



**The Providential Genocides:
Racial Survival and Acts of God in *Fin-de-Siècle* Apocalyptic Fiction**

Steve Asselin

Abstract

This paper focuses on three narratives from the popular press during the boom in apocalyptic literature at the turn of the twentieth century: George Griffith's *Olga Romanoff* (1894), Robert Barr's "Within an Ace of the End of the World" (1900), and M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901). In all three texts, a catastrophic event causes the near extinction of humanity, and the event is inscribed in a religious narrative wherein humanity's moral failings justify the cataclysm. In these texts, the survivors are European or descended from Europeans, such that post-apocalyptic humanity is exclusively White; all racial Others are depicted as unworthy of divine protection, or even as worthy of divine destruction. The survivors of these disasters fuse social Darwinism and theology to present themselves as racially superior and thus divinely favoured, compared to the deceased. The providential genocide significantly alters ethical ramifications by ensuring that racial elimination does not occur because of deliberate actions on the part of characters, sparing them from any culpability; instead, racial cleansing is presented as God's will. This sets up a White exclusivist racial utopia free of moral stain, although the persistence of racial ideology into the apocalypse can undermine the utopian sentiment.

Keywords

apocalypse; disaster fiction; race; providence; genocide; White exclusivity; immaculate colonisation; George Griffith; Robert Barr; M. P. Shiel

Date of Acceptance: 16 December 2023

Date of Publication: 20 December 2023

Double Blind Peer Reviewed

Recommended Citation:

Asselin, Steve. 2023. "The Providential Genocides: Racial Survival and Acts of God in *Fin-de-Siècle* Apocalyptic Fiction." *Victorian Popular Fictions*, 5.2: 89-103. ISSN: 2632-4253 (online) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46911/IISG9047>



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The Providential Genocides: Racial Survival and Acts of God in *Fin-de-Siècle* Apocalyptic Fiction

Steve Asselin

Introduction

The popularity of apocalyptic fiction can be credited in part to the spectacle of desolation that is the stock-and-trade of such catastrophic scenarios. Part of the thrill of large-scale devastation is the role played by characters, whether in the collective death of anonymous crowds, or the resilience and sacrifice of protagonists and the punishment of villains. Who survives an apocalyptic narrative is an authorial choice informed by considerations moral and/or narratological, but the identity of the survivors and the deceased are also readily informed by who is valued, and who is denigrated, in the cultural context in which the narrative is produced. As a result, the demographics of catastrophic and apocalyptic fiction become a reflection of the way that culture hierarchises people. During the boom in disaster and apocalyptic fiction at the *fin de siècle*, a pattern emerges in which a global catastrophe leaves only a handful of White survivors alive to repopulate the species. Rather than mourning the loss of population and diversity, this genocidal catastrophe is often presented as a beneficial event that will permit the founding of a White racial utopia. As such, the apocalypse is read as a providential act of God, and religious rhetoric is used to fulfill eugenicist fantasies of a superior humanity – namely, one that is exclusively White.

In this article, I examine three such *fin-de-siècle* apocalyptic narratives — *Olga Romanoff* by George Griffith (1894), “Within an Ace of the End of the World” by Robert Barr (1900), and *The Purple Cloud* by M. P. Shiel (1901) — in which a catastrophe conveniently leaves only White people alive to repopulate the world. These narratives demonstrate a pattern by which pre-existing racial hierarchies and attitudes, often influenced by social Darwinist ideas linking race and adaptive behaviour, become manifest in the lead-up to catastrophe. Privileged White characters retreat into racial enclaves to ensure their survival, which simultaneously justifies the deaths of everyone else for their lack of preparation (even when such measures would not be possible). The catastrophe as racial test is then couched in religious terms by the survivors, who see their survival (and the extermination of all Others) as

providential. Because these characters merely survived the apocalypse and were not themselves responsible for wiping out all racial and national antagonists, they are free of guilt or culpability. This enables a prospective White utopia, though space is left to question the suitability of protagonists in their role as founders of a renewed human species, or to suspect the persistence of racial ideology. While each of these texts manifests this pattern, they each emphasise different stages of the process that will be examined in turn.

These texts are part of a considerable mass of disaster and apocalyptic fiction at the end of the nineteenth century which set many of the parameters of the genre. This trend has been detailed by Ailise Bulfin (2015) and Mark Frost (2019), who situate these works within the context of growing ecological awareness at the end of the Victorian period. Such awareness stemmed in part from the realisation of how interconnected global ecological systems were because of the worldwide spread of ash from Krakatau's 1883 eruption (Morgan 2013). Another important factor was the readily observable consequences on the environment of the pollution caused by the Industrial Revolution (as detailed in Jesse Oak Taylor's 2016 *The Sky of Our Manufacture* and Lawrence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison's 2019 collection *Victorian Environmental Nightmares*). Consequently, scholars who have worked on Victorian disaster fiction, like Bulfin, Frost, and myself in some prior work, have largely taken an ecocritical approach to these texts, centered on the Victorians' understanding of Nature and their place within, and relationship to, the environment. In this article, however, I am interested less in the ecological mechanisms of the apocalypse than in the way catastrophe is made to support racial and imperial agendas, even as they veil the active enforcement of those ideologies behind physical phenomena and divine will.

Although these three narratives are works of disaster fiction, the end result of reinforcing racial and imperial agendas means they can be productively compared to the invasion and future war literature that was thriving at the same time because they engage with similar anxieties and fantasies. The intersection of war and race in such literature has been examined by Brian Stableford (1985), John Rieder (2008), Paul Williams (2011) and Bulfin (2018), amongst others, who show how these fantastic and oracular conflicts both necessitated racial difference as pretext for war and reinforced those distinctions through conflict, often with the goal of the suppression or outright elimination of racialised antagonists. Paul Williams, after Warren W. Wagar, argues that "the pre-1914 'apocalyptic race wars'" narratives present in much invasion and future war literature were inherently connected "to social Darwinism, and the perception of non-white peoples as a 'kind of alien menace'" which would justify "a future genocidal war leaving some races extinct and others to inherit the Earth" (2011: 25, 33). The key difference between racialised narratives of future war and the providential genocides I discuss here is a question of responsibility, and thus culpability. In stripping away the intent of genocide from narratives in which genocide occurs via disaster, these authors are able to achieve the same goal of a White-exclusivist racial utopia without assigning any responsibility or guilt to surviving characters. Intentional racial antagonism is instead displaced onto a version of God, often acting through social Darwinist values; thus, the extermination of racial Others is rendered an act of God, invested with the positive connotations of providential action, while largely sidestepping the overt bigotry of the racial war texts.

White Retreat, Racial Survival, and Immaculate Colonisation

I begin with *Olga Romanoff*, which initially seems like another straightforward future war narrative, and as such demonstrates what little distance separates the racial logic animating the future war genre from the White-exclusivist fantasies of apocalyptic fiction. *Olga Romanoff* is the second book in Griffith's duology beginning with *The Angel of the Revolution* (1893) and

does not innovate much upon the first; perhaps for this reason, *Olga Romanoff* has not received a great deal of critical attention. Susan Hroncek discusses the marginalisation of the titular villain from a gendered perspective while also pointing out that she is “as Russian ... characterized as Other” from a racial perspective (2016: n.p.) while Bulfin (2023) points out that the text’s Russian and Muslim antagonists represent the threat of cultural regression, a racialised return to a primitive past. This conflict is a continuation of *Angel of the Revolution*, in which an “Anglo-Teutonic Alliance” prevails in brutal warfare against a “Franco-Slavonian League” led by a despotic Russian tsar (Griffith 1893: 180). Victory comes thanks to an invention, airships, controlled by a Brotherhood of anarchist inventors who are the heroes of the text despite an overt embrace of terrorism.¹ The membership of the Brotherhood is more pan-European than either belligerent faction, and even includes a Jewish leader, Natas. That Natas and his daughter play important supporting roles for the protagonist is notable given that Jews were often treated as alien to White European culture at this time, although this is offset by the book’s use of contemporary stereotypes linking Jews to anarchist violence.² Nevertheless, the Brotherhood’s imperial and racial attitudes are made clear when they effectively take over the leadership of the “Anglo-Teutonic Alliance” but Natas steps down in favour of an English Lord to ensure that “the empire of the Earth [is] given into the hands of the Anglo-Saxon race” (Griffith 1893: 363). The term “given” obviates that control of the world was *taken* in bloody warfare, but matches the religious tone of this culminating moment in which the victory of self-proclaimed nihilists is ideologically transmuted into the decree of divine providence rather than human action – and so the defeat of their Russian enemies, consistently described as racially compromised by savagery (Bulfin 2023), is likewise divine will.

The Brotherhood physically separate themselves from Europe and its peoples by founding their ideal society in “Aeria,” a hidden valley in central Africa accessible only by air due to mountain ranges. Once again, the supposed anti-establishment beliefs of the Brotherhood give way to the overt imperialist and racial agenda of colonisation. This is manifest in the homonymic pun between the “Aerians,” as this new nation refers to itself, and “Aryan,” the supposed pinnacle of many contemporary racial hierarchies. That this valley was uninhabited serves a dual goal: first, it maintains the racial purity of Aeria as the land was never contaminated by the Africans indigenous to the continent; and second, it sterilises colonialism of the racialised violence of historical imperialism, as the Aerians are not culpable of displacing or exterminating any native populations to establish their segregated racial enclave. The providential convenience of this sheltered “paradise” (Griffith 1893: 123) ready to be turned into a White utopia without the need for violence or oppression – what I term an act of immaculate colonisation – foreshadows the surviving Aerians venturing forth from their valley to repopulate the world after global catastrophe wipes out the rest of humanity at the end of the second book.

Ensuring the sole survival of select White persons is the first step in founding the White-exclusivist utopia; this demands a retreat from cosmopolitan, multi-racial society into a segregated enclave. Jeffrey Kaplan describes this as “a quietist withdrawal to an enclave where the White Race can safely sit out the apocalypse to come” (2018: 503) in his work on narratives of race war and apocalypse of the American Right, and this observation holds true for late-Victorian apocalypses that likewise feature racialised conflict. Such a withdrawal is at the heart of *Olga Romanoff*, as it happens twice over across the duology, but also manifests (at a smaller

¹ See Mollmann (2015) for a discussion of technology and violence in this novel.

² See Knepper (2008) for a discussion of these stereotypes. A full accounting of Griffith’s complex attitudes towards Judaism is beyond the scope of this article.

scale) in “Within an Ace” and *The Purple Cloud*. Aeria’s function as a racial retreat is made explicit in *Olga Romanoff*, set one hundred years after the first novel. By this time “the Aerians, descendants of the pick of the nations of Europe” appear “far superior” to the rest of humanity and are considered their own race (Griffith 1894: 10). The Aerians, grown tired of world domination, decide to devolve power back to the inferior nations of the world – a category which now includes the traditional White cultures of Europe – and retreat to their superior White racial enclave in Africa. Consequently, resurgent Russian and Pan-Islamic armies attack Anglo-Saxon nations, who (to highlight their inferiority to the Aerians) lack the capacity for self-government and defence, and are largely wiped out. The book seems to be another future war novel, but in its finale makes a sudden shift towards disaster fiction when it is discovered that Earth will pass through the tail of a flaming comet. The Aerians build a shelter within their mountains for a few hundred to survive the apocalypse, selected as “the most perfect flower of our race” (306), and moving from a segregated utopia into literal bunker mentality, as the Aerians decide who will inhabit the figurative lifeboat of the bunker along racial and eugenic lines. What was already the “pick ... of Europe” is further refined to the “flower” of this already select group, and so the survivors represent the pinnacle of humanity – all White, of course.

The narrative necessity of such making choices during catastrophes reflects what Janet Fiskio calls “the lifeboat narrative” that “draws on Social Darwinism, which imagines human behavior in a monolithic way (as a struggle for survival) and ignores historical, cultural, economic, and political contingencies” that impact whether a person is in a position to survive catastrophe (2012: 14). In *Olga Romanoff*, all non-Aerians are already excluded from survival because of the Aerians’ belief in their own racial supremacy; seeking only to save a select tranche of their own civilisation, no effort is made to save anyone beyond their borders. No one else survives the catastrophe because their nations are too devastated by war to plan for disaster. This failure of governance is ascribed to the collective racial inferiority of the rest of humanity, and thus their extinction is read as a consequence of their own unworthiness for survival rather than the Aerians’ inaction.

Purgative Disaster and Religious Rhetoric on the Path to Utopia

John Preston distinguishes between “Eurocentric” narratives of catastrophe, which foreground the role of white victims and western nations even amongst global disaster, with more recent “Afrofuturist and CRT [Critical Race Theory] reinterpretations” of supposedly race-neutral catastrophes (2012: 73). Not surprisingly, given that they were authored by British men at the *fin de siècle*, disaster fiction of this period is quite Eurocentric. While threats frequently emerge from colonised or otherwise ‘uncivilised’ areas of the world, such as the poisoned cloud originating in the South Seas in *The Purple Cloud*, the protagonists are almost invariably white and locations in the world other than Europe or America are only mentioned in passing, if at all. Disaster fiction often reinscribes imperial racial logic, especially social Darwinist and Malthusian notions, as catastrophised and otherwise resource-poor environments are contested by communities divided along (supposedly natural) racial lines. Nancee Reeves, examining speculative fiction of the late nineteenth century, finds that neo-Malthusian notions, allied with Darwinist approaches to biology and culture, led to the argument that “social undesirables” needed to be eliminated “for the good of society,” a reduction in overall population targeting the portions of that population hampering utopian (and socially and racially homogenous) visions of society (2017: 95). So too does the providential genocide exterminate racial undesirables, namely anyone outside Whiteness (however defined by the text). However, instead of the eugenic schemes that Reeves discusses, God serves as the agent of racial pruning and refinement.

Just such a Malthusian scenario, by which “the limit of the earth’s production of wheat had been reached, and ... universal starvation” would follow (Barr 1900: 546), is the premise of “Within an Ace of the End of the World.” This pulp fiction short story initially appeared in *The Windsor Magazine* in 1900, and has received little critical attention, though I have previously discussed its depiction of extraction capitalism (Asselin 2019). Although the text does not specify who is responsible for the overpopulation that ironically begins this narrative of mass depopulation, the Malthusian and eugenic discourse of the *fin de siècle* pinned responsibility squarely on the supposed overbreeding of non-European peoples, with Asian populations especially singled out. Penury and conflict are avoided in this tale thanks to a scientific breakthrough: extracting nitrogen from the atmosphere to use it as super-fertiliser for growing food. The atmosphere is considered too vast to be affected by such extraction, but the corporatisation and mass deployment of this industry changes the ratio of gases in the atmosphere, leaving the planet dangerously over-oxygenated – and thus flammable. Likewise, “the insane folly of Russia, Germany, and France competing with each other in raising mountain ranges of food products as a reserve in case of war” (Barr 1900: 551) shows how readily invasion narratives and disaster narratives dovetail, as nationalist competition accelerates the atmospheric catastrophe. Although the culpability for the conflagration that follows lies squarely on Western practices of unrestricted industrialism and extraction capitalism, and on the European national rivalries that soon drag the world into global warfare, the survivors are all of European descent. “Within an Ace” is thus a good example of Preston’s Eurocentric disaster: White people are both the cause and the survivors of the disaster, while racial Others effectively do not participate in the moral scheme of the text – a narrative erasure that anticipates the physical erasure of all non-White peoples by the story’s end.

As Earth’s population becomes drunk on high oxygen levels, few realise the danger before massive conflagrations sweep the planet. The only survivors of the cataclysm are eight male Oxford students who construct “nitrogen colonies” (551) where they can keep the proper atmospheric ratio, and thus their sense, and eight female Vassar students who do the same after corresponding with the Oxford students. Though this equivalent to a racial retreat takes place within England and the United States, and those from whom they segregate themselves are their fellow citizens and racial brethren, Barr draws upon an imperial lexicon. The description of these iron huts as colonies likens the inhabitants to European imperialists who have built settlements based on supposed rationality instead of the superstition of the indigenous population – or, in this case, to differentiate the last rational humans from the wild, silly behaviour of an oxygen-drunk humanity. The name of the leader of these colonists, “John Rule” (550), signals a concern both with proper measurement (as a scientist concerned with the chemical composition of the atmosphere) and with good governance, which has been lost to over-oxygenation. Indeed, Rule is introduced to readers through the transcription of an editorial in which he decries the infantilism of the oxygen-drunk British government (cheering as the Prime Minister dances on a table); as in *Olga Romanoff*, traditional seats of Anglo-Saxon power are depicted as weak and incapable to highlight the superiority of the surviving heroes. Not coincidentally, the proto-imperialists in the nitrogen colony are made up of both “science students” and “divinity students” and include “a clergyman” (551), reflecting both science and religion as twin motivations and justifications in colonial enterprises.

After the devastating fires sparked by a flammable atmosphere wipe out almost all human life, the Oxford students embark on a dangerous cross-Atlantic journey on a salvaged ship, whose name – the “Teutonic” (552) – again signals the text’s fixation with racial hierarchies even at the brink of extinction. When they reach their female Vassar counterparts, they fulfill a prophesised “union of the English-speaking races” (550), and thus another aspect

of Fiskio's lifeboat narrative: the purgative properties of catastrophe "holds out the possibility of creating a sustainable, if exclusive, society ... The collapse of civilization following the apocalypse ... allows for the rebirth of society as a Utopian community" (2012: 14). Rieder likewise argues that "although science fiction disasters are often about the end of the world ... what is most persistently at stake ... is not the world's end but its transformation by modernity" (2008: 121). While Rieder has in mind technological innovations, racial science and ideology are also features of late-Victorian modernity, and the transformation in these disaster narratives is the complete manifestation of such ideologies into the White utopia.

Mollmann, after Arthur Turner, identifies a "belief in the necessity for a *tabula rasa*" prior to the creation of utopia in speculative fiction of the *fin de siècle*, a desire for the corrupt present world to be wiped clean as reform alone was deemed insufficient (2015: 35). In these narratives, the "blank" slate afforded by a *tabula rasa* scenario is a "White" one, as the existence of all racial Others is the corruption to be removed for a racial utopia to emerge. SF texts either present revolutionary violence as a necessary precondition of the radical social transformation utopia requires, or else "elide the conditions necessary to bringing about [its] foundation" (21), presumably to avoid compromising the perfect society by illustrating the mass slaughter upon which it is built. Disaster fiction, however, offers an alternative to mass murder: its violence still has the potential to be revolutionary, but there is no need to either conceal or justify this violence because the survivors carry no responsibility for it – violence merely emerges from the natural world, often read as divine. While some disaster fiction lingers on the tragedy of the event, much of this literature tries to derive a net positive from catastrophe, and frames that benefit as a question of theodicy. Victims of calamities are often asked to trust in a divine plan, and traditional religion is replete with examples of catastrophes as schemes for social and/or racial improvement, like the biblical Flood. Even original sin, and the consequent expulsion of humanity from Eden to face the tribulations of mortality, can be reframed in positive terms: the doctrine of *felix culpa*, the fortunate fault, holds that this fall was ultimately beneficial because it enabled the subsequent moral redemption of humanity, allowing individuals to choose good in spite, rather than out of ignorance, of evil. In disaster fiction, this doctrine can be recontextualised as *felix calamitās*, the fortunate disaster.

Martha Wolfenstein, observing the psychology of disaster relief in the field, notes that there is often a "state of warm fellow-feeling and active and generous mutual aid" that prevails after many disasters, as communities band together for survival and as empathetic strangers send aid into the affected area; she characterises this state as "a post-disaster utopia" (1957: 192-3), similar to Fiskio's post-apocalyptic utopian rebirth. Many disaster stories from this period, such as Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt* (1913) or Grant Allen's "The Thames Valley Catastrophe" (1897), showcase this fellow-feeling in their epilogues. But often, the benefits of disaster deal directly with what and/or who is eliminated. In another of Barr's apocalyptic short stories, "The Doom of London," the narrator's contemporaries believe "that the simultaneous blotting out of millions" after London's destruction by pollution "was a beneficial event" and an "unmixed blessing" ([1892] 1982: 71). William Delisle Hay's *Doom of a Great City* (1882) makes the same argument: life in the twentieth-century frame narrative is better because London was destroyed. Sometimes the benefits derived from catastrophes are practical – better urban planning in *Doom of a Great City*, the elimination of smog in "Doom of London" – but for the most part it is humanity's moral character that is improved by the catastrophe, as a causal link is made between the supposedly degenerate moral character of the victims and the advent of catastrophe. Another of Griffith's comet narratives, "Hellville U.S.A." (1899), makes the explicit argument that the national character of America is elevated by the deaths of the last of the country's criminals when a comet strikes the prison-town into which they have all been confined. These narratives embrace what I call the punitive model of

disaster, in which the affected polity had transgressed against the divine (or equivalent superhuman force) and merits collective punishment. The fallen provide a counterexample for the survivors and, by their absence, the rest of society thrives. The survivors and the deceased thus serve as moral mirrors, as with the biblical catastrophes of the Flood or Sodom and Gomorrah: the wicked perish so that the good, however few, can rebuild.

In the examples cited in the previous paragraph, the racial devastation of genocide is not required for moral elevation, only for the elimination of society's worst elements; however, in the texts under consideration in this article, moral failure is explicitly racialised. "Within an Ace" predicates the post-apocalyptic perfect society on a eugenicist fantasy: the new human race stems from sixteen students at Oxford and Vassar, a distinctly White, anglophone, and socially elite demographic. The narrator of the story, writing centuries into the future, states: "The race which now inhabits the earth is one that includes no savages and no war lords. Armies are unknown and unthought of. . . . It is doubtful if universal peace could have been brought to the world short of the annihilation of the jealous, cantankerous, quarrelsome peoples who inhabited it previous[ly]" (Barr 1900: 554). "War lords" is not necessarily a racialised group, because the story condemns the futility of the arms race in Europe. The term "savages," however, is a clear reminder that only a handful of White people have been allowed to survive and repopulate the world; all persons of colour, and any so-called inferior White races (of Eastern European or Mediterranean heritage), have been stricken from the species' genetics. By the story's logic, this nigh-universal genocide allows for centuries of post-catastrophic peace and prosperity: the survivors represent the elite of the so-called superior race, and their ability to construct utopia has not been hampered by inferior stock. Griffith's *Aerians*, too, view the global conflagration and the eugenicist selection of "the most perfect flower of [their] race" to survive as cleansing: the survivors will be "purged by fire of the dross of human wickedness" (Griffith 1984: 306). Both that novel's antagonistic Russians and Muslims (here a marker of both race and religion), and the weaker White ethnicities who could not oppose them, have been wiped out, allowing the Aerial *Übermensch* to rebuild the species in their own image. The anticipatory utopianism of these post-catastrophic communities makes such genocidal fantasies appealing to those who follow racist ideologies, who anticipate vindication from "Divine Judgment" and foresee themselves as part of the "post-apocalyptic 'righteous remnant'" – a category defined by Whiteness (Kaplan 2018: 504).

Yet unlike the race wars detailed by Williams and Kaplan, genocide is a side-effect of other events for which no characters (nor their survivors) need carry the guilt. Regardless of any possible physical or metaphorical anthropogenic cause, catastrophes appear to emerge from and radically modify the natural world, reinscribing human racial competition back into a naturalistic context in which some races survive calamity because they are better adapted evolutionarily. From a social Darwinist perspective, Barr's university students and Griffith's *Aerians* survive because they alone anticipated and prepared for disaster, justifying the elimination of all other failed races, and their remit to subsequently repopulate the planet. Global natural disasters become "imaginings of apocalypse that escape specific culpability (for instance, in processes of settler colonialism, capitalism, or imperialism) and instead center a universal human frailty that ends with triumph, a clear moral, and a clean slate" (Gergan, Smith, and Vasudevan 2020: 92), indicating that *tabula rasa* is not only a practical but also a moral precondition for utopia.

God is key to the punitive model of disaster, which states that people do not survive or die through random chance but by the will of a supreme being, making selections based on morality. Such is certainly the view of the narrator in "Within an Ace":

While it cannot be denied that the unprecedented disaster which obliterated human life in 1904 seemed to be a calamity, yet it is possible to trace the design of a beneficent providence in this wholesale destruction. ... The Lord destroyed humanity once by flood, and again by fire; but whether the race, as it enlarges, will deteriorate after its second extinguishment, as it appears to have done after its first, must remain for the future to determine.

(Barr 1900: 554)

The fiery conflagration in the narrative is explicitly linked to the Flood as a model of purgative disaster and framed as the result of divine will, even though the story also shows how the calamity arises as a direct result of human science and industry; the narrator is not troubled by the overlay of a moral, metaphysical causation on top of the physical, temporal one. The purpose of God's wrath is also made clear: rectifying racial deterioration. The link between such deterioration and the Flood repeats the old racist trope that non-White peoples are descendants of Noah's cursed son Ham and thus inherently corrupt (see Haynes 2002). The narrator makes it clear that the all-White race that now exists must guard against similar degeneration; an exhortation to racial purity, irrespective of the fact that all racial Others have already been exterminated.

The fiery calamity in *Olga Romanoff* is likewise framed as a religious prophecy by Natas, the genius of the first novel. Just as in Barr's narrative, scientific and theological explanations overlap: Natas leaves a secret message with the calculations that prove the Earth shall pass through a flaming cometary tail, yet publicly Natas frames this discovery as a religious exhortation, claiming to have seen "a sign in heaven as of a flaming sword, whose hilt is in the hand of the Master of Destiny, and whose blade is outstretched over the habitations of men" (Griffith 1894: 6). Amidst the Old-Testament language of Natas' prophecy is once more the punitive model of disaster; Natas invokes the destruction of "Babylon the Great" to establish the metaphysical causation: disaster will occur because once again certain people "elect to do evil" (6). Those miscreants are the non-Aerian nations of the world, who demonstrate their inferiority through warmongering, or the inability to counteract the warmongering of others. The punishment is annihilation, and when the surviving Aerians emerge from their bunker they find "the world was ... as it had been before the first forms of life appeared" (372) and they become "the parents of the new race, [to] replenish the Earth and possess it" (6). This is a reenactment of Genesis in which the characters overtly refer to stories of "Eden" and "Cain" to make sense of their newly depopulated world and their belief that their manifest destiny is to repopulate it (373). The initial immaculate colonisation of Aeria is repeated worldwide: though these lands once belonged to others, providence has conveniently cleared the way, and no other humans remain to trouble their efforts.

Leaking Lifeboats and Racial Theology

Olga Romanoff and "Within and Ace" superimpose the rhetoric of race and religion over natural disasters in order to frame White survival as providential, but in Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* the divine takes an active role in arranging for a post-apocalyptic White-only humanity. Unlike the other two texts considered in this article, *The Purple Cloud* has received considerable critical attention as its tale of global climate catastrophe resonates with our own current climate crisis; I will only engage here with the criticism most relevant to my concerns. The novel begins with a race to the North Pole to claim prize money offered by a wealthy industrialist; the narrator Adam Jeffson and his fiancée commit several murders to assure his victory. At the North Pole, he encounters a strange sight: a pillar set into a spinning lake, which Jeffson describes as "the Sanctity of Sanctities ... which it was a most burning shame for a man

to see,” an encounter with the divine suggestive of mortal disobedience (Shiel 1901: 41). Jeffson has previously acknowledged the religious transgression he is committing: just like “Adam and the fruit ... should mankind force his way to the Pole and the old forbidden secret biding there,” a punishment would be visited on the “race of man” (27). As Sutherland and others have noted, the novel fuses mainstream Christianity with late-Victorian and Edwardian esotericism, in which the Pole carries both sacred and racial implications as the origins of the first, and superior, iteration of humanity in Theosophist thinking (Sutherland 2012: xxiii-xxv).

Unlike the other texts, where the survivors are selected for their virtue, Jeffson is a deeply compromised character, at times violent and insane, which may undermine the anticipation of utopia at the end of the novel. But having touched the root of racial supremacy according to the pseudo-theologies of contemporary esotericism, he becomes a figure of destiny, father to the next iteration of humanity. The parallels to his biblical namesake are many and, just like the original Adam, disobedience becomes a necessary step on the path to redemption. The anticipated punishment for this transgression arrives: Jeffson returns south to discover he is the last man alive after a poisonous cloud of cyanogen gas, emerging from a South Seas volcano, has killed off all terrestrial animal life. Once again, a crime rooted in White, Western ideologies – the juncture of imperial exploration and capitalism – results in the death of all but two White survivors. Proving this was no coincidence, Jeffson later discovers a ship providentially kept afloat for decades without a crew, wherein a passenger’s final log records the emergence of the planet-killing volcano on “that same day, twenty long years ago, when I reached the Pole” (Shiel 1901: 165). Jeffson survives by being the only living being far enough north not to be affected by the cloud. There is a retreat to a White enclave during this apocalypse, as Jeffson “built ... a semi-subterranean Eskimo den for the long Polar night” (46), unknowingly waiting out the months when the atmosphere south was poisoned. Like Jeffson himself, this retreat is compromised: it is White only in the technical sense that the sole inhabitant of this bunker is White, its form is derived from non-White indigenous knowledge appropriated by the imperialist explorer.

The text critiques White nations’ failure to maintain their own “lifeboat” enclaves during the apocalypse. Critics such as Hultgren (2021) and Svitavsky have noted the racialised treatment of the dead global refugees Jeffson finds in Europe, and Svitavsky (2004) compares it to Shiel’s more explicit tales of racial invaders such as the infamous *The Yellow Danger* (1898). Jeffson cannot “believe that [he] was in England” because of the “foreign air” of corpse piles he comes across, calling the wave of refugees a “monstrous, infuriate flood,” language that implies the invasion of White, northern nations by “un-northern, southern, and Oriental” racial others, and even racial miscegenation in the “variegated ... mixture of races” that make up these touching bodies (Shiel 1901: 67-8, 75; original emphasis). Racial thinking is so deeply ingrained in Jeffson that he insists on such distinctions even when humanity has, himself excluded, died off. Shiel himself was deeply invested in racist ideology, despite (or because of) his own mixed racial heritage; his *Yellow Peril* invasion novels are overtly racist and he obsessed over “racist fantasies of the Nietzschean ‘Overman’” during the rise of Nazism (Sutherland 2012: xxxvi).³ Racial conflict is overlaid on the religious conflict animating the novel, wherein “certain ‘Black’ and ‘White’ beings” (Shiel 1901: 27) rendered analogous to the Devil and God respectively, make Jeffson their pawn in the former’s goal of annihilating humanity and the latter’s goal of then reconstructing it. Black is ascendant for most of the text, and while this racialised force is rendered villainous by its plot to murder humanity, readers ranging from Lovecraft to modern critics have found the Black written in a more compelling manner than its opposite (Svitavsky 2004: 17), much like Milton’s Satan. Under the influence

³ See also Hultgren (2021) and Svitavsky (2004) on Shiel’s background and its influence.

of this racialised supernatural foe, Jeffson racialises himself: he decides that he is “hardly any longer a Western, ‘modern’ mind, but a primitive and Eastern one,” and in an act of cultural transvestism begins to dress and act according to Western beliefs about Oriental despots (Shiel 1901: 125). In critiquing the demographics of the dead, Jeffson attempts to retain a sense of his Whiteness even as the last man alive, but with no living Other to define himself against, his racial status blurs and collapses.

He continues in this manner during twenty years of solitude until an earthquake releases a female survivor, eventually named Leda, from her confinement in an airtight Constantinople dungeon where her pregnant mother had been imprisoned when the apocalypse struck. Leda is “of Circassian blood, or, at least, origin” and her “skin was whitey-brown, or old ivory-white” (187). Her racial status is open to contestation, as the light-skinned daughter of a Sultan and a Circassian woman. Hultgren, after Maria Fulmigatti, suggests that her eventual pairing with Jeffson shows that “some cultural variation is permitted as long as Anglo-Saxon culture is at least the narrow winner” (2021:39), while Svitavsky reads their relationship as a “union with the inferior, primitive East” that allows “modern, Western man [to] be regenerated” (2004: 19). However, it is important not to read back into the novel modern, sociological notions of race, but rather use as a frame the racial pseudo-science of the period. Nineteenth-century race theorists like Johann Blumenbach and Charles Augustin Vandermonde held that Circassian women were “the ideal white woman, whose body is physical proof of the European connection to a lost, original human ideal type,” positing an ancestral White homeland in the Caucasus region (Figal 2014: 182).⁴ Fusing the racial science of Blumenbach and the theology of biblical scholars like Johann David Michelis, the inhabitants of the Caucasus were designated “as the immediate descendants of the first human” (namely Adam) after his expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Keel 2018: 49), and so purported Circassian racial superiority was founded in aesthetics and religion. Leda’s origin reinforces racial oppositions by echoing narratives of White slavery that animated contemporary imperialist literature, since Jeffson reasons that her Circassian mother had been “the victim of some unbounded fit of imperial passion” by the Turkish Sultan (Shiel 1901: 201).⁵ Despite her mixed status, then, Leda represents an original form of Whiteness, and through such contact Jeffson regains his original racial identity after his Orientalist masquerade: “a certain *Western-ness* – a growing modernity of tone – may be the result ... of her presence with me” (213; original emphasis). Her presence annuls his impersonation of the racial Other, as Jeffson cannot continue his parody of Oriental irrationality before her example of moral and behavioural superiority – features Jeffson expects her children shall inherit and are thus read racially.

The Eden narrative is explicitly invoked when Jeffson realises that he “was preserved ... to be a sort of new-fangled Adam – and this little creature to be my Eve,” and indeed she initially attempts to adopt the name Eve for herself, though Jeffson overrules her (202). This is because Jeffson, unlike the nitrogen colonists or the Aerians, rejects a reenactment of Genesis after the apocalypse and refuses to “recommence the Race” (202), a stance Svitavsky links to his belief that “civilization had fallen long before” the catastrophe and Jeffson’s sympathy with the Black power (2004: 15-17). Indeed, his first impulse on seeing Leda (driven by the Black power’s whispers) is to kill and cannibalise her. He is foiled by being struck with lightning, overt divine intervention as “the Powers” of good and evil “no longer hide themselves from” these lone survivors (Shiel 1901: 189). Leda herself claims to be in contact with God, the White Power, and tolerates the aged, semi-lunatic Jeffson because providence has decreed to her that they repopulate the Earth. As Monique Morgan has observed, it is possible “to sustain two very

⁴ See also Baum (2006) on how the Caucasus came to stand in for Whiteness in European racial theory.

⁵ See Figal (2014) on contemporary narratives of Circassian beauty and the racial peril it entailed.

different readings of [*The Purple Cloud*] and its genre,” (2009: 266), either as an example of the late-Victorian metaphysical romance genre popularised by authors like Marie Corelli, or as a psychodrama whose protagonist is driven mad by solitude and guilt, in which case the supernatural and divine elements of the book are merely manifestations of Jeffson’s unstable psyche. This duality recalls the way characters in both previous texts overlay metaphysical causation over physical events. Morgan has detailed the many ways in which the narration of *The Purple Cloud* is unreliable, from its esoteric frame narrative to the self-confessed madness of the narrator. But a purely psychological reading struggles to account for the incredible correspondences in the text that Jeffson sees as divinely moved, such as the timing of the world-killing eruption, or the lightning strike that saves Leda’s life. One would have to disbelieve that Jeffson can accurately report events, regardless of his ability to interpret them, and so I favour reading *The Purple Cloud* as a “theological fantasy,” as Brian Stableford terms it (cited in Morgan 2009: 66).

Yet even discounting active divine involvement in the text, Jeffson uses providential rhetoric in response to and as a means of justifying near-global extinction. Like the Aerians and the “Within an Ace” narrator, he believes God (the White) acted to preserve him and Leda, so they could restart the human species in their own image. When Jeffson, afraid of being alone again, concedes to the divine plan, he “look[s] for a race that shall resemble its Mother: nimble-witted, light-minded, pious,” superlative in almost every way, just as Leda herself is presented as the perfect woman (Shiel 190: 260). This too is reinforced by contemporary racial theory that positioned Circassian women as ideal partners in a eugenicist scheme by which such women would improve the racial stock of any resulting children, and were thus much sought after (Figal 2014: 179-82). While both characters are White, or in Leda’s case White-coded, the racial science of the period marked hierarchical variations within the category of Caucasian, making their union simultaneously hybrid and racially endogamous. An all-White, intellectually and morally superior race shall inherit the Earth; divine manipulation achieves the same result as Aerian eugenics, or the self-selected wisdom of the nitrogen colonists, all of which were likewise read providentially by those characters.

Conclusion: White Exclusivity and the Persistence of Racism

These three texts fully embrace White supremacist racial hierarchies considered scientifically and morally true during their period, as seen in the repeated claims that White (and often specifically Anglo-Saxon) people and their culture are superior in might, foresight, and morality to any other race or culture. Yet the term “supremacist” is insufficient to fully describe the apocalyptic, genocidal scenarios imagined here. Supremacy indicates a higher position in a (racial) hierarchy, but in these texts there exist no other races and cultures to occupy the rungs below Whiteness; indeed, the hierarchy itself ceases to be, as (for the moment) only the singular racial category occupied by the survivors exists. This is not segregation, the retreat to White racial enclaves described by Kaplan (even as that retreat proves a necessary precondition), because segregation delineates racial boundaries against the threat of integration by racial Others existing beyond those boundaries. By the end of these stories, all racial Others have ceased to exist, and the need for boundaries or hierarchies has ended. Even the unenviable positions of subaltern, of enemy, of slave, are denied to racial Others in this context – non-existence alone satisfies the requirements of the post-catastrophe White utopia. I characterise these genocidal narratives as fantasies of White exclusivity because the authors imagine a world in which Whiteness is not merely supreme, but indeed the only option. Both the planet and the species are left irrevocably White in the aftermath of the providential disaster.

Even in fantasies of White exclusivity, it is unclear if the physical fulfillment of racial ideology puts an end to that ideology; that is, whether these White utopian communities will be spared the problems of racism. There are reasons to doubt the utopianism of all these societies: none are true *tabula rasas* as survivors carry their own faults, and faulty ideology, into whatever future social constructs. *Olga Romanoff*, despite the devastation that marks its ending, is the most confident in the utopia produced by their eugenic selection of the “flower” of an already refined race. Protagonist Alan Arnoldson does fall under the spell of the titular villain, but as if to forestall any objections to his fitness in repopulating the world, the text itself raises and dismisses this concern. Alan seeks to exclude himself from the Aerians selected to survive the catastrophe in their bunker because of his prior weakness, but other characters convince him that he has become stronger for overcoming his enthrallment, and a final, post-disaster confrontation with a dying Olga Romanoff confirms that he has the virility and strength of character to be foremost amongst the new humanity. The nitrogen colonists of “Within an Ace” have no apparent personal flaws; if merely sitting around as others burn to death is not particularly heroic, a harrowing journey through dead Britain and then across the Atlantic proves their fortitude and thus their virility as fathers of the new, White race. It is, not surprisingly, Adam Jeffson who remains the unlikeliest candidate for founder of a utopia, because of his many criminal acts, his madness, and his persistent defiance of the divine. The dual interpretations of the text point to divergent futures. If Jeffson’s belief in divine intervention is simply a symptom of his madness, then there is no reason to credit his optimism for the future, given his tendency to alternate between mania and despair. However, if the text is read as a theological fantasy, then Jeffson has been brought to redemption through Leda, the chosen agent of the White power, whose own inherent and inheritable goodness will likewise redeem humanity from this point forward.

Even discounting individual problems with the founders, however, there remains the problem of a state founded on racist ideology with the simultaneous function of eliminating the need for racist ideology (by the elimination of all racial Others). *Olga Romanoff* presents its racial utopia without caveats, perhaps because the survivors are the result of eugenic synthesis and refinement twice over, but the other two texts leave space for challenges. If one of the functions of racial ideology is to define self-identity by means of Othering, in White exclusivist fantasies that lack any Other by which survivors and their descendants can define themselves against how will such identity formation occur? The result may be a loss of identity, as in the case of Adam Jeffson’s embrace of extinct Orientalism and his struggle back towards “Western-ness” – and while Jeffson pleasantly anticipates a species that will resemble its White-coded mother, his earlier horror of miscegenation makes him an unlikely patriarch to a hybrid humanity. For the narrator of “Within an Ace,” racial Others are historical bogeymen much as mythical monsters, serving as moral counterexamples against which his contemporary humanity self-fashions itself. The endurance of these “savages” and “war lords” figures centuries after being wiped out signals the belligerent endurance of racial ideology. Yet this text, in which utopia is extant rather than merely anticipated, also most problematizes the legacy of racial ideology: the narrator marks his concern about the racialised re-emergence of sin and conflict amidst this supposedly purified species. Conflict implies factionalism, and factionalism both feeds and is constructed by racial ideology. The survivors of these texts may be of one race, in their present view, but they are nonetheless carriers of racial ideology. The persistence of such ideology, combined with the great mutability of racial categories (since they are inherently fictive), suggests the possibility of new racial hierarchies developing amongst the survivors. While purely speculative, the experience of Adam Jeffson and the foreboding of the “Within an Ace” narrator problematize the White exclusivist utopias they envision.

These apocalyptic narratives and their fantasies of White exclusivity reflect a culture that believed that revolutionary violence doing away with racial Others was key to a perfected society, especially if this came about not through bloodshed but through complicity with evolution and the divine. But as Fiskio has argued, “millenarian imaginaries drawn from speculative fiction, disaster films, and biblical texts ... inform and constrain the imagination of political possibilities” for resolutions to crises like disaster, the slow violence of climate change, and how polities will distribute their resources during crises sudden and extended (2012: 13). The exclusion of racial Others as survivors during an apocalypse (indeed, the clear articulation that the genocide of such Others is a blessing) is a terrifying constraint of political possibilities, but one Fiskio already finds foreshadowed in xenophobic nationalist discourse about the way borders and limited resource should curtail the movement of migrants and refugees. The trends demonstrated in these three texts, and in the racial war narratives discussed by Williams (2011), continue well into twentieth-century nuclear narratives (whether disaster or war), wherein “it seems that the survivors of the apocalypse are always white people” (Brioni and Comberinati 2019: 104). This persistent narrative colours the way real-world disasters are presented and sets the stage for future conflicts. The White withdrawal Kaplan (2018) identifies in the literature of American White Christian Nationalist (a movement whose genesis Michael Barkun has traced to the racial politics of late nineteenth-century England) is not mere fiction, but a practical means around which segregated communities of White survivalists organize themselves while they pray for and await the providential catastrophe or conflict that will eradicate their perceived racial enemies and give them the world to remould in their image. Amidst the overlapping crises of our age, climatic and political, that make catastrophes more common, it is imperative to be aware of the way the narratives around disaster and apocalypse are made to serve racial and imperial agendas.

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