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Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/03061973221096310>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/03061973221096310>  
EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/11213>

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Lindsay Thomas, *Training for Catastrophe: Fictions of National Security after 9/11* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), pp. xiv + 287, \$112 DOI: 10.1177/03061973221096310

Thomas's timely study provides us with an extremely useful reminder that, as she writes, 'the discourse of preparedness naturalizes disaster by making it unremarkable, conditioning citizens to accept catastrophe as part of everyday life' (p. x). Thomas emphasises the historical context of post 9/11 catastrophe literature, how these selected texts form a literature of preparedness and of perpetual readiness for imminent disaster. These documents, she argues, reflect a historical turn towards what might be thought of as an existential malaise of twenty-first century living: stoically accepting the inevitability of disaster. Thus, the predictive text, designed to prepare a future government for such an imagined scenario actually taking place, has an uncanny relation to reality. These texts, acting, as it were, 'warnings' also reflect how literature and history are intimately and complexly inter-related.

Following the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs hearing on FEMA's 'disastrous failure' after Hurricane Katrina, Thomas writes that the participants 'defended the Hurricane Pam exercise by positioning it as epistemologically equivalent to Hurricane Katrina' (p. 31). In 'the context of preparedness', Thomas suggests, a fictional catastrophe is 'therefore evidence both of what would happen in the future and of what could or might happen in the future' (p. 30). Throughout *Training for Catastrophe*, Thomas underlines that since 9/11 this perpetual readiness for a threat that will take place (even if it doesn't), that is imminent and omnipresent, has been incredibly useful in helping to maintain a kind of low-level ambient fear.

What is most rewarding about the book is the eclectic set of sources Thomas utilises. These range from the surprisingly philosophical (alluding, at one point, to Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*) to a graphic novel (p. 39) contemplating being prepared for an earthquake in LA to a 'counter-zombie dominance' (p. 49) scenario for junior military officers, from the novels of former National Security Official Richard Clarke (p. 82) to on-line courses providing help for people in 'emergency management procedures' (p. 99), from Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (p. 189) to Audrey Lorde's poem 'A Litany for Survival' (p. 154). Thomas also includes PSAs and two free on-line games designed to 'teach natural disaster preparedness to children' (p. 125). But perhaps the most significant contribution that the study makes to our reflections on the last twenty years is in relation to race and racism and the subtle (and not so subtle) ways in which such discourses have been deeply ingrained into how we have been encouraged to think about the future and the immanence of impending threat.

In this regard, the sections on the signifying power of the zombie are especially useful when unpicking the many meanings inherent in the prevailing use of the word 'resilience'. Thomas, when analysing the graphic novel *Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic* produced by the CDC in 2011, evokes the singular nature of the zombie as representing 'no difference between living and dying' (p. 141) and argues that their relentlessness means that they are 'figures of the state of objecthood at the heart of resilience' (p. 142). Thomas links this figure of the generic zombie to the growing power of white supremacist hegemony and more general colonialist and racist thinking and how they dominate discussions around disaster, terrorism and our state of preparedness.

The 'character' of the zombie is therefore central to both fictional imaginings of an apocalypse but also, more crucially, 'a zombie plague is a perfect allegory for the logic of twenty-first-century national security in the United States' (p. 145). Thomas writes about these threats to the 'homeland' as being constant, even perpetual, an everyday, politically and culturally normalised existential

reality that, as she points out in the book's introduction, have only been accelerated and exacerbated by COVID-19.

In anticipation of her inspired reading of Lorde's poem, Thomas engages with Achille Mbembe's concept of 'necropower': namely, that by consistently valorising concepts such as 'preparedness' and 'resilience' we can forget the 'understanding of politics as the dealing out of death' (p. 122). Mbembe writes that some people in society are simply 'disposable' (and, of course, equally, those who are not) and Thomas argues that 'governmentality makes some people [...] killable' (p. 122). Paradoxically, and for me, most memorably, 'the most resilient individuals are often those who have been deemed disposable' (p. 123). Thomas adds: 'The repugnance at the heart of resilience [...] is a repugnance at the continued survival of those who have been made killable' (p. 123). As can be seen from such reflections, the variety of sources Thomas includes in *Training for Catastrophe* helps her to remain responsive to how each text uses fictional tropes to imagine and re-imagine disaster scenarios, no matter how potentially outlandish. But Mbembe's chilling observations allow us to perhaps conclude with Thomas' appreciation of 'A Litany for Survival'.

Thomas' book is centrally concerned with questions of temporality – fiction's future-oriented imaginary scenarios and the sense of trying to be, as it were, 'ready' for the future by looking back at the past. Lorde's poem with its tragic refrain, 'we were never meant to survive' (p. 155), resonates with an 'anxious temporality by insisting on the present' (p. 157). Here, Thomas emphasises the explicit appeal that Lorde makes to a 'different take on the value of survival' (p. 157), a present-day survival that 'is an ongoing, lived practice of defiance that occurs in the present' (p. 158). Lorde praises 'Black survival' and her poem is a 'work of speculative fiction that imagines Black life and hope into existence' (pp. 155–6).

Here as elsewhere, the author uncovers rich complexities in the concepts of preparedness and its many fictional articulations and she reveals a number of political, cultural, social and heavily racialised assumptions that cohere into something of a unifying post-9/11 discourse. This is encapsulated in the graphic novel titled *A River in Egypt*, in which a character alludes to Camus's writing on the myth of Sisyphus, arguing that given the inevitability of an upcoming disaster, we are compelled to 'live as-if' (p. 34); in other words, as if a catastrophe is always about to happen. As Thomas suggests, this existential state 'is a cycle from which there is no exit' (p. 37). Preparedness, Thomas concludes, is a perpetual condition of the twenty-first century and one, Lorde, Peele and others posit, is merely a reminder that for African-Americans this is survival in a systemically and historically hostile and racist country.

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