabitable hellscape by nuclear war or by unspecified means that "scorched the sky" (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999), why shouldn't humans just fold the tent, die off (perhaps after one last rave in Zion), and turn the planet over to AI creatures who seem not to mind existing in a hellscape? What precisely is wrong with deciding to lie unconscious in a pod of pink goo, literally dreaming your life away, if the alternative is fighting to "take back" a planet your species has utterly destroyed?

I suppose the appeal of these franchises lies partly in their optimistic versions of the humans-vs.-machines trope that defines an entire subgenre of science fiction, insofar as there is something plucky about our refusal to go quietly. And of course *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron 1991) held out the hope that there is "no fate but what we make"—a hope that lasted for just over a decade before *Terminator 3* (2003) snuffed it out, leaving us with the vision of the nuclear holocaust we could not avert after all. But I still don't get it: why do the humans keep thinking *la lutte continue*? Both franchises make it very clear that for Earth, it's game over, and our future selves are playing an imaginary overtime period as delusional as any existence inside the Matrix.

I am aware of no dystopian postnuclear fiction that presses this question as compellingly as does Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream*

of Electric Sheep? (1968). Its film adaptation, *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), is justly renowned, even if it did take over a decade to earn the popular following it now enjoys, but one of the things lost in translation from novel to film is the fact that the novel *is* a postnuclear dystopia. The fallout from World War Terminus is everywhere: the war itself has decimated the human population and countless animal and plant species, and Earth's remaining human inhabitants live with the knowledge that the radiation will inexorably erode their mental and physical faculties. Gradually, we will all become "specials"—mildly impaired "chickenheads," more severely impaired "antheads"—and that knowledge is what drives our desperate attempt to colonize Mars. As bounty hunter Rick Deckard knows, his days, like everyone else's days, are numbered:

> So far, medical checkups taken monthly confirmed him as a regular, a man who could reproduce within the tolerances set by law. Any month, however, the exam by the San Francisco Police Department doctors could reveal otherwise. Continually, new specials came into existence, created out of regulars by the omnipresent dust. The saying currently blabbed by posters, TV ads, and government junk mail, ran: "Emigrate or degenerate! The choice is yours!" Very true, Rick thought as he opened the gate to his little pasture and approached his electric sheep. But I can't emigrate, he said to himself. Because of my job. (4–5)

His job, as every SF-loving schoolchild knows, is to "retire" the androids who try to return from the Mars colonies and assimilate into human society on Earth; the newest model, the Nexus-6, is almost indistinguishable from humans, requiring a rigorous application of the Voight-Kampff empathy test to identify them. And humans need to identify them reliably and retire them expeditiously, because . . . why?

The film has a ready answer: they are dangerous, considerably more powerful than humans and possessed of a murderous rage toward their creators. Their prototype was apparently Frankenstein's creature, which is why their leader, Roy Batty, insists on confronting and killing Eldon Tyrell, the genetic engineer who designed him, but they are considerably more attractive than the creature was—and all the more dangerous for that. The novel contains no such scene in which the creatures meet their maker. Indeed, the novel is much more ambiguous on every front, starting from the basic questions: how many of these androids are we talking about, how dangerous are they, and why do we need to "retire" them?

The questions come to a crisis point when Deckard tries to apprehend Luba Luft, an android who has assimilated into human society by becoming an opera singer of some renown. Notably, she has no counterpart in the film, which substitutes for her character an android named Xhosa, a burlesque dancer. The demotion in the character's cultural capital allows the film to evade the question Deckard asks after retiring Luft: "She was a wonderful singer. The planet could have used her. This is insane . . . . [h]ow can a talent like that be a liability to our society?" (136–37). Deckard happens to be an opera fan and comes upon Luft as she is rehearsing Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (1791); the rehearsal, opening a four-chapter sequence that for me is the crux of the book, leads Deckard to ruminate on Mozart's mortality . . . and everyone's:

> [H]e wondered if Mozart had had any intuition that the future did not exist, that he had already used up his little time. Maybe I have, too, Rick thought as he watched the rehearsal move along. This rehearsal will end, the performance will end, the singers will die, eventually the last score of the music will be destroyed in one way or another; finally the name "Mozart" will vanish, the dust will have won. (98)[1]

Thus, the Luba Luft episode opens with Deckard thinking that in the long run we're all dead and concludes with Deckard thinking that his job, and therefore his existence, is worse than pointless. Along the way, in the novel's most *unheimlich* and disorienting sequence, Deckard is apprehended by androids posing as police officers and taken to a shadow police station for interrogation. Much earlier in the novel, Deckard had insisted that androids were not roaming among humans: "I think the various police agencies here and in the Soviet Union have gotten them all. The population is small enough now; everyone, sooner or later, runs into a random checkpoint" (53). By the time his long day is over, Deckard will have learned that the planet is in fact teeming with androids, from the police station to the opera house to Buster Friendly, the ubiquitous talk show host and his stable of guests, and the question will have become inescapable: why shouldn't we retire *ourselves* and let the androids have the run of the place?

There is one problem with this option: the androids are not nice to animals. On the contrary, they are deliberately cruel and abusive. Pris snips the legs off a spider, and Rachael throws Deckard's new goat off the roof. Since we humans have concocted a new religion in the wake of World War Terminus, "Mercerism," that requires us to care for a pet animal and psychologically fuse with other humans by means of

"empathy boxes," the androids' indifference to animals is especially galling. That, for the novel, is the defining distinction between humans and androids: we have the capacity for empathy and they don't. But it is one of the novel's more subtle touches that the humans never ask how they can continue to construe themselves as empathetic, animal-loving creatures after they have managed to render the planet a radioactive hell. The androids call bullshit on this arrangement: as Irmgard Batty points out, "without the Mercer experience we just have your *word* that you feel this empathy business" (209). She is not wrong.

But for all my sympathy for Cypher and empathy for Dick's androids, I'm not ready to give up quite yet. Besides, all-out nuclear apocalypse doesn't seem to be as imminent as it did during the Cold War; we have other nightmares to wake up screaming from. So I want to close by contrasting these postnuclear dystopias with Octavia Butler's version of Afrofuturism in *Parable of the Sower* ([1993] 2000) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). The world of the *Parables* is that of a hideous, now-very-near-future United States (it opens in 2024), in which federal, state, and local governments are nominally functional, but everyone not locked into their gated communities is subject to random rape, pillage, and arson. Elections still take place, (amazingly) paper money is still good, and life insurance still exists, but you need to bribe the police if you want protection, and they might wind up ignoring or arresting you anyway. The world of Southern California in *Parable of the Sower* is very like the landscape of the pleeblands in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, except for the fact it is explicitly racialized in a way Atwood's is not (the pleeblands are marked more by gendered violence in all its forms). The exact causes of the collapse are not known—climate plays a role, as does the collapse of the financial system and of the institutions of civil society—but the general effect can be read as a version of capitalism run aground and white supremacy run amok. Indeed, as we proceed from *Parable of the Sower* to *Parable of the Talents*, we move into a world in which white fundamentalist Christians, with either the blessing or the passive contrivance of the president, establish a system of torture and rape that explicitly evokes the antebellum South, with advanced technology to boot. That president, by the bye, is a white-nationalist authoritarian named Andrew Steele Jarret who pledges to make America great again. (Yes, that really is his campaign slogan.)

There is another, more decisive difference between Butler's dystopia and Atwood's or Dick's: the character of Lauren Olamina, the visionary teenager who dreams that our human destiny lies in space travel and creates a belief system, Earthseed, and a band of followers

devoted to the proposition that "the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars" (84). Even as the American government moves to shut down its space program (as in the climate dystopia *Interstellar* [Nolan 2014]), and Lauren's father, voicing the common opinion, insists that "you don't have any idea what a criminal waste of time and money that so-called space program is" (20), Lauren Olamina serves as a prophet of interstellar exploration and wonder, an improbable mashup of Greta Thunberg, Arthur C. Clarke, and Sojourner Truth. In the counterintuitive narrative of the *Parables*, the traditional dream of classic science fiction—space, the final frontier—lives on in the unlikeliest circumstances, pursued by a young disabled Black woman traversing a *Mad Max* landscape with a small band of people, most of whom are as vulnerable as herself.[2] The *Parables* thus offer an extraordinary, brutal account of social disintegration and racialized violence that nevertheless refuses to abjure the audacity of hope. About Lauren Olamina we can justly say: still, she persisted. Might she give us a reason to believe?

I write in what appears to be the first stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, safe within my home in late April 2020, week six of family quarantine, watching right-wing mobs descend upon state capitols to demand the right to infect themselves and others with a deadly virus, as is guaranteed them in their hallucinatory version of the Constitution. It has not escaped notice that the global reaction to the pandemic is at once a respite from and a prelude to the greater depredations accompanying global climate change, some of which are already features of the natural and political landscape (wildfires, epic hurricanes, climate refugees, nationalist backlash against climate refugees). COVID-19 presents us with a global collective action problem, and if this were a test (which it is), the United States has already failed—just as the developed world has already failed the test of how to curtail carbon emissions. There may yet be grounds for hope, though as I write those words I think they would be easier to believe if we addressed this collective action problem, as a first step, by finally establishing a robust one-world government and placing New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern in charge of it.

Instead, I will turn to the words of David Wallace-Wells, author of one of the darkest accounts of our future, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (2019):

> Climate change means some bleak prospects for the decades ahead, but I don't believe the appropriate response to that challenge

> is withdrawal, is surrender. I think you have to do everything you can to make the world accommodate dignified and flourishing life, rather than giving up early, before the fight has been lost or won, and acclimating yourself to a dreary future brought into being by others less concerned about climate pain. The fight is, definitively, not yet lost—in fact will never be lost, so long as we avoid extinction, because however warm the planet gets, it will always be the case that the decade that follows could contain more suffering or less. (31–32)

That's the funny thing about non-nuclear apocalypses: they seem to leave us with something to hold onto, something to believe in. In Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*, Les Knight, the founder of the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT, which advocates giving up collectively in a deliberately chosen *Children of Men* (2006) scenario), bemoans the fact that viral apocalypses won't finish us off: "No virus could ever get all 6 billion of us," he says. (Weisman's book was written long ago, in 2007. We are at 7.8 billion now, but who's counting?) "A 99.99 percent die-off would still leave 650,000 naturally immune survivors. Epidemics actually strengthen a species. In 50,000 years we could easily be right back where we are now" (310).

I can't imagine that we would be *right* back where we are now. I suspect the rest of the biosphere would have something to say about that. One increasingly plausible scenario leads us to the vision of future earth offered by Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Dispossessed*, in which the Terran ambassador, Keng, tells Shevek, our protagonist (and us), that her world has become "a ruin . . . spoiled by the human species" (279). Complete deforestation, desertification, depopulation: down to under half a billion from nine billion, dotted with ruins of the old cities: "the bones and bricks go to dust, but the little pieces of plastic never do" (279). (*The Dispossessed* was published in 1974. Is this the first mention of plastic in environmental disaster scenarios?)

> We failed as a species, as a social species . . . . [W]e had saved what could be saved, and made a kind of life in the ruins, on Terra, in the only way it could be done: by total centralization. Total control of the use of every acre of land, every scrap of metal, every ounce of fuel. Total rationing, birth control, euthanasia, universal conscription into the labor force. The absolute regimentation of each life toward the goal of racial survival. (280)

It is not a world we would deliberately wish on our descendants. But at

least we—they—will not have given up. The conclusion seems obvious. We can't give up, not yet. We must go on. We can't go on. We'll go on.

Until, finally, one day, we won't.

Michael Bérubé is Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Literature at Pennsylvania State University and the author, most recently, of *Life as Jamie Knows It: An Exceptional Child Grows Up* (2016).

Notes

1 It is entirely possible that this is Dick's reply to Soren Kierkegaard's remarks in *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (1992): "With his *Don Giovanni* Mozart enters that small, immortal band of men whose names, whose works, time will not forget, for they are remembered in eternity" (62). The passage is cited by Weisman (2007: 323) in the context of the Voyager mission's golden records, which, Weisman suggests, hold out the chance that music, the most ephemeral of human accomplishments, might indeed survive until the heat death of the universe.

2 For the definitive explanation of why Lauren Olamina's "hyperempathy" should be read as a disability, see Schalk 2018.

References

Atwood, Margaret. 2004. *Oryx and Crake*. New York: Anchor.

Atwood, Margaret. 2009. *The Year of the Flood*. New York: Nan A. Talese.

Atwood, Margaret. 2014. *MaddAddam*. New York: Anchor.

Butler, Octavia E. 1998. *Parable of the Talents*. New York: Seven Stories.

Butler, Octavia E. [1993] 2000. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Grand Central.

Cameron, James, dir. 1991. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Culver City, CA: Tristar Pictures.

Dick, Philip K. 1968. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* New York: Del Ray.

Kierkegaard, Soren. 1992. *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*. Edited by Victor Eremita. Translated by Alastair Hannaty. London: Penguin.

Le Guin, Ursula K. 1974. *The Dispossessed*. New York: Avon.

Nolan, Christopher, dir. 2014. *Interstellar*. Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures.

Schalk, Sami. 2018. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press.

Scott, Ridley, dir. 1982. *Blade Runner*. Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers.

Wachowski, Lana and Lilly Wachowksi, dirs. 1999. *The Matrix*. Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers.

Wallace-Wells, David. 2019. *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*. New York: Tim Duggan.

Weisman, Alan. 2007. *The World Without Us*. New York: Thomas Dunne.